

## *Chapter Six*

### THE MAIL COACHES

AS LATE AS as the 1780s the mail was still carried by the post-boys, riding at about six miles an hour and costing the post office 3d. an hour, while the stage-coaches were reaching a speed of seven miles an hour and costing their proprietors only 2d. a mile.

The letter- and travelling-post was a royal monopoly, giving postmasters the advantage of being the only people legally entitled to supply horses, but after 1780 this monopoly was removed. Anyone could let horses and any innkeeper could call his inn a posting-house.

In 1782 John Palmer planned a service of mail coaches which, by means of changing horses every seven or ten miles, would increase the speed of the post to eight or nine miles an hour. By allowing passengers to ride in the mail coaches, he argued that the extra cost of the shortened posts would be offset and the postage of mails need cost no more.

After months of deliberation, John Palmer won his concession for the mails. At first no outside passengers were allowed but the mail coaches carried a guard armed with two short guns and a blunderbuss and the coachman was provided with two pistols.

The first mail coach ran from Bristol by way of Bath to London on August 2, 1784, five innkeepers having been engaged on the route to horse the coach at 3d. a mile, two at Bath, one at Marlborough, a fourth at Thatcham and the fifth

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the proprietor of the Swan with Two Necks, Lad Lane, London.

It was advertised as a Mail Diligence and the first advertisement announced that

The Proprietors of the above Carriage having agreed to convey the Mail to and from London and Bristol in Sixteen Hours, with a Guard for its Protection, respectfully inform the Public, that it is constructed so as to accommodate Four Inside Passengers in the most Convenient Manner; that it well [*sic*] set off every Night at Eight O'Clock from the Swan With Two Necks,<sup>1</sup> Lad Lane, London, and arrive at the Three Tuns Inn, Bath, before Ten the next Morning, and at the Rummer-Tavern, near the Exchange, Bristol, at Twelve. . . . Will set off from the said Tavern at Bristol at Four o'Clock every Afternoon, and arrive at London at Eight o'Clock the next Morning.

The Price to and from Bristol, Bath, and London, 28s. for each Passenger. . . . No Outside allowed.

Both the Guards and Coachmen (who will be likewise armed) have given ample Security for their Conduct to the Proprietors, so that those Ladies and Gentlemen who may please to honour them with their Encouragement, may depend on every Respect and Attention. . . .

There was a postscript to this notice that the London, Bath and Bristol Coaches would run from the above Inns as usual. At the same time, other coach and inn proprietors, quick to sense dangerous competition, immediately announced that 'Pickwick, Weeks, and other Proprietors of the Coaches from Bristol, Bath and London respectfully beg leave to inform the Public that they continue to run their Coaches from the Bush Tavern in Corn Street, Bristol' and from other inns in Bristol and Bath 'with equal Expedition to any Coaches that travel the Road.'

<sup>1</sup> A corruption of the 'Swan With Two Nicks', the two nicks being the mark used for royal birds.

By 1785 the Norwich Mail was on the road and the first cross-posts established from Bristol to Portsmouth. Within a few months more services to London were established, the Leeds, Manchester and Liverpool mail, the London, Gloucester and Swansea, the Hereford, Carmarthen and Milford Haven, the Worcester and Ludlow, the Birmingham and Shrewsbury, the Chester and Holyhead, the Exeter, the Portsmouth, and, by the autumn of 1786, the Edinburgh mail, which ran along the Great North Road by way of York.

