

STAGECOACH TO TRAIN

AT

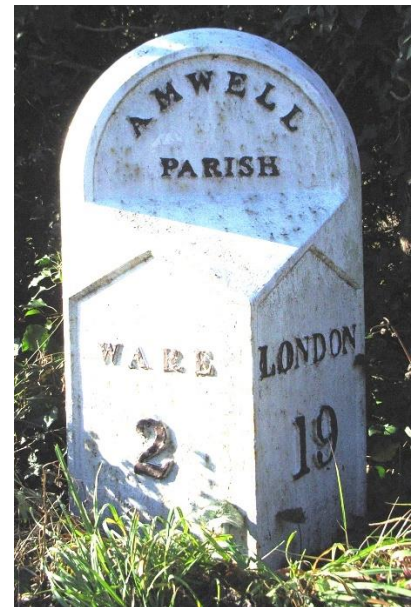
STANSTEAD ABBOTTS

By

Stuart Moye

The Old North Road had for centuries been a major route from London to York and beyond to Edinburgh. It passed through the adjacent parishes of Stanstead St. Margarets and Great Amwell some three-quarters of a mile to the west of Stanstead Abbots. The Cheshunt Turnpike Trust was created in May 1725 which through the levy of tolls was authorised to improve and maintain this road from Cheshunt via Amwell Cross Roads to Thundridge, north of Ware. They erected stone mile markers in 1743 replacing them by 1820 with cast iron replacements. One of the latter can still be seen locally at the junction of Gypsy Lane and the main road in Great Amwell. The stagecoach era only lasted on this stretch of road from about 1860 to 1840 with what are called the “Golden Years” of the stagecoach lasting just a surprisingly short 20 years from 1820-1840. It being brought abruptly to an end for our local roads with the opening of the railway from London to Broxbourne in the 1840.

A cast iron mile post acts as a reminder of the Cheshunt Turnpike days on the Old North Road. This one can be found by the side of the old main road in Great Amwell near the junction with Gypsy Lane. A passenger on an ordinary stagecoach seeing that there was 19 miles to go knew that it would take another three or thereabouts to complete the journey to London.



Had a villager in the 1830s walked to Amwell Cross Roads [just to the north of the present roundabout] they could have witnessed the passing of more than 20 stagecoaches in any 24 hour period. These would have included Mail Coaches travelling from London as far as York and Edinburgh, plus the fast coaches known as flyers. There were other long distance coaches like the “Lord Wellington” which went as far as Newcastle. Mid distance coaches they would have seen included the “Beehive” and “The Star” both plying their trade between Cambridge and London via Royston. These long distance coaches were pulled by four horses changed at regular intervals and had six inside seats and nine or more riding outside. In addition the road was busy with large wagons, local stagecoaches, smaller Carrier’s wagons private carriages, people on horseback and ordinary folk on foot.



A stagecoach pulled by four horse on the London via Ware to Cambridge route, carrying six inside passengers and nine outside passengers. This type of coach could travel at an average speed of 6 to 7 miles per hour.

These grand sights were not however to be seen at Stanstead Abbots as the village was situated on a much less important east to west road. In the 1830s the village benefited from just two stagecoaches. One coach started daily at about 7 am from Hadham the other from Roydon [just over the border in Essex], setting off from London on the return journey at about 4 pm. The Hadham coach, pulled by four horses, started out it is believed from the Red Lion in Much Hadham calling at Widford, Hunsdon and then stopping briefly at the Pied Bull in Stanstead Abbots just before eight in the morning. On leaving the Pied Bull and having paid its dues at the toll bridge over the river it turned left into Hoddesdon Road at Pie Corner {Hoddesdon Road Corner} at the bottom of Hertford Hill {Folly Hill}. It then made its way to London, stopping on its way at the main towns like Hoddesdon and Cheshunt. Roydon had a few coaches from Harlow {Old Harlow} passing through it and they either went on to London on the Essex side of the Lea Valley or crossed over into Hertfordshire. Those that did enter Hertfordshire travelled up to the Old Church [St. James] in Stanstead Abbots and then turned down the Toll Road to Rye House, before joining the Lea Valley route through Hoddesdon to London. It was just one daily return coach that originated in Roydon that passed through Tollbridge Street {High Street} of Stanstead Abbots using the Red Bull {Pied Bull} as a picking up and set down point.



The Pied Bull in about 1900 some 60 years after the Hadham Stagecoach had last called here on its journeys through the village.

