STAGE COACHES

By Peggy Ferguson

The Stage Coaches Act 1788 was an act of Parliament of Great Britain to regenerate the use of stagecoaches. In came into force from 1 November 1788 and stipulated that no more than six people were permitted to ride upon the roof, and no more than two in the box of any coach or carriage travelling for hire.

The penalty was to be a fine of forty shillings per person over the limit, levied on the driver; if the driver was the owner, they were to be fined four pounds per person. If the driver could not be found, then the owner was liable to the 40 shillings penalty.

The Act was later amended and clarified by the Stage Coaches Act 1790.

The term “stage” originally referred to the distance between stations on a route. For a coach travelling the entire route in “stages” a fresh set of horses would be stabled at each station so that the coach could continue after a quick stop to re-hitch a new team. Under this staging system the resting, watering and feeding of the spent horses would not delay the coach.

A stagecoach could be any four wheeled vehicle pulled by horses or mules, the primary requirement being that it was used as a public conveyance, using an established route and timetable. The choice of vehicle was made by the owner of the stage line and he would choose the most efficient based upon the load to be carried, road conditions and weather, and would use two, four or six horse teams based upon these factors.

Stagecoaches travelled at an average speed of 5 miles an hour with the total daily mileage covered being about 60 to 70 miles. In 1784 a mail stagecoach did the 120 mile journey from London to Bristol in 16 hours (approximately 7½ miles per hour).

Great Britain developed the stagecoach during the 16th century and it continued in use to the early 1800’s.

Coaching Inns opened up throughout Europe to accommodate passengers and Shakespeare’s first plays were staged at coaching inns.

1784 brought the introduction of the Royal Mail stagecoach and hastened improvements of the road system in the British Isles through the turnpike charges. The postal delivery service in Britain had existed in the same form for about 150 years from its introduction in 1635. Mounted carriers had ridden between "posts" where the postmaster would remove the letters for the local area before handing the remaining letters and any additions to the next rider. The riders were frequent targets for robbers, and the system was inefficient.

John Palmer of Bath, a theatre owner, believed that the coach service he had previously run for transporting actors and materials between theatres could be utilised for a country wide mail delivery service, so in 1872, he suggested to the Post Office in London that they take up the idea. He met resistance from officials who believed that the existing system could not be improved but eventually the Chancellor of the Exchequer, William Pitt, allowed him to carry out an experimental run between Bristol and London. Under the old system the journey had taken up to 38 hours. The

coach, funded by Palmer, left Bristol at 4pm on 24 August 1784 and arrived in London just 16 hours later.

Impressed by the trial run, Pitt authorised the creation of new routes. By the end of 1785 there were services from London to most English cities and the following year a service was introduced to Edinburgh. Palmer was rewarded by being made Surveyor and Comptroller General of the Post Office.
Initially the coach, horses and driver were all supplied by contractors and there was strong competition for the contracts so they provided a fixed, regular income, on top of which the companies could charge fares for the passengers.
By the beginning of the 19th century the Post Office had their own fleet of coaches with black and scarlet livery. The early coaches were poorly built but in 1787 the Post Office adopted John Besant's improved and patented design, after which Besant and his partner, John Vidler, enjoyed a monopoly on the supply of coaches and their upkeep and servicing.

They were originally designed for a driver seated outside and up to four passengers inside. The guard, the only post office employee on the coach, travelled on the outside at the rear next to the coachman and eventually a second row of seating was added behind him to allow two further passengers to sit outside.

Travel was uncomfortable as the coaches journeyed on poor roads and passengers were obliged to dismount when going up steep hills to spare the horses. The coaches averaged 7 to 8 miles per hour in summer and 5 miles per hour in winter but by the time of Queen Victoria the roads had improved enough to allow speeds of up to 10 miles per hour.

Fresh horses were supplied every10 to 15 miles. Stops to collect the mail were short and sometimes there wouldn't be any with the guard throwing the mail off the coach and catching new deliveries from the postmaster on the run!
The cost of travelling by mail coach was about one penny per mile, more expensive than private stagecoach, but it was faster generally, less crowded and cleaner. Crowding was a common problem with private coaches which led to them overturning. Travel on mail coaches was nearly always at night when roads were less busy and they could travel faster.

The guard was heavily armed with a blunderbuss or two pistols and dressed in post office livery of scarlet and black, and so coaches were well defended against highwaymen. To prevent corruption the guards were well paid and received a generous pension. The mail was their total responsibility and would be delivered on foot if a problem arose with the coach. Unlike the coachman they stayed with the coach for the whole journey and occasionally the guards froze to death from hypothermia in their exposed positions during harsh winters.

The guard was supplied with a time piece and a post horn (a yard of tin) the former to keep to time and the latter to alert the post house of their imminent arrival and to warn toll gate keepers to open the gates (otherwise they would be fined if the coach was forced to stop). The horn was also used to warn other road users that it had right of way.

In Peebles the earliest coaches used the County Inn and also the Tontine (opened in 1808) built when the Cross Keys in the Northgate (built in 1683) became inadequate.