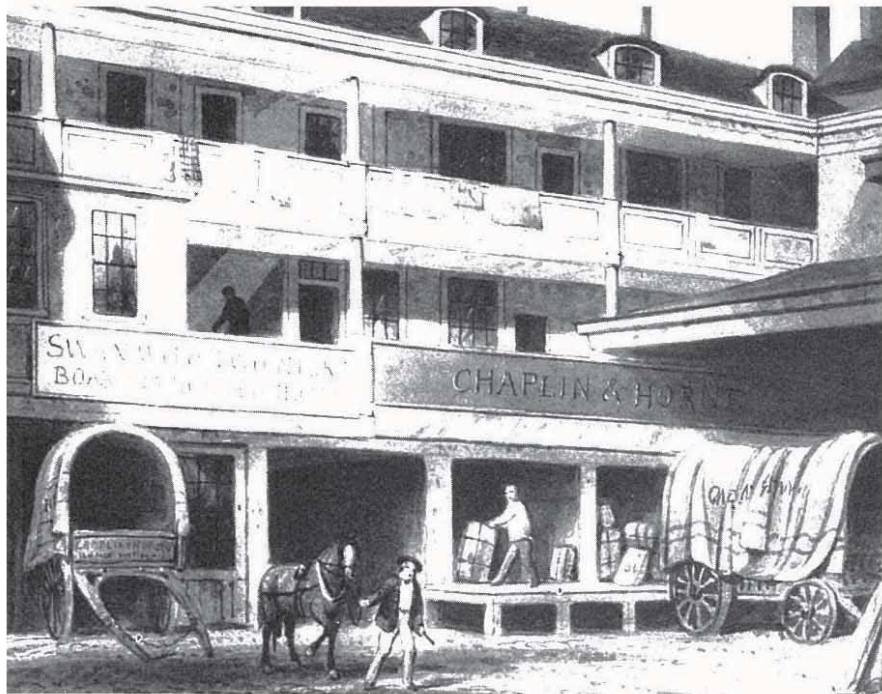
By this time John Palmer had been appointed Comptroller General of the Post Office. The ordinary stage coaches were as numerous as ever and the long-distance travellers who preferred travelling by day and enjoying a good bed at an inn for each night of their journey preferred them, but the mail coaches gained a prestige. Their turn-out was extremely smart and their time-keeping astonishingly accurate, while nervous travellers felt that the security of the armed guard outweighed the dangers of the ever-increasing speed at which they travelled.

The coachman was under the order of the guard but was employed by the innkeeper-contractor who horsed the coach, the coach itself being hired by the coachmaker who had the government monopoly for the building of all the mail coaches, and to whom it was regularly returned for cleaning and maintenance. The guard was a Post Office employee who, despite his magnificent appearance in the royal livery of scarlet coat and black hat, his timepiece to log the journey and his pistols and blunderbuss, was paid 10s. 6d. a week, having to rely on the usual 2s. 6d. tip from each passenger.

Palmer, determined that the mail coach should be the most efficient available, ordered that Besant's new 'patent coach' should be used exclusively for the mail. It was a coach hung very high, with a new type of patent spring, but was extremely uncomfortable. Matthew Boulton, taking a mail-coach journey from London to Exeter in 1798, thought very little of it. 'I had the most disagreeable journey I ever experienced the night after

5. The George Inn (left) and White Hart (below) were two examples of galleried inns in London borough of Southwark.





The Swan with Two Nicks (later corrupted to Necks), Lad Lane (*above*), was first London inn to receive a mail coach (1784) and The Spread Eagle in Gracechurch Street (*below*) was another famous City coaching inn, at one time owned the same proprietor, William Chaplin.



I left you,' he wrote to a friend, 'owing to the new improved patent coach, a vehicle loaded with iron trappings and the greatest complication of unmechanical contrivances jumbled together, that I have ever witnessed. The coach swings sideways with a sickly sway, without any vertical spring; the point of suspense bearing upon an arch called a spring, though it is nothing of the sort. The severity of the jolting occasioned me such disorder that I was obliged to stop at Axminster and go to bed very ill. However, I was able to proceed next day in a post-chaise. The Landlady in the London Inn at Exeter assured me that the passengers who arrived every night were in general so ill that they were obliged to go supperless to bed; and unless they go back to the old-fashioned coach, hung a little lower, the mail-coaches will lose all their custom.'

