

The Copernicus Trail as part of the 1973 Quincentenary celebrations

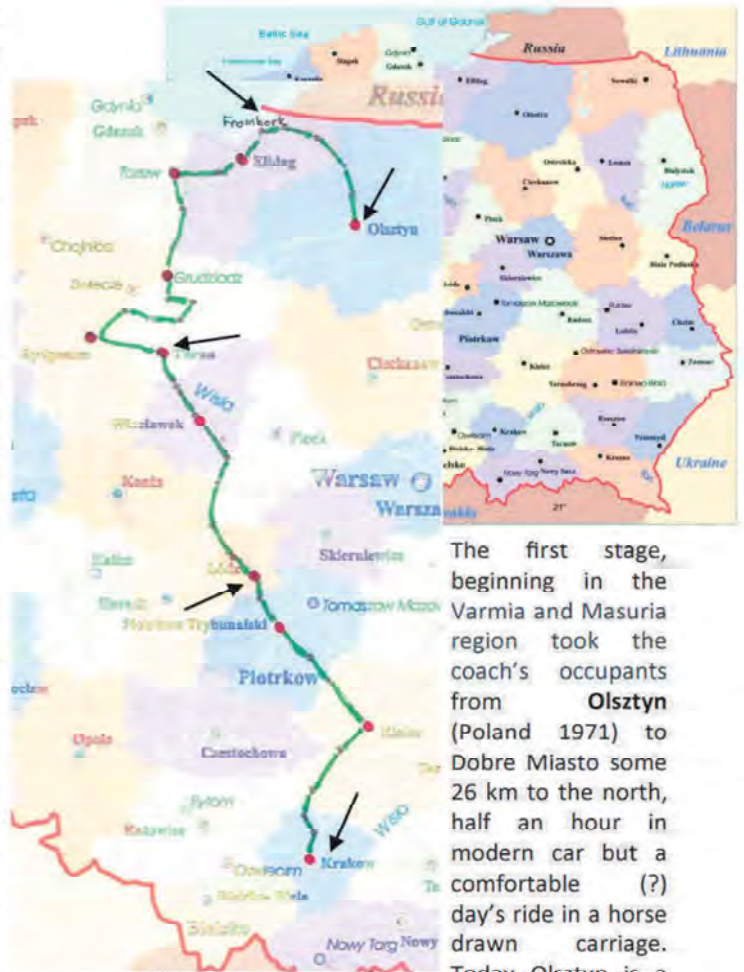
Just under fifty years ago the scientific and cultural world celebrated the birth of Nicolaus Copernicus, the revolutionary Polish astronomical thinker, who promoted a different way of understanding the relationship of the Earth to the Sun, as you will know... Philately played a major part in those public celebrations as a glance at Harvey Duncan's checklist of Copernicus stamps, issued with this journal in January 2000, (see page 16) will verify.

Naturally, in Poland itself the celebrations were many and varied, one of the more imaginative being the creation of The Copernicus Trail, a route map of various places starting in the North and North-East of Poland which are associated with the Great Man—from Olsztyn to Krakov. Tourists in years to come would then be invited to follow The Trail and see the various places on it associated with Copernicus, many of which would not normally merit much attention at all. The Trail was created by using transport technology of the 15th C. viz. horse drawn coaches which Copernicus and his contemporaries would have thought as normal a way of getting about as we today do re the modern automobile. The photo below is of the coach at Kutno, north of Łódź on June 3rd.



The first running of the Trail began in the second week of May 1973 and concluded on June 16, making 35 stops along the way with rest days built in every week or so: see schedule opposite. Most of the stages required coach travel of around 20-25 km (12-15 miles) and some of the places mentioned can be illustrated with stamps. The coach truly was a mail-coach, delivering letters from one point on the Trail to another.

The Trail follows places associated with Copernicus across the various stages of his life, though there was no suggestion he had ever travelled it. The route's longest section is 237 kilometres long and runs through the Province of Varmia and Masuria. It is dotted with cities and towns which bear witness to Copernicus' non-astronomical activities, e.g. medical and religious.



The first stage, beginning in the Varmia and Masuria region took the coach's occupants from Olsztyn (Poland 1971) to Dobre Miasto some 26 km to the north, half an hour in modern car but a comfortable (?) day's ride in a horse drawn carriage. Today Olsztyn is a large city with over 170,000 citizens but in medieval times was an important centre of trade, crafts, science and administration. (On map above rough route plotting by JD.)

Its current entry in Wikipedia boasts, "Olsztyn, for a number of years, has been ranked very highly in quality of life, income, employment and safety. It currently is one of the best places in Poland to live and work... also one of the happiest cities in the country".

May 09- Olsztyn – Dobre Miasto ,	May 10- Dobre Miasto – Lidzbark Warmiński,
May 11- RESTING ,	May 12- Lidzbark Warmiński – Pieniężno,
May 13- Pieniężno – Braniewo,	May 14 – Braniewo – Frombork,
May 15 –Frombork – Elbląg,	May 16 – Elbląg – Malbork,
May 17 – Malbork – Sztum,	May 18 – RESTING,
May 19 – Sztum – Kwidzyn,	May 20 – Kwidzyn – Grudziądz,
May 21 – Grudziądz – Wąbrzeźno,	May 22 – Wąbrzeźno – Brodnica,
May 23 – Brodnica – Golub Dobrzyń,	May 24 – Golub Dobrzyń – Chelmża,
May 25 – Chelmża – Chelmno,	May 26 – Chelmno – Bydgoszcz,
May 27 – RESTING,	May 28 – Bydgoszcz – Toruń,
May 29 – Toruń – Ciechocinek,	May 30 – Ciechocinek – Włocławek,
May 31 – Włocławek – Gostynin,	June 01 – RESTING,
June 02 – Gostynin – Kutno,	June 03 – Kutno – Łęczyca,
June 04 – Łęczyca – Zgierz,	June 05 – Zgierz – Łódź,
June 06 – Łódź – Tuszyń,	June 07 – Tuszyń – Piotrków Trybunalski,
June 08 – RESTING,	June 09 – Piotrków Trybunalski – Paradyż,
June 10 – Paradyż – Smyków,	June 11 – RESTING,
June 12 – Smyków – Kielce,	June 13 – Kielce – Chęciny,
June 14 – Chęciny – Jędrzejów,	June 15 – Jędrzejów – Miechów,
June 16 – Miechów – Słomniki,	June 16 – Słomniki – Kraków,
	June 16 – Around City of Kraków

