

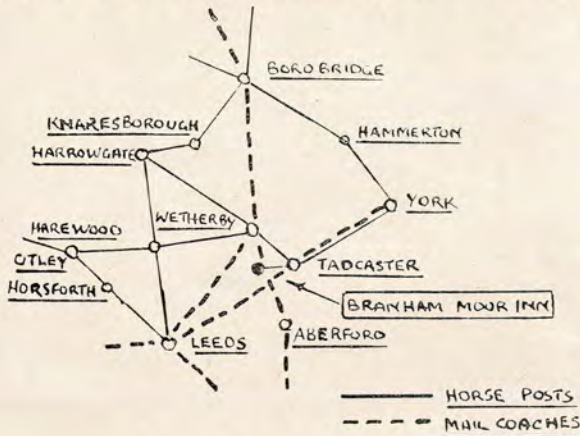
INNS AS POST-TOWNS

By W. G. STITT DIBDEN

UP and down the country there is still the evidence of a once most important postal practice.

With the introduction in 1784 of the regular, scheduled and speedy mail-coaches the countryside began to be opened up as it had never been before in the old horse-mail days; and it was not long before mail coach routes began to flow east and west across the countryside as well as north and south along the traditional roads out of London. During the early days after the end of the Napoleonic Wars, fresh roads were laid down, often by-passing small towns and frequently along new lines of direction.

One of the more important postal results of these new routes was that a change of horses, governed by the distance a team of



Branham Moor Inn postal routes

horses was able to draw a heavy mail coach, was often required to be performed not in a convenient town, but, perhaps, far out on a deserted moorland at a small inn. As the years went by, it became the custom for the few people living in the vicinity to post, and receive, letters at the post-change inn and, one after another, such inns became Official Receiving Houses, and the inn-keeper a deputy postmaster.

Thomas Hasker, Superintendent of Mail Coaches, in a report to the Postmaster-General, dated November 11th, 1795, refers to a second practice that grew up parallel with the post-change inn. Referring to the possibility of a new road from Leeds to Wetherby

"... if such a road was made", Hasker stated, "I should still be in hopes that the mail might go through Witherly, but can't think of its going 6 miles round, for what would the passengers say to be only 14 miles from York at Branham Moor, and then travel 5 miles more to Wetherby, York? and then be a mile more from their journey's end. I wish a house was built near where the roads cross each other on Branham Moor where the Mail Coach from the North might leave the bags for the West, and the cross Coach going west from York, about an hour or two after, would take them. In like manner, the cross Coach going to the East would leave the bags, and an hour or two after, the coach going to the North would take them... I do really think it worth while to see if Sir Thomas Goodrich*, Sir Walter Vavasor†

or some other neighbouring Gentleman would not build a cottage and put in a Shepherd or a labourer into it, to whom a comfortable salary could be afforded by the Office‡ to make it a receiving house."

Although this particular plan did not materialise then, the house was much used after the turn of the century.

Thus, for two reasons, isolated cottages or inns became post-houses and later acquired the status of a post-town, receiving first name hand-stamps, and, later, dated stamps, penny post hand-stamps, and even mileage marks—the real test of an office taking the dignity (and postal importance) of a post-town.

It has long been a wish of mine to collect information about these inns-used-as-post-towns, and I detail below some of the examples I know. I would appreciate any information about these or other examples readers may care to furnish.

Probably the most famous of such wayside receiving houses was that known as "Old Down" between Bath and Wells, Somerset. Describing it in 1837, George Louis, Superintendent of the Mail Coach Department, said,

"... This post is rather a peculiar one, the bag is carried 14 miles by the mail to Old Down, which is a single inn, halfway between Bath and Wells, from which point as a centre the penny posts branch out... there are several messengers sent to different villages... the Old Down local letters are an eighth of the whole of Bath Local Letters."

A census of the letters were taken in two monthly periods as follows:—

6.11.1836–6.12.1836 : £9.15.6d. was received on 1,173 letters at a 2d. rate.

6.11.1837–6.12.1837 : £6.2.0d. was received on 1,464 letters at a 1d. rate.

giving a monetary decrease of 40 per cent and a letter increase of 25 per cent.



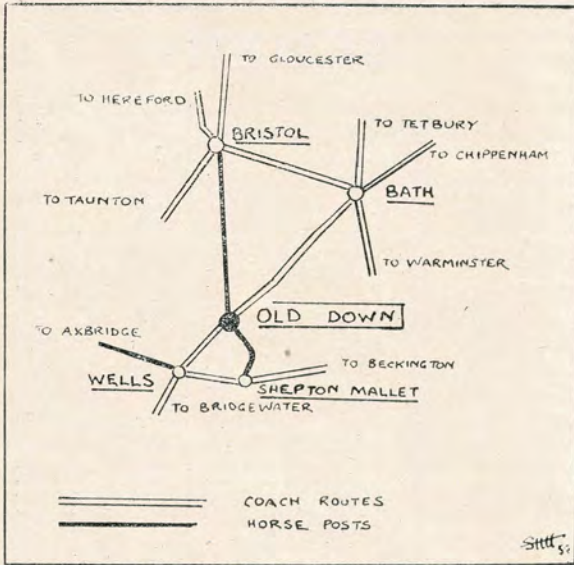
Old Down Inn Receiving House.

The rate was reduced from 2d. to 1d. in 1837 after a long official investigation into local rates.

Mail handled at the inn (illustrated from a modern photograph by courtesy of Mr. E. H. Ford) in either direction received a

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* Of Ribston Hall. † Of Haselwood Hall. ‡ The Mail Coach Office.