These two shorter stagecoaches were not the top flight vehicles one would see on the Old Great North Road but short distance coaches that made more frequent stops. The coaches used four horses and carried four people inside on the expensive seats and six or seven on top for a lower fare. They averaged about 5 to 6 mph for their journeys to and from London. This meant that if a Stanstead Abbotts resident boarded a Hadham stagecoach at the Pied Bull just before 8 am they would expect to reach London in good weather between 11 and 11.30 am. Return trips took roughly the same time and departed London at 4pm arriving back in the village between 7 & 7.30 pm. Whichever of the two stagecoaches used meant an 11 hour plus day away from home with just over four hours in London for a total return journey time of six and a half to seven hours. The timing was very dependent on the weather and roads conditions. Not surprisingly some of the wealthy that might use the stagecoach tended to stay overnight in London for a day or so, staying in one of the many hotels that were available to meet their needs. There were also an abundance of Gentlemen's Clubs which gave socialising opportunities for those with similar business interests. The type of people using these coaches would have held important jobs in the city and would not be working for a full week. Indeed many had interests back on their estates, businesses and big houses in the local area. It is of interest to note that Hertfordshire had been considered, for many centuries, an ideal distance for those with financial interests in the city to reside in the fresh healthy countryside air, 15 to 30 miles out of London.

There had been for a long time a much slower and cheaper way to be transported to London by road from Stanstead Abbotts. This had involved a rather uncomfortable ride on top of the load in a Carriers wagon. Not so bad if it was loaded with hay for London's many horses not so good if sacks of potatoes were being carried. The earliest record found was for 1721 when a wagon left Stanstead on Tuesdays and Thursdays only, destined for the Pewter Pot in Leadenhall Street. These wagons had an average speed of 3 to 4 mph and took about 8 hours for the journey stopping at many place along the way, including a lunch stop. The horses were rested in London overnight with the return journey the following day. These wagons continued to run even after the railway arrived with Mr Aaron Trump in 1855 operating a Carriers Wagon from Stanstead to London on Fridays returning on Saturdays.

It is into this world that the Railway Age was so suddenly to intrude on the 15th September 1840, with the opening of the Northern and Eastern Railway [N&ER] to Broxbourne. Today we speak of the internet bringing major changes to our lives but the railways were a much bigger revolution in many ways. The effect on the roads tended to be abrupt and brutal on those who had operated the stagecoaches and the coaching Inns. When the railway first opened trains took 55 to 65 minutes for the journey between Broxbourne and the London terminus at Shoreditch. That was less than half the time taken for an average journey along the parallel road by stagecoach. The train fares for a single journey were 3rd class 1s 6d, 2nd class 2s 6d, and 1st class 3s 6d whereas the average stagecoach fares for an equivalent journey were inside 5s outside 3s 6d. Not surprisingly the majority of stagecoaches that had travelled this route cut their journeys short delivering their passengers to Broxbourne station instead of travelling all the way to London. There was in fact no possibility of the stagecoach competing with the new railways in the longer term and this pattern of change was repeated across the country. This was to have serious repercussions for those whose living relied on the stagecoaches and the Inns that supported them at the places along their routes.

The Hadham and Roydon Coaches no longer took their passengers to London but instead took them to Broxbourne station. The Hadham coach proprietor Thomas Carter issued a notice explaining that from October 5th 1840 the coach would run from The Red Lion in Much Hadham at 8 o'clock every day except Sundays. It would call at Widford, Hunsdon and Stanstead and arrive in time at Broxbourne station for the passengers to catch the 9 o'clock train for London. The coach would also meet the train at Broxbourne that left Shoreditch station at 4.30 pm to return passengers to the villages, reaching Stanstead Abbots about ten minutes past six and Hadham around 7pm. Many coaches that were once London bound began to terminate at Broxbourne station including most but not all local coaches from both Hertford and Ware. It was reported that coaches operated by Messrs Staples [Hertford] and Carter [Ware] that had run one return trip to London daily now do six return trips to Broxbourne stations from their respective towns. In early 1841 the railway company advertised for those who might provide additional coach or bus service from Broxbourne to Hertford and Ware. They would give consideration to persons who had been displaced from the road by the opening of the railway but nobody still running a stagecoach in competition with their railway would be considered.

As the railway was attracting more travellers than the stagecoaches had ever done other business people were also able to offer transport to the new railhead at Broxbourne. An example of this can be found at the Saracens Head Inn at Ware which from 20th March 1841 provided a coach to meet every train at Broxbourne station. A valuable addition to the business and no doubt attracted more guests to stay at one of Ware's most important Inns. However for Stanstead Abbots the Roydon Coach ceased to run from the 9th August that same year when the railway was extended to Roydon and Harlow {Old Harlow}. The railway also at this time let it be known that they were now able to convey carriages and horses accompanying passengers to and from London. Indeed there are at least two stagecoaches and accompanying horses that are known, for a short time, to have been conveyed by train on this line. On arriving at the destination horses then passengers were reunited with their stagecoach for their onward journey. For Stanstead Abbots Broxbourne station could be reached throughout the day by the Ware coach service which stopped at St. Margarets, not far from the church, on its six return journeys a day. The local road coach operators had effectively been reduced from providing a London service to a point where much of their work was as a local bus operator providing a feeder service to the railhead. This was only going to be a temporary respite for many of them as the opening of the Hertford branch line was not that far in the future.