Besant's design had been intended 'to give an easy motion fore and aft, as well as sideways and also to be self-righting in case of a spill', Besant claiming that 'the overturning of the carriage will only set the body down on its bottom between the fore and hind wheels when they lay flat on the ground.'

Very soon after this the design was modified by Vidler, the coach-builder of Millbank, who held the monopoly for the supply of mail coaches until 1836. A seat was provided for one outside passenger but it was not till the end of the mail-coach days that more than one outside passenger was allowed, and those days were very short for Matthew Boulton, who had suffered so badly from Besant's coach, represented an undreamed of threat to their existence. He was the proprietor of the large Soho engineering works at Birmingham and he took as a partner James Watt, who had made a valuable contribution to the development of Newcomen's steam engine, which had been used as early as the beginning of the eighteenth century for pumping water out of coal mines. However it was not until 1830 that the threat became tangible and when the mail coaches first appeared few people thought their speed would ever be exceeded.

Innkeepers were anxious to become mail coach contractors, for although passengers were given little time to stop for a meal it was a sign of prestige to be known as a house where the Royal Mail stopped. Moreover, people sometimes used the Mail for part of a journey and would put up at the inn where it stopped to change horses before continuing in a post-chaise, so the innkeeper had a chance of additional custom.

The organization of the mail-service was very complicated, and made possible only by the efficiency of the posting inns. In 1796 Thomas Hasker, who had succeeded Palmer at the Post Office, was writing to the Hon. Charles Greville: 'I do not think it would be proper to establish a Mail Coach between Gloucester and Carmarthen . . . it would establish more coaches on the road than can live. . . .

'If the Innkeepers think the contrary, and will back that opinion, and not let it be only a word, let them Start a Coach themselves and run it three days a week from Gloster to Carmarthen for six months, and at the end of that time they shall have the mail to carry.'

During the same year he was writing to Mr. Woolmer of Carlisle about the establishment of a Mail to Dundee and Aberdeen. 'You know it must be a maxim of the Office to bring all the Mail to one Inn at a Central Town that they may assist each other. This being the case, Drysdale's must be the Inn at Edinburgh—and by way of nursing the undertaking I will intreat the Postmaster General to give the first year 2d. per mile each way—if the hills are still so bad between Bervie and Stonehaven there is another road via Lawrence Kirk—it may be right if you find it bad to report the Lawrence Kirk road.'

Thomas Hasker was extremely efficient and insisted on the mail coaches maintaining their speed and keeping to time, so that travellers had to snatch their meals in the shortest possible time. J. G. Campe, the German professor who visited England in 1801, described his journey from Yarmouth to London, after a thoroughly uncomfortable North Sea crossing, during which

they had been tossed and buffeted for four days and had finally been forced to make for Yarmouth instead of Harwich.

'... with the English posting system,' he wrote, '... the pursuit of efficiency is driven to such lengths, that any traveller with a considerable journey before him, who is not rich enough to provide his own equipage and stop when he pleases, is subjected to a veritable torture. Picture to yourself that we were obliged to cover 124 English miles from Yarmouth to London in fifteen hours without a single stop, except about half-way, at Ipswich, where we were suffered to refresh ourselves for half an hour. Even the most urgent demands of nature had to be suppressed or postponed in order that there might not be a minute's delay in changing horses, which happened about every ten miles. If a traveller wished to get down and disappear for a moment, he was faced with the danger that his luggage might be carried on to London without him. The postilion seemed to recognize no other duty than to arrive punctually. Whether his travellers, whose money had very wisely been collected beforehand, arrived with him was their concern, not his. The fresh horses were harnessed in a flash, and away we dashed without any inquiry as to who was on board. It was useless to call after the postilion. Either the noise of the carriage drowned the voice, or if he heard he paid no attention, nor would he stop even for a moment. The guard who sat behind, armed with two pistols as a protection against highwaymen, has no responsibility for the passengers. They are left entirely to their own devices, and must see to it themselves that they are not left behind.