During the war between Poland and the Teutonic Order in 1516–1521, Copernicus was in charge of managing the property of the Varmia Chapter in Olsztyn. He was in command of defence at the Olsztyn castle (shown on Poland 1971) against the Teutonic forces.

The second stage from Dobrze Miasto to **Lidzbark Warmiński** (Poland 1971, showing the Castle) is a distance of 23km. In the latter city Copernicus took up the post of a bishop's secretary and was also a doctor. Copernicus first visited the town at the turn of 1495 and 1496, and then lived at the castle from 1503. It is believed he wrote part of his *De revolutionibus orbium coelestium* there.



On June 5th the coach reached **Łódź** (Poland 2004 now the third largest city in the country and ten days later concluded on reaching its 35th stage at **Kraków**. (Poland 2002 and 1971, below



showing Collegium Naius, Jagiellonium University and on the label a reference to Copernicus' personal copy of Euclid's "Geometry") to which Copernicus had headed from his home town of Torun at the age of 18 to study at the Academy.



Frombork which was reached by the coach on May 15th 1973, it having travelled from Braniewo is an important city in relation to Copernicus.

He completed his epochal work, *De revolutionibus orbium coelestium* in the small town. In his book, written in Latin, Copernicus used the Latin name of the town and region -*Frueburgo Prussiae* Shortly after its 1543 publication, Copernicus died there and was buried in the town's cathedral, shown on Poland 1971 (left).

In the northwest corner of the cathedral grounds is Copernicus' tower, and in the southwest corner an octagonal building with a square bell tower.



Having travelled 45km South East from Bydgoszcz on May 28th the coach reached the city of **Torun**, (Poland 2003, showing the Gothic Town Hall and the Copernicus monument) The town is where Copernicus was born, on 19 February 1473. The medieval Old Town tenement where his mother brought him into the world now houses his museum, shown on Poland 1971 (above right.) The local university is named after Nicolaus Copernicus.



Two further photos from the stop at **Kutno**. Centre left you can see a coachman and a passenger dressed up in contemporary costumes. The coach was borrowed from the Museum of Post and

In each major settlement the coach visited, even if it was not making a stop there for the night, crowds came out to welcome it and celebrate its arrival with cultural entertainments like dancing and brass band music.

For example on May 20th when the coach stopped for the night at **Wabrzeźno**, local dignitaries and members of the Cultural Circle welcomed its arrival, as did regional TV crews. The three coachmen (who took it in turns to drive the group of horses) were dressed as they would have been in the days of Duchy of Warsaw, two on the driving board of the coach. Inside, a representative of the District Board in Bydgoszcz, Zbigniew Drost, who was in charge of the mail made sure the deliveries were made to each town the coach passed through. Local children were permitted a short ride in the coach, before urged on by a post horn next morning it moved on to its next destination.



(A fuller account of the Copernicus tourism trail can be found at [https://poland.pl/tourism/urban-tourism/trail-copernicus/.](https://poland.pl/tourism/urban-tourism/trail-copernicus/))

All the stamps used above to illustrate The Copernicus Trail predate its coach journeys but there was also a separate major philatelic commemoration of the events.

For each of the 35 stages a serviced cover was produced, four of which from the first and last stages are exemplified opposite: actual size 16.5 x 11.5 cms. As you'll immediately see there is much commonality. At the bottom left of each cover is a line drawing in brown or blue of a medieval stage coach and underneath wording which translates as "The Stage-Coach Post on the occasion of the 500th anniversary of the birthday of Nicolas Copernicus". These are also known as the Diligence Post covers.

Top left, tying a green and black perforated label with a nominal value of 1zł (issued May 8th, 1973) showing Copernicus holding an astrolabe is a purple rectangle which states for each stage of the journey "Carried on board" (followed by the names of the starting and finishing points for that day) so that the first one opposite tags "Olsztyn—Dobre Miasto" which was the first stage of the trail or tour, as explained above. 294,000 labels in the form of a miniature sheet of six were printed. Almost 37,000 of them were destroyed at the conclusion of the Trail.



Then top right is a pictorial and often elaborate hand cancel naming the start point and date and tying a brown 1.50zł stamp marking the 500th Birth anniversary as issued on December 28th 1972. Often this cancel shows a basic illustration of how Copernicus saw the solar system, and the coat of Arms of the city or town referenced as for Łódź and Kraków (right).

The addressees named in a green handstamp bottom right are either The Polish Philatelists Union—The Copernicus Club (as below) or The Regional Management of Polish Philatelists Union, Olsztyn, Rataja Street #58...



Full sets of all 35 covers are available to purchase on the internet for around £60.

Jeff Dugdale 4.2021