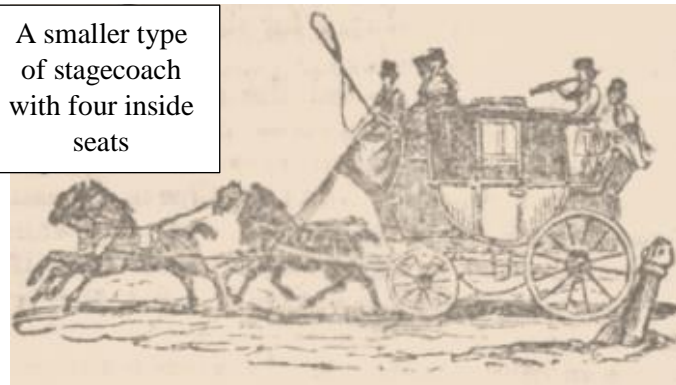
It was on the 31st October 1843 when the railway started its service from Hertford to London and that Stanstead Abbots was directly served by trains calling at St. Margarets station. The village now had seven trains to London Monday to Saturday, the first at 7.42am and the last at 6.42pm with a similar number for journeys to Ware and Hertford. The travelling time to London, now all the way by train, was just over the hour and fares were decidedly cheaper than those available on the pre 1840 stagecoaches. At the opening of the railway fares to London were charged at the following rates 1st class 4s, 2nd class 3s 2d and 3rd 1s and 10d. It was now possible to comfortably visit London and return in one day giving plenty of time in the capital for just over two hours of travelling time. Few however took up daily commuting at this time as those who could afford the fares tended to work a few days a week or indeed continued their habit of staying in London overnight on occasions.



Average speed 20 mph

These are examples of illustrations used at the time to in advertisements for the services offered by the railway and the road coaches in the 1840s.

Average speed 5-6mph
[Short distance coaches]



A smaller type of stagecoach with four inside seats

The Hadham stagecoach, which had taken its passengers to Broxbourne station since 1840 was cut back to terminate at St Margarets station instead. The proprietors George Crawley and James Stracey announced that from November 13th “A new coach from Hadham” with a pair of horses would depart Hadham at 20 minutes before 8 o’ clock every morning except Sundays and meet the train at St. Margarets that arrives at the Shoreditch terminal at 50 minutes past 10 o’ clock. The return service met the train at St Margarets that had left the London terminus at half past 4 o’ clock and would reach Hadham at 6 o’ clock. The coach called at the Bell in Widford and the Fox and Hounds in Hunsdon. The fares for outside and inside seats were quoted as Hadham 2s 6d and 1s 6d, Widford 1s 6d and 1s and Hunsdon 1s and 9d. This coach and its successors were to last until the Buntingford railway line opened 20years later. The Hadham coach no longer needed to stop at the Pied Bull and 1843 marked the end of an inn in Stanstead Abbots being associated with a stagecoach.

A Hertford to London coach still continued to operate despite the Hertford railway being opened. It ran daily from the Salisbury Arms at 9 am to The Bell and Crown in Holborn, returning at 3.30 pm. This was operated by Robert Carter a brother of Thomas Carter who had operated the Hadham coach. The unequal struggle between the old and new way to travel lasted until March 1846 when it was withdrawn. This followed an agreement between the railway company and Mr Carter which was mutually agreeable to both parties. This was the end of stagecoach competition for the railway from Hertford to London. Mr John Staples who had once driven his coach from Ware to London was essentially driven out of business by the railway like so many others around the country. It is said he was an amiable man and found a suitable new direction in life as mine host at the White Hart Inn in central Hertford.

In 1844 stagecoaches returned to the village for five days from 25th to the 29th of September with the temporary closure of the Hertford branch line. This was to allow for the change of track gauge from five foot to the standard gauge of four feet eight and a half inches. Coaches left Broxbourne after the arrival of London trains and called at St. Margarets and Ware stations before terminating at the Salisbury Arms in central Hertford. Return journeys were timed to arrive at Broxbourne for passengers to catch the trains to London. An early example of what we think of today as a bus substitution for a railway service.

Mention was made earlier concerning the Saracens Head in Ware providing a road coach service to convey guests from Broxbourne station direct to the courtyard of the Inn. With the opening of the Hertford branch line railway the proprietor advertised that a coach would meet trains at Ware station and convey guests with their luggage to the Saracens Head. Interestingly they also reassured customers that their horses brought by train with them would be well looked after in their stables. This arrangement of conveying guests to the Saracens Head to and from the railway station continued until the early 1920s. The authors Great Grandfather an employee of the Saracens Head took his turn at these duties in the early C20th. He had been given some careers advice by his father in the late 1870s to "Go into horses, people will always need to travel, you will have a job for life" By the mid-1920s he was seated not on a horse drawn carriage but in the cab of a lorry working for J. W. French of Ware. An indication that the railway which may have revolutionised transport in the Victorian era was about to face the reappearance of the dominance of road transport in the C20th.

Notes

It is worth noting that the value of £1 in 1840 was equivalent in financial terms to approximately £70 today. However a more meaningful comparison is that £1 in 1840 was the average wage for five days work for a skilled worker. Many in Stanstead Abbots would have earned considerably less than this at the time.

Where names are used that have subsequently changed the 1840s name is used followed by the current name in {brackets}.