'This indifference extends also to the passengers' luggage. In order that not a second should be lost, everything—trunks, boxes, packages—were thrown into the well like balls. Whether they fell on their sides or corners, or damaged each other, or were smashed, was not even a matter for thought. A request that a little care might be taken to avoid injury was simply ignored. No one pays the least attention or even deigns to reply.

Every one is concerned with his own affairs, and has no thought except to see that the coach departs at the exact moment and arrives according to schedule. The result, so far as I was concerned, was that on arrival in London my trunk was in holes, while a sturdy box, made of oak and strengthened with iron, was stove in completely on one side down to its contents.'

Yet the guards who controlled the coachmen were themselves under strict orders from Hasker to keep up their speeds. 'Stick to your bill and never mind what the passengers say', he wrote, when passengers had complained that they were given no time to finish their meals. 'Is it not the fault of the Landlord to keep them so long? Some day when you have waited a considerable time, suppose 5 or 8 minutes longer than is allowed by the Bill, drive away and leave them behind, only take care that you have a witness that you called them out two or three times—then let them go forward how they can.'

The craze for speed, particularly towards the end of the coaching era, caused some terrible accidents, many of them fatal. In one month alone of 1835 the Post Office recorded: February 5, Edinburgh and Aberdeen Mail overturned; February 9, Devonport Mail overturned; February 10, Scarborough and York Mail overturned; February 16, Belfast and Enniskellen Mail overturned; February 16, Dublin and Derry Mail overturned; February 17, Scarborough and Hull Mail overturned; February 17, York and Doncaster Mail overturned; February 24, Louth Mail overturned; February 25, Gloucester Mail overturned.

It was small wonder that by this time the stage coaches had become as popular again as the mail coaches, for although many had increased their speed and were as fast as the mails, there were plenty available which proceeded at a more leisurely pace, still allowing their passengers overnight stops at the inns on the roads.

By the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century, the principal London coaching inns were the

Bull and Mouth, St. Martin's-le-Grand, the Bell Savage on Ludgate Hill, by this time known as the Belle Sauvage, the Swan with Two Nicks, Lad Lane, the Spread Eagle in Gracechurch Street, the White Horse in Fetter Lane, the Blossom Inn, Lawrence Lane, Cheapside, the Bolt-in-Tun, Fleet Street, the Cross Keys, Wood Street, Cheapside, the Golden Cross, Charing Cross, the George and Blue Boar in Holborn, the Bell and Crown, Holborn, the Bull Inn, Aldgate, the Three Nuns, Aldgate, the Saracen's Head, Snow Hill and the King's Arms, Snow Hill.

All these inns had stabling for bringing horses in late at night and taking them out early in the morning, as well as stables for the night coach and mail horses which stayed all day in London. And the London end of the coaching business was mainly in the hands of six competitors, William Chaplin, Edward Sherman, Benjamin Horne, Robert Nelson, Mrs. Ann Nelson of the Bull Inn, Aldgate, and Mrs. Ann Mountain of the Saracen's Head, Snow Hill.

William Chaplin succeeded William Waterhouse at the Swan With Two Necks about 1825 and then acquired the White Horse, Fetter Lane and the Spread Eagle and Cross Keys in Gracechurch Street. His coaches went north, east, south and west and he also owned large stables at Purley on the Brighton Road, at Hounslow on the road to the west and at Whetstone at the beginning of the Great North Road.

Lad Lane no longer exists for it has been merged into Gresham Street, but in Chaplin's day the inn yard was in a narrow lane approached by a low arch and extremely difficult of access. The courtyard was surrounded on three sides by three tiers of galleries with outside staircases, made gay with creepers and window boxes, and so it remained until it was demolished in 1856, but as his business expanded Chaplin had underground stables built for two hundred horses. At the height of his prosperity, in the 1830s, he employed two thousand people and owned or partly-owned sixty-eight coaches and 1,800 horses.

