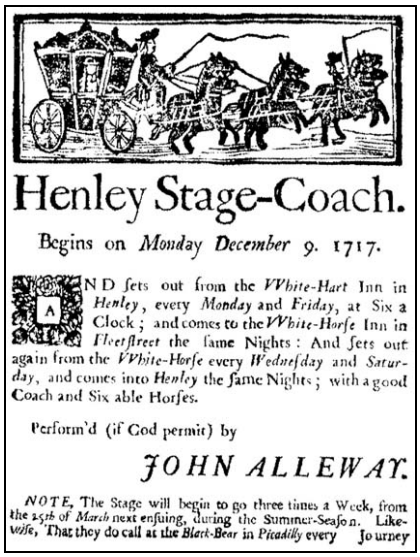
Oxfordshire

TURNPIKES AND COACHING

extracted from Henley-on-Thames: Town, Trade and River, *by Simon Townley, to be published by Phillimore as part of the EPE paperback series*

From its creation Henley was dependent not only on the river but on good roads. From the 16th and 17th centuries England's medieval road system came under increasing pressure for several reasons, among them heavier use in an age of expanding economy and population, and the almost universal replacement of carts with heavy four-wheeled wagons. But as with the medieval period, we must be careful not to exaggerate the road network's shortcomings. One powerful indication that roads were by no means as poor as is sometimes claimed is the development of stage-coaching, which predated by several decades the 18th-century improvement of roads through turnpiking.

The first true stage-coaches were established in the 1650s, running timetabled public services and changing horses at specified inns. By the end of the decade, services linked London with towns as far afield as Plymouth, Shrewsbury and Edinburgh. Henley had its own service by 1668, when John Hathaway (died 1700) issued a trade token, and by 1681 his coaches ran to London 3 times a week. By his retirement in 1694 he owned 2 coaches and 9 horses, and his successor William Hall extended the service to Wallingford. Another Henley man, John Alleway, ran a London service from the *White Hart* by 1717. None of these men are known to have been innkeepers, though like later operators they had close relations with particular inns in Henley and presumably en route. They were also substantial people. Quite apart from the actual coaches, the cost of maintaining and feeding large numbers of horses was considerable, and both Hathaway and Hall employed coachmen to drive their vehicles.



Henley Stage-Coach.

Begins on *Monday December* 9. 1717.

AND ſets out from the *VVhite-Hart* Inn in *Henley*, every *Monday* and *Friday*, at Six a Clock; and comes to the *VVhite-Horſe* Inn in *Fleetſtreet* the ſame Nights: And ſets out again from the *VVhite-Horſe* every *Wednesday* and *Saturday*, and comes into *Henley* the ſame Nights; with a good Coach and Six able Horſes.

Perform'd (if God permit) by

JOHN ALLEWAY.

NOTE, The Stage will begin to go three times a Week, from the 25th of *March* next enſuing, during the Summer-Seaſon. Likewiſe, That they do call at the *Black-Bear* in *Picadilly* every Journey

Handbill issued by John Alleway, advertising his winter service to London from the White Hart. Teams of 6 horses (with a rider at the front) were fairly common in winter, and on particularly steep stretches such as the ascent up White Hill; otherwise most stage coaches had teams of 4, with no rider. The 6-seater coach, slung from the frame on leather straps, is typical of the period.

What sort of people used these early coaching services? For Henley there is no evidence, but diaries and correspondence suggest that the commonest passengers were gentry and professionals, clergy, scholars, military men, and (increasingly) women, who until now might not have been able to travel at all, and certainly not alone. This, in other words, was not just a transport but a social revolution. In addition, some of Henley's well-to-do already owned private coaches. As early as the 1640s Sir Bulstrode Whitelocke had a light 'chariot' that could get him to London in half a day, and in the 1660s he kept a more substantial family coach, which on one memorable occasion tipped over on a Henley street depositing his wife in 'a dirty hole at the brewhouse door'. These heavier coaches, whether private or public, were slower than Whitelocke's chariot, taking probably nearer a day to London in the earlier 18th century. Nonetheless their relative comfort and (in the case of stage coaches) their regularity made them increasingly popular.[1]

