

GLHS Talk via Zoom: 10th March 2021

Royal Mail Coach Routes through Northumberland and the Borders 1790-1840

Speaker: Ian Rawles

The Society was treated to a fine, well-illustrated talk, which generated a long discussion among members. The focus of the talk was on arguments about changing the Royal Mail coach route between Newcastle and Edinburgh, but through this lens, our speaker, Ian Rawles opened out many other issues about the society and politics of the time. The established route, from London to Edinburgh, through Newcastle, followed the old A1, but the stretch from Morpeth onwards was longer than other possible routes and landowners and businesses interests lobbied vigorously for change to shorter routes. As background to the arguments, Ian Rawles introduced us to the mail coaches, of a standardised design, pulled by four horses. The coaches changed horses every ten to fifteen miles to maintain speed with fresh horses, with changeovers taken just a minute or so. Each coach had a uniformed guard who sat at the back, equipped with pistols and a horn. The drivers were skilled horsemen and there was space for three passengers. The routes fanned out from London to the rest of the country and were an important way to draw the whole of the United Kingdom together. Our speaker said it was a great sight at the time to see the coaches ready to depart from central London, and must have impressed people with power of the State as the coaches flew by at ten to fifteen miles an hour through rural Northumberland.

Sir Francis Freeling was in charge of the Royal Mail service from 1790 to 1836, and was keen to reform the service, and especially to speed it up. There were many interests lobbying for improvements, including government needing better communication, lawyers who needed a secure way to deliver papers and businesses who needed quick answers to queries. People in Scotland lobbied hard for better communication north of Edinburgh, while many people thought a royal mail route would lead to road improvements. Engineers, such as the great Thomas Telford, were also pushing for major highway schemes using new engineering innovations. Finally, many landowners could see the benefits of a Royal Mail route through their land.

The four routes in discussion were: The existing A1 route; the Wooler line, more or less along the modern A697; the Carter line, more or less along the A696 and the Jedburgh line, via Hexham. The discussion about each route went on from the late 1780s until a final decision was made in 1830. Ian Rawles explored how the decision was made, and the relative influence of scientific and engineering analyses versus political influence. The Royal Mail had their own surveyors and assessed the alternative routes in terms of distance, topography, weather and financial return. The Jedburgh route was quickly dismissed because of topography and weather. In good weather, the Wooler and Carter lines won out when carefully assessed against the A1 route. On the Wooler route, there were some problems of topography. Passengers sometimes had to get out of coaches on steep parts of the route to lighten the load the horses had to pull. Thomas Telford advised about changing the route across Rimside Moor north of Long Framlington to avoid a particularly steep slope. As regards finance, the postal service needed to make money from people who paid to deliver packets and letters, perhaps another reason why the Jedburgh line dropped out of consideration.

But these technical arguments were only one side of the story. At that time, landowners wielded considerable power at all levels of government. During the course of his research, Ian Rawles found petitions and letters from landowners and others influential people strongly advocating the Wooler line, including one from Ann Roddam of Roddam Hall. The Blacketts of Wallington Hall advocated the Carter line, while Viscount Morpeth, later Earl of Carlisle, a significant Whig politician, promoted the Wooler line. However, the Duke of Northumberland argued to maintain the Berwick line, which of course ran through his seat at Alnwick. So 'old money' linked to the Duke confronted the

modernisers associated with the Whig party. In the end, a clever behind-the-scenes compromise allowed both routes to proceed. The Royal Mail Coach continued to follow the A1. A new additional service was introduced for the Wooler line using a light curricle pulled by two horses. This was both faster and cheaper to run than the Royal Mail Service. This service was a great success until 1837, when a quite different technology – the railway – overtook it. The last Royal Mail coach left Newcastle for Edinburgh in 1847.

We all found Ian's talk a fascinating insight into our area at an important moment in its history, with the industrial and agricultural revolutions getting underway.