Of the twenty-seven mails which left London every night, he horsed fourteen on the first stage out of London and the last stage in, and his annual returns were estimated at half a million pounds.

From the General Post Office in Lombard Street or the new building to which it moved in 1829 in St. Martin's-le-Grand, all the mail coaches except those bound for the west, departed every evening at 8 o'clock, having first loaded up their passengers and luggage, from the inns.

As late as the 1830s the population of England and Wales was only fourteen million, a large proportion of whom were illiterate and never received or sent a letter in all their lives, so all the letters and newspapers from London to every part of England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland were carried in the boots or on the top of twenty-seven mail coaches. To avoid congestion, passengers for the West assembled at the booking offices and inns in Oxford Street and Piccadilly or were taken there in coaches or omnibuses from their City inns, while the guards collected their mail boxes from the Post Office and drove down to the West End departure points to join the mail coaches. There was a line of inns from the City to the West End catering for these west-bound coaches and their passengers, including the Green Man and Still and the Gloucester Coffee House in Oxford Street for those using the Uxbridge Road, the White Bear in Piccadilly and the Spread Eagle, the Bull and Mouth and the Golden Cross where Piccadilly Circus now stands, and where Chaplin, Sherman and Horne had their West End offices, which were used for the Hounslow route. Hatchett's was another very popular coaching inn for travellers to the west country and the White Horse Cellar, on the corner of Arlington Street, near where the Ritz now stands, though it later moved across the road next door to Hatchett's, was at one time considered the finest inn in London.

On summer evenings crowds would gather outside the White Horse Cellar to watch the West Country mails depart.

'The finest sight in the metropolis is the setting-off of the mail coaches from Piccadilly,' wrote Hazlitt. 'The horses paw the ground and are impatient to be gone, as if conscious of the precious burden they convey. The mail carts drive up and the transfer of packages is made, and at a given signal off they start. . . . How we hate the Putney and Brentford stages that draw up when they are gone! Some persons think that the noblest object in Nature is the ship launched on the bosom of the ocean; but give me, for my private satisfaction, the mail coaches that pour down Piccadilly of an evening, tear up the pavement, and devour the way before them to *The Land's End*.'

But Hazlitt was already living in the past, for the days of coach travel were numbered by the time he was writing, although the little band of Jewish street traders still hung around the passengers selling oranges, pencils, sponges, brushes and similar sundries. Dickens took a less romantic view of the White Horse Cellar. 'The travellers' room at the "White Horse Cellar" is, of course, uncomfortable,' he wrote in *Pickwick Papers*. 'It would be no travellers'-room if it were not. It is the right-hand parlour, into which an aspiring kitchen fireplace appears to have walked, accompanied by a rebellious poker, tongs and shovel. It is divided into boxes, for the solitary confinement of travellers, and is furnished with a clock, a looking-glass, and a live waiter: which latter article is kept in a small kennel for washing glasses, in a corner of the apartment.'

Edward Sherman, who established himself at the Bull-and-Mouth, St. Martin's-le-Grand in 1823 was second only to Chaplin in the coaching business. He was the pioneer of the long-distance day coaches to Carlisle, Glasgow, Liverpool, Manchester, Holyhead and other places in North Wales, and as a result of marrying no less than three elderly and rich women in quick succession he was able to rebuild his seventeenth-century inn, with its three tiers of open galleries round the spacious courtyard, which was large enough to accommodate thirty coaches. Every Monday twenty-one coaches left his

yard and twenty-one arrived, and his pride was his Manchester 'Telegraph', which first ran in 1833, and by starting from London at 5 o'clock in the morning reached Manchester the same day, at 11 p.m., covering 186 miles in eighteen hours, though it was closely rivalled by Chaplin's Manchester 'Defiance'.

The Bull-and-Mouth, which became the Queen's Hotel after the rebuilding in 1830, was the stopping place for Manchester men, and long after the coaches were off the roads it remained their favourite London inn until it was pulled down in 1887.