Even so the inadequacy of many roads, particularly in winter, was increasingly recognized during the earlier 18th century, and was thrown into sharper relief by the fact that more people than ever were on the move. The solution was the development of toll or turnpike roads, so called from the gates or 'turnpikes' at which tolls were collected. These were individually established by Act of Parliament and run by local trusts, which oversaw their management and upkeep. The first was established in 1663, and from around 1700 they became increasingly common: by 1760 nearly 90% of the main national coaching routes into London had been turnpiked. Henley's experience was typical. The road from Maidenhead to Henley bridge, dismissed as ‘indirect, unlevel and woody’ in the 1670s, was turnpiked in 1718, and the Oxford road through Dorchester and Abingdon, which had become rutted and dangerous because of the 'many heavy carriages' using it, followed in 1735–6. By the time the north–south road through the town was turnpiked in 1768 it formed part of an extensive network across the Chilterns and beyond. The importance attached to these improvements by local landowners and others was shown in the membership of the trusts: that for the Oxford road, for instance, included the mayors and corporations of Henley, Abingdon and Wallingford and the Vice Chancellor of Oxford University, together with Gislingham Cooper of Fawley Court and several other landowners from the Henley area. Motives could be social as well as commercial. The Hatfield–Reading turnpike through Henley linked with roads to the fashionable spa resort of Bath, where two of its most prominent aristocratic sponsors are said to have made yearly excursions to relieve their gout.[2]

The earliest road improvements could be fairly cosmetic, but from the 1750s major engineering and rerouting became common. The steep ascent from Henley bridge up White Hill, still quite a haul today, was reduced in 1768, as described by Dr Johnson's biographer James Boswell:

> At Henley we came out and went and looked at the machine with which they are levelling a very steep hill on the London side, by digging it down and throwing the earth into the hollow at the bottom. This is done without horses, by two carts which are contrived to work as buckets in a well ... the weight of the loaded cart going down the hill pulls up the empty cart, which is filled, and then pulls up the other ... This method was invented lately by a Dissenting clergyman at Henley. It is exceedingly useful, by making that be done by two men which would require a great number of horses and oxen.

The 'Dissenting clergyman' was the Congregationalist minister of Henley Humphrey Gainsborough (brother of the painter Thomas), who besides being a respected member

of the town community was an inventor and engineer. His wide scientific interests, shared with several surrounding landowners, were typical of the improving spirit of the period (see Chapter 8), and found a practical expression not only in road improvement, but in the construction of new poundlocks along the Thames and in hydraulic schemes for improving water supply to country estates.[3]

Such road improvements prompted a further expansion of coaching, particularly after the introduction of steel-sprung suspension from 1752. Suddenly coaches could be both lighter and faster, heralding a golden age of stage-coaching from which Chilterns towns such as Henley all benefited. By the 1790s no fewer than eight long-distance coaches to London and several more from Oxford passed through the town every day, supplementing a daily service from the *White Hart* which left at 6 a.m. and returned in the evening. Coach-masters vied with each other for speed and comfort, as shown in their newspaper advertisements: in 1780, for instance, a 'neat and elegant post-coach' built 'upon an entire new construction' ran to London from the *Catherine Wheel*, while the following year the Henley coachmaster Richard Taylor advertised a new 5-hour service to London from the *Bull* on Bell Street. The obsession with speed and competition was reflected in a warning by Henley corporation in 1787, threatening prosecution to coachmen and riders who passed through the town 'at a ... furious rate, thereby creating great danger both to themselves, the passengers ... and the foot passengers along the streets'. The well-to-do still ran private coaches as well, and commercial wagons added further to the volume of traffic. In the 1790s there were two locally-run London stage-wagons a week, with wagons from a dozen other towns passing through regularly.[4]

The consequences for Henley, as for most coaching towns, were profound. Those who most obviously stood to gain were the town's innkeepers, who established close relations with coach-masters and expanded their premises accordingly. The *Red Lion*, virtually the first building which travellers from London saw as they passed over the bridge, was rebuilt with a fashionable 3-storeyed brick facade in the earlier 18th century, and around 1780 new stabling was built on the north side of its gradually enlarged courtyard, catering for private carriages as well as stage coaches. The *White Hart* (which became Henley's premier stage-coaching inn) and the *Bear* on Bell Street had stabling for over 70 horses by the 1820s, and the *Bell* (at Northfield End) for over 50. Not surprisingly, some of the town's major innkeepers became substantial figures. Barrett March, who owned the *Red Lion* from the late 18th century, served four times as mayor, and at his death in 1816 left a fortune of £120,000. But not only innkeepers benefited. Coaching and travel brought incidental trade to the town, and presumably employment for large numbers of unnamed stable-hands, ostlers, servants and kitchen staff. Coach-building also developed. The coach-maker and ironmonger Henry Oakley had premises on Bell Street in the 1780s, while in 1805 Caroline Powys (off to visit her in-laws in Staffordshire) hired a post-chaise from a coach-maker on the Fairmile, for a guinea a week.[5]

