Coventry Coaching before the coming of the railway

Coventry, Warwickshire, c.1832 Joseph Mallord William Turner

The Coaching Age is a generalised term for the horse drawn transport network prior to motorised road transport. The term generally focuses on 4-inside and 6-inside stage and mail coaches. This usually overlooks many of the different types of vehicles that were on the roads at the time. There were many private vehicles, which also changed horses on longer trips, a system generally referred to as 'posting'. For those on the lower rungs of society there were the 'slow coaches' and 'hitching' on the giant covered wagons. There is of course also the whole range of carts for other uses.

As we will see, a network became established of horse drawn coaches out of London to all corners of Great Britain and cross country. Within the network were two sectors, one of private enterprise operating the inspiringly named Stage Coaches and the other the Royal Mail, with a degree of overlap between the more significant coach proprietors who also operated the mails.

Amongst a host of government granted permissions, including a waiving of tolls on toll roads, a requirement that gates were open in preparation of the coach's passing, running to tight schedules and inns needing horses to be ready for swift changeovers, there was also that the mail carried letters in mail bags with an armed guard, while the stage coaches carriage parcels. Research suggests that the stage coach that carried six inside passengers was in fact waning into the 19th century and 4-inside coaches were on the rise, mimicking to a degree the mail which only ever carried 4-inside passengers.

The development of omnibuses in various forms and the existence of different types of larger carriages is something that requires further research. British coach representations in art survived where they met a romantic or nostalgic demand. This meant the carriage depicted usually took the form of a central compartment or 'berline' with unprotected outside seating above the front and rear boots, representations of other types of carriage appear less frequently or have been lost. By far the most often depicted stage coach in art is that of Royal Mail.

John Cordrey 'London & Birmingham Stage Coach' 1801 according to the Science Museum. Note that this carriage stops at Coventry and Dunchurch.[1]

However a closer look at this carriage reveals two Balloons either side of the Swan with Two Necks. This suggests very strongly, coupled with the names Thomas Willson and William Waterhouse, that this carriage is in fact the Birmingham Balloon Post Coach. As a post coach it would have 4 inside as depicted [2]

[1] Science Museum Group Collection © The Board of Trustees of the Science Museum Object Number: 1938-661

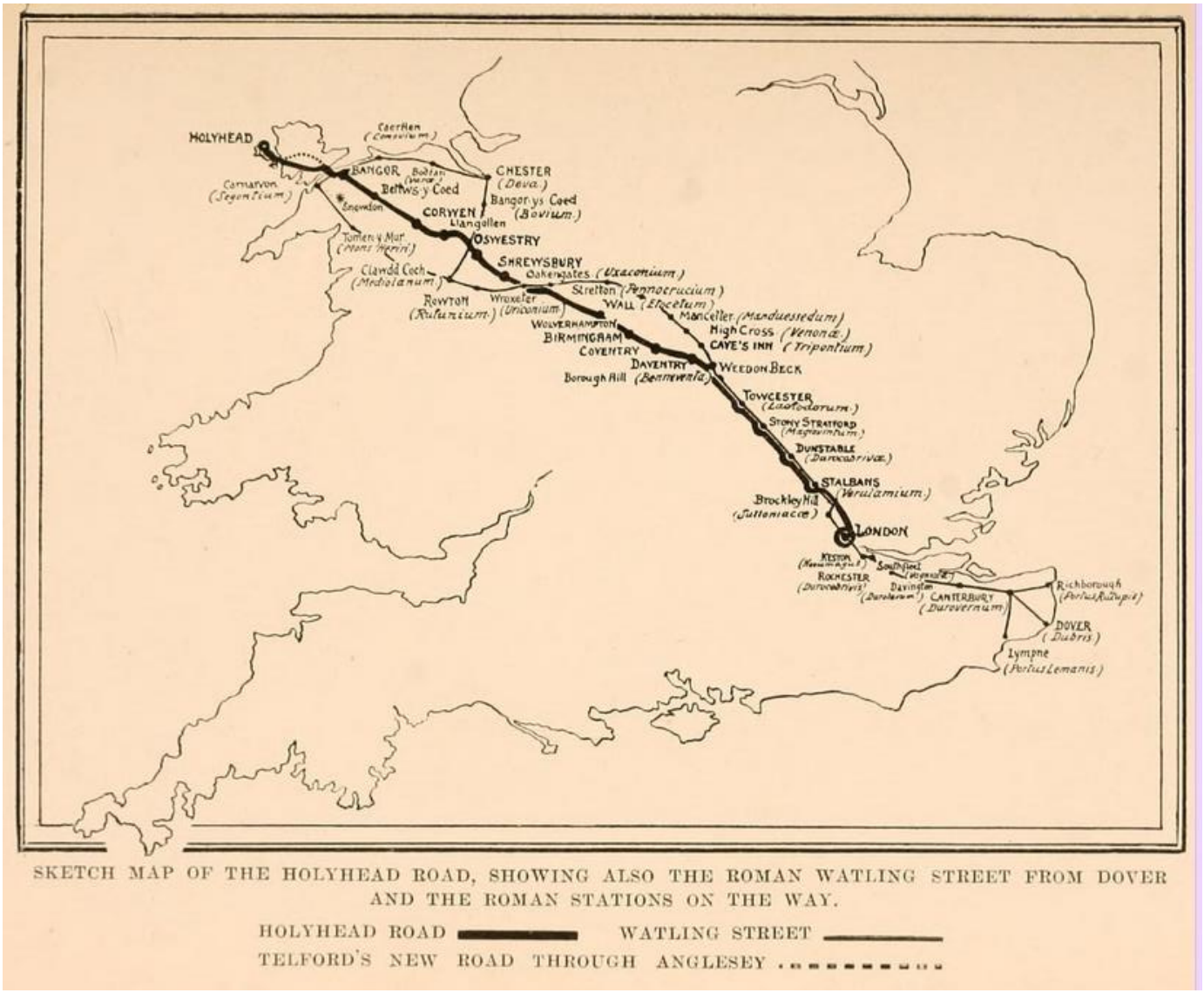
[2] Oracle and the Daily Advertiser - Monday 07 September 1801

BIRMINGHAM BALLOON POST COACH, through Dunstable, Stoney Stratford, and Coventry, every Evening at Seven o'Clock.

This kind of stylish stage coach, which weas lighter and faster than the heavier six inside was the predominant type of stage coach on long distances in the first half of the 1800s.

The London & Birmingham railway station was some distance from the city centre. In the tradition already established at the Manchester and Liverpool stations, various entities vied for the customers of the railroad. A pattern was emerging across coaching in general, where railways appeared long distance coaches disappeared. This wasn't the catastrophic earthquake that some writers say that it was, well not to be insensitive it was a shakeup and could be said to put an end to the golden age of long distance coaches. What it didn't do was put an end to the coach proprietors, in fact, as in the case of Henry Lacy of Manchester and a good number of others, there was a period of improved fortunes. The long distance journeys were replaced by more frequent shorter and much more profitable journeys. We'll come back to this.

Coventry – on the path of long distance carriages



SKETCH MAP OF THE HOLYHEAD ROAD, SHOWING ALSO THE ROMAN WATLING STREET FROM DOVER AND THE ROMAN STATIONS ON THE WAY.

HOLYHEAD ROAD ——— WATLING STREET ———

TELFORD'S NEW