William Horne became proprietor of the Golden Cross early in the nineteenth century and soon acquired the Cross Keys in Wood Street and the George and Blue Boar in Holborn, as well as West End offices. By the time he died, in 1828, he was working seven hundred horses, and his son Benjamin, who succeeded to the business, made it even larger, but in 1830 the first Golden Cross, which stood in the south-eastern part of what was to become Trafalgar Square, had to be rebuilt, and no sooner was it finished than it had to come down again because of the slum clearance and rebuilding scheme which was afoot, during which the tumbledown buildings huddled round St. Martin-in-the-Field were all swept away and Trafalgar Square laid out. The third Golden Cross, designed by Smirke, went up a little to the east, opposite Charing Cross, a dignified Georgian building of five storeys with a long, narrow courtyard. Benjamin Horne also had large stables at Barnet and Finchley so that he could compete with Sherman on the north and north-western routes, and at one time he had seven mails, the old Chester and Holyhead, the Cambridge Auxiliary, the Gloucester and Cheltenham, the Dover Foreign Mail, the Norwich, the Milford Haven and the Worcester and Oxford.

There were several coaching inns in East London, serving the eastern counties, but the most important and considered one of London's best, was the Bull Inn in Aldgate, owned by Mrs.

Ann Nelson. She ran nearly all the coaches on the eastern routes and also the Exeter 'Defiance' which was driven by her son George. Charles Harper, writing in 1903, said that the Bull 'presented the picture of a typical old English hostelry, and its coffee-room, resplendent with old polished mahogany fittings, its tables laid with silver, and the walls adorned with numerous specimens of those old coaching prints that are now so rare and prized so greatly by collectors, it wore no uncertain air of that solid and restful comfort the new and bustling hotels of today . . . are incapable of giving. Everything at the Bull was solid and substantial, from the great heavy mahogany chairs that required the strength of a strong man to move, to the rich old English fare, and the full-bodied port its guests were sure of obtaining.'

At the Bull, Mrs. Nelson kept a room especially for her coachmen and guards where they 'dined with as much circumstance as the coffee-room guests, drank wine with the appreciation of connoisseurs, and tipped the waiter as freely as any travellers down the road. A round dozen daily gathered round the table of this sanctum. . . .

'The etiquette of this room was strict. The oldest coachman presided—never a guard, for they always ranked as juniors—and at the proper moment gave the loyal toast of the King or Queen. An exception to this rule of seniority was when Mrs. Nelson's second son, Robert, who drove her Exeter "Defiance", was present, as occasionally he was. Following the practice of the House of Commons, whose members are never, within the House, referred to by their own names, but always as the representatives of their several constituencies, Mrs. Nelson's coachmen and guards here assembled were addressed as "Manchester", "Oxford", "Ipswich", "Devonport", and so forth.'

When Mrs. Nelson retired her son John carried on the business and saw the dawn of the railway age and the end of the coaches, but the old Bull survived until 1868, still known as an inn and not the Bull 'Hotel', for, says Harper, Mrs. Nelson

'most resolutely set her face against that new-fangled word; and as an "inn" the house was known to the very last.'

In 1807 Robert Nelson, Mrs. Nelson's third son, took over the Belle Sauvage from Robert Gray, who moved to the Bolt-in-Tun in Fleet Street.

The Belle Sauvage was a magnificent place in Nelson's day, its galleried courtyard busy with his fast day and night coaches running to Bath, Cheltenham, Brighton, Cambridge and Manchester and the Newmarket-Norwich Mail. He kept four hundred horses in his stables and the inn was famous for its comfort and good food.