Coaching not only brought new prosperity to the town, it also helped establish it as a social centre. Suddenly Henley was on a transport route not only for bulk commercial goods but for the most fashionable elements of society, while quick and comfortable transport made it feasible for surrounding country gentry to slot it into the newly fashionable round of assemblies, balls and social seasons described in the next chapter. Celebrated visitors to the *Red Lion* included the lexicographer and wit Samuel Johnson (died 1784), George III and his family, and possibly the 1st duke of Marlborough (died 1722), who is said to have kept a furnished room there. Consequently the remodelling of

many of Henley's larger coaching inns reflected not just the increasing volume of traffic but their changing social role. The *Bell* was refurbished around 1794 with 'a spacious ballroom, comfortable sleeping rooms [and] four parlours', and was popular with local country gentry even before then. A grand supper and ball was hosted there by Lord Villiers in 1777, attended by guests from several neighbouring country houses; typically they arrived in a stream of private coaches, providing an unexpected talking point after highwaymen looking for diamonds robbed one of them on its way from Bolney Court.[6]

The Railway and the End of Coaching

The first public railway (from Stockton to Darlington) opened in 1825, followed five years later by the Liverpool–Manchester line. This ushered in a frenzied and largely unregulated free-for-all, which by 1852 had created over 7,000 miles of track. For Henley, the most significant route was the Great Western Railway's line from London to Bristol (completed in 1841), which included stations at Twyford (opened 1839) and Reading (1840). The line bypassed Henley itself until 1857, however, when a branch finally opened from Twyford.[7]

The impact on coaching was dramatic. In 1830 around 26 long-distance coaches a day passed through Henley (many of them from the *White Hart*), but in 1852, some twelve years after the opening of the GWR, there was only one daily service to London and a twice-weekly one to High Wycombe. This was supplemented by an omnibus to Twyford station, whose driver, in a vain attempt to hold back the clock, 'kept up the dress and dignity of earlier times'. By the 1860s those services too had ceased, replaced by local shuttles between Henley station, the *Catherine Wheel* and the *Red Lion*. The most immediate impact was presumably on the inns which had invested so heavily in coaching. The *Red Lion* closed (temporarily) in 1849 and the *Bell* in the early 1850s, although whether this followed directly from the collapse of coaching is not entirely clear. Certainly inns like the *White Hart* and *Catherine Wheel* appear to have weathered the storm.[8]

The effects on the town more generally are difficult to quantify, but for a place so reliant on trade, retail and services, and with virtually no manufacture other than malt and beer, the prospects must have looked bleak. The effects were felt by 1848, when a town petition against the new national income tax claimed that diversion of traffic to the railway had 'very materially decreased' the town's trade and increased 'the burthen of the poor'. The town's troubles were reflected in a marked slowing of population growth, which from 1801 to 1831 had seen a rise of over a fifth to 3,618 (excluding the area south of Friday Street). Thereafter, population growth even in the expanding southern suburbs slowed considerably until the 1860s, approaching early 19th-century rates only in the 1880s–90s when the total (including the suburbs) reached 5,600. House building followed a similar pattern.

The crisis, in fact, went much deeper than a temporary loss of trade. Bypassed for the first time in its history by the most important transport routes, Henley looked set to become an inconsequential backwater, endangering not only income from coaching but the town's burgeoning appeal as a fashionable social centre. The banker George Grote, who inherited his family's Badgemore estate at Henley in 1830, sold up soon after because of the 5-hour journey-time to London, an event which must have set alarm bells ringing: as a relative later noted, he 'would have been inclined to fix his residence at

Badgemore, but in those days 40 miles from the City was too great a distance for a mercantile man'. Another resident (born in 1840) recalled Henley as 'a quiet little town', its sole connection with the outside world the Twyford omnibus – a far cry from the bustling world of the late 18th-century coaching town.[9]

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