Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

Eighteenth & Nineteenth Century Horse Transport

H46/A

On Thursday, 27th April 1727, "The Daily Post" published the following advertisment :

NEWBERRY FLYING STAGE COACH IN ONE DAY
Sets out from the White Horse Inn

in Fleet Street, at 4 o'clock in the morning, to the Bear Inn in Maidenhead to dine, every Monday, Wednesday and Friday, from thence to the White Heart Inn in Newberry, and returns from thence Tuesday, Thursdays and Saturdays. Each passenger to carry fourteen pounds weight and to pay Nine Shillings a-piece full pay, and to all other places on that route at proportionable rates.

Performed, if God permit, by John Baker, Edward Gregory and James Hall.
N.B. The coach carries only four passengers.

This coach would have passed through Reading on its way from London to Newbury (a distance of 50-60 miles). It was one of hundreds of such vehicles travelling along the roads of Berkshire and elsewhere in the early eighteenth century. Passenger carrying vehicles were rare before the seventeenth century: before that you walked, climbed aboard a cart, rode a horse or used a sedan chair. Coaches did not become common until the latter half of the eighteenth century. The Regency period marked the beginning of the great age of coaching. From around 1810 to the 1830s coaches ruled the newly surfaced roads and reached fantastic speeds of around 12 miles per hour allowing a free and easy flow of passengers and goods around the country. It seems rather sad that a complex transport system should take hundreds of years to develop only to take off for a few decades and then die overnight with the arrival of the train.

The coming of the railways changed the lives of everyone in Britain. By 1852 all the main rail routes in Britain had been built. Passengers and goods could now be taken quickly and easily to all parts of the country. Horse drawn vehicles remained in widespread use throughout the nineteenth century, even within cities until the invention of the motorcar. With the coming of the car the social relationships, economy and environment of Britain were even more dramatically changed than they had been with the construction of the railway system.

This box contains artefacts associated with the horse powered transport system which reached its height in the first few decades of the nineteenth century.

Heritage Lottery Fund

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Halter Weights



A halter weight (also called a manger ball) was a wooden weight which was used when tying a horse to its stall in the stable. A rope from the harness would run through a ring on the manger and this weight was tied to the end to stop the rope being pulled back through the manger ring. Halter weights are quite heavy - this one weighs 800g - and this helped keep the rope slightly taut and prevented it from getting tangled. At the height of the coaching era thousands of horses were employed in the business and inns needed to have extensive stables. Often an inn-keeper owned a chain of premises. Stage lengths were from 5 to 15 miles depending on the type of country and at each stop the tired horses would be changed, which was often accomplished in one to two minutes. If the inn was part of a chain the horses would remain where they were to be fed, watered and rested. If not, they would have to be hacked back to their owner's inn by a stable boy. In the late eighteenth century Mrs Mountain of the Saracen's Head Inn, Holborn, kept some 2,000 horses in her stables for the routes she served. It is estimated that the life of a coach horse was only three years. The strain of pulling a coach weighing more than 2 ton for an average of 10 miles at a speed of some 12 miles per hour two days out of three soon exhausted the animals. After that they were sold for they still had significant working life left. Farm work seemed easy by comparison.

Carriage Lamp



Coaches and carriages didn't stop running when it got dark. They often began their journeys very early in the morning and, during winter, continued long after dusk. Coaches carried lamps to illuminate their way and also as warning lights on the rear. This lamp did both jobs. It was illuminated by a candle but, unfortunately, this example has lost half of its candle holder. The tube at the bottom would originally have been another 12-15cm long. It could be unscrewed and a candle fitted onto a spring-loaded platform inside. As the candle burned down the spring mechanism pushed the remainder of the stub upwards. The lamp would have fitted onto a bracket on the side of the coach.

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Horse Bit



Whether a horse is part of a coach team or is to be ridden by an individual it will have to be fitted with a bridle if it is to be controlled. A bridle is an arrangement of straps around the horse's head. A bit is a piece of metal, attached to the bridle, which fits in the natural space between a horse's front cutting teeth and its back grinding teeth.
Reins are attached to the outer ends of the bit and are held in the rider's or driver's hands. Reins are the means by which a horse rider or driver gives directional commands to the horse's head. Pulling on the reins can be used to steer or stop the horse. The sides of a horse's mouth are sensitive, so pulling on the reins pulls the bit, which then pulls the horse's head from side to side, which is how the horse is controlled. There are several different kinds of bit and if they do not fit correctly they can damage the horse. The bit in this box is large and may well have been used to control a cart horse, but it gives some idea of the way coach horses would have been controlled.

Horse Shoe Fragment



In the wild horse the horny casing of the foot is quite sufficient to meet its needs, but when an animal has to walk continuously on hard ground and paved surfaces then the foot needs to be protected. The Romans used a kind of metal sandal, which was attached to the horses foot by cords. The practice of nailing a shoe onto the foot may have developed among the Celts of north-west Europe.

This example is a token of the range of service industries which developed to maintain the coaching system. There would have been thousands of blacksmiths in towns and villages all across Britain who made ploughs, nails, gates and, of course, horse-shoes. As well as blacksmiths there were also many other crafts and trades: saddle makers, harness makers, coach builders, along with innkeepers, stable-hands, toll-booth keepers and feed merchants.

Horse Shoe Fragment (continued)

As with many museum objects there is a degree of uncertainty about this shoe - it may not be a fragment and it may not be horse shoe. Oxen, which were widely used to pull ploughs and to haul farmwagons, were also shoed. Ox shoes, like this example, were shaped liked a comma or teardrop - narrow at one end and curving towards a rounder, fuller end. They came in pairs as an ox's foot is split into two parts and each part needs a separate shoe. Ox shoes also tended to be made of thinner material than a horse shoe. There is a good chance, in fact, that this is an ox shoe. In which case it can be taken to stand for the many slow moving farm vehicles that must have clogged up the road and lanes, causing annoyance to the fast-moving coach drivers. Traffic jams were not unknown even then!

Two Spurs



Nowadays spiked spurs like one on the right are no longer used, as they are considered cruel, but for centuries spurs were considered a normal part of a rider's outfit. The other example, without the spikes, would simply have given the horse a prod. Spurs fastened over a boot using a leather strap - one end would be fastened onto the catch while the other would have been tightened using a buckle on the other arm. Fastening them on in this way prevented them being lost if they worked loose.



Many coaches were driven by postillions. A postillion did not travel on the coach itself, but rode on the horse's back, urging them on (using spurs) and steering them using ordinary reins. Coaches usually had two pairs of horses - the pair nearest the carriage were called the wheelers and the other pair were the leaders. Sometimes a four horse carriage would be driven by a coachman and there would be a postillion mounted on one of the leaders, or there may have been a postillion on each pair