To rival Sherman, who had run Nelson's 'Red Rover' to Manchester off the road with an even faster coach, Nelson established a new service with his 'Beehive', announcing that:

Merchants, buyers, and the public in general, visiting London and Manchester, are respectfully informed that a new coach, called the 'Beehive' built expressly, and fitted up with superior accommodation for comfort and safety to any coach in Europe, will leave 'La Belle Sauvage', Ludgate Hill, London, at eight every morning and arrive in Manchester the following morning, in time for the coaches leaving for Carlisle, Edinburgh, and Glasgow. . . . In order to insure safety and punctuality, with respectability, no large packages will be taken, or fish of any description carried by this conveyance. The inside of the coach is fitted with spring cushions and a reading-lamp, lighted with wax, for the accommodation of those who wish to amuse themselves on the road. The inside backs and seats are also fitted up with hair cushions, rendering them more comfortable to passengers than anything hitherto brought out in the annals of coaching, and, to prevent frequent disputes respecting seats, every seat is numbered. Persons booking themselves at either of the above places will receive a card, with a number upon it, thereby doing away with the disagreeables that occur daily in the old style. The route is through Stockport, Macclesfield, Congleton, Newcastle, Wolverhampton, Birmingham, Coventry, Dunchurch, Towcester, Stony Stratford, Brickhill, Dunstable, and St. Albans,

being the most level line of country, avoiding the danger of the steep hills through Derbyshire.

It was twenty-five years earlier than Robert Nelson's arrival at the Belle Sauvage that Parson Woodforde described his visit there. In 1782 he had travelled up from Norwich with his niece Nancy and arrived at the Swan with Two Necks, but not liking it there had taken a hackney coach to the Bell Savage where they dined, supped and slept. Here they seem to have been very comfortable, with certain important reservations, for Parson Woodforde recorded: 'They were very civil people at the Bell Savage inn by name Barton and a very good House it is. About 10 o'clock at Night we set of [*sic*] in the Salisbury Coach from the same Inn for Salisbury, and the Coach guarded. I was bit terribly by the Buggs last Night, but did not wake me.'

Four years later he and Nancy were again staying in London at the Bell Savage, but on June 25 he wrote: 'I was very much pestered and bit by the Buggs in the Night'. The next day they breakfasted, supped and slept at the inn, but, said Parson Woodforde: 'I was bit so terribly with Buggs again this Night that I got up at 4 o'clock this morning and took a long Walk by myself about the City till breakfast time.' They remained at the Bell Savage but that night the poor Parson, determined to get a better sleep, made his own arrangements. 'I did not pull off my Cloathes last Night but sat up in a Great Chair all night with my Feet on the bed and slept very well considering and not pestered with Buggs', he wrote. Again the following night, June 28: 'I did not pull off my Cloathes last Night again but did as the Night before, and slept tolerably well.'

And the next morning they departed for Bath, leaving at 6.45. There were four in the coach and a guard on top and it was called the 'Balloon coach on Account of its travelling so fast making it a point to be before the Mail Coach.'

Robert Nelson maintained the standards of the Belle Sauvage

until the end of the coaching days and then kept the Portland Hotel in Great Portland Street, the historic old Belle Sauvage being demolished in 1850.

The sixth important coaching proprietor of the early nineteenth century was Mrs. Ann Mountain of the Saracen's Head, Snow Hill. She had been widowed in 1818 but with the help of her son, Peter, carried on the business. In 1823 she put the Tally-Ho coach on the London to Birmingham road, which, to the fury of William Horne, travelled 109 miles in eleven hours. He quickly established his Independent Tally-Ho on the same road, arranging for it to set out an hour and a quarter before Mrs. Mountain's coach, in order to attract her customers. Her Tally-Ho was only one of thirty coaches which left the Saracen's Head each day and at the back of the inn she had a coach-factory where her own coaches were built: and other coaches built here were leased to her partners at the rate of 3½d. a mile.

It was at the Saracen's Head that Nicholas Nickleby joined Mr. Squeers and the five small schoolboys for his journey to Dotheboys Hall and found the schoolmaster breakfasting in the coffee room on a plate of hot toast and a round of beef, while the boys were provided with milk and water and thick bread and butter, and expected to be grateful.