Old Down postal routes

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strike of the framed OLD DOWN hand-stamp (Fig. 1). In addition, each sub-office used a small number hand-stamp. Mail passing through Bath also received a strike of its current penny post hand-stamp. A dated stamp (Fig. 2) was later issued to Old Down.

Another example was known as Hundred House at Stonebridge, Worcestershire, at the cross roads formed by the present B4105 to Kenilworth, and the A45 between Birmingham and Coventry. A second example under Bath, was to be found at Becketington, 10 miles from Bath (and under that office) at the junction between the Bath-Warminster road, and the Frome-Devizes road. Two further examples occurred in South Wales. The first was at the cross roads formed by the Tenby-Haverford-West road, and the Pembroke, St. Clare and Carmarthen road. The second was at the Beaufort Arms at the point where the Llanelly road joined the Carmarthen-Swansea road.

The word "cross" has naturally figured in this cameo of history. A hand-stamp (Fig. 3) was sent to Llandilleos on May 7th, 1851, for the receiving house at what is now known as Cross Hands, 13 miles from Llanelly on the A476. The New-Inn hand-stamp (Fig. 4) was in use for mail dropped at the crossroads of the A40 Carmarthen-Llandilo, and the B4310 Llansawel-Llanelly roads.

Another famous inn "drop" was on the Bristol-Highbridge road (A38) and the Weston-Super-Mare to Cheddar and Wells. Both an undated circular stamp (Fig. 5) and a penny post (Fig. 6) were used on outgoing mail. The earliest example I have is 1812 and the latest 1849.

Yorkshire had at least one other mail drop as well as that at Branham Moor. This was Cleveland Inn (Fig. 7) north-east of North Allerton on the A684 near the junction of the A19. Another Yorkshire example was the New Inn north-west of Borobridge on the Catterick road.

The "Indian Queen" in the parish of St. Columb, Cornwall, was another example, as a local inhabitant remembered (in 1895):

"I have been told by my father . . . it was a very important centre in the old coaching days . . . it consisted of the old inn and about a dozen houses . . . it was a sort of junction where all the mails for St. Columb, Padstow etc. were brought in, and I think also for Wadebridge . . ."

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Fig. 1



Fig. 2



Fig. 3



Fig. 4



Fig. 5

Cross Penny Post

Fig. 6

CLEVELAND IN N

Fig. 7



Fig. 8



Fig. 9

CAVENDISH-BRIDGE

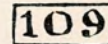


Fig. 10

KILDWICK

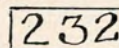


Fig. 11



Fig. 12

February 7th, 1964

Inns as Post-Towns (continued from page 821)

At the other end of the country was the Spittal Inn, an open moorland between Boroughbridge and Barnard Castle on the A66. This was the 25-minute breakfast stop on the second day out from London on the Glasgow mail coach. Here, mail for and from the scattered countryside was sorted and rebagged.

Another isolated spot was the Wheatsheaf on Alconbury Hill, 100 yards north of the junction of the two great roads from London, one via Royston and Huntingdon, and the other by way of Baldock and Biggleswade. The original building was about 60 yards off the junction.

Another isolated drop was at the quaintly-named "Can Office" (Fig. 8), five miles due south of the South Eastern end of Lake Vernwy, at the place now known as Pen-y-bont. This posting-inn on the main Holyhead-Worcester post-road was probably named as CANN or CANNON Office; an Ecclesiastical Office. A similar inn was Halfway House (Fig. 9) on the B4386 near Worthen, at the junction with the B4499 to Minsterley, Salop.

Under Carlisle (26 miles distant) on the A69 between Haltwhistle and Hexham, at the junction with the A686 to Helston, is Haydon Bridge, the first of three drops at bridges. The second at Wolseley Bridge was on the Lichfield to Stafford road, and was under the Rugely office, two miles away.

The third, Cavendish Bridge (Fig. 10), used a stamp showing the mileage of Loughborough, Leicestershire, under which office it fell. It was the post-town for Lord Hasting's Donnington Hall in the 1820's. Cavendish Bridge lies at the crossroads formed by the A6 (Derby-Loughborough) and the B5324 between Remstone and Ashby-de-la-Zouch. I have a number of covers showing the use of the Office as a "penny post".

A similar use of a mileage stamp was that of Kildwick (Fig. 11), a small receiving house under Leeds, on the junction formed by the termination of the A6034 to Leeds, the A6068 to Colne and Nelson; and the through road, the A629, Skipton to Keighley.

The oldest example of this mail drop system of which I have been able to collect examples is Peacock Inn (Fig. 12), Derbyshire. The Inn is on the crossroads two miles west of Alfreton, and two miles south of Higham Cross. It was a posting house on the London, Derby, Chesterfield main post-road, and also on the Cross Post Roads from Gainsborough to Stone, and Nottingham to Manchester. Two hand-stamps were in use between 1799 (my earliest copy), and the early 19th century.

These "drops" at times led to confusion in the main sorting offices of London and Edinburgh, as this report from the Post Office Surveyor points out:—

Newark. 21st. July, 1801. Many complaints have been made that letters for Alfreton, Wingfield Inn, and Peacock Inn, are not put in the Derby Bag from London but are frequently sent in the Bag to Chesterfield. . . .

The plan was clear—"The villages as per enclosed list can gain half a day by being sent from London in the Derby Bag instead of the Chesterfield. The tax is the same and as the London coach, is I find, always at Derby before the Birmingham, these letters will go on the same evenings to Peacock Inn . . . every Wednesday evening—all to be taxed 8d. single and charged on Derby".

These notes on a little-known aspect of British postal history show that opportunities for research still exist in what is a fascinating glimpse of the historic past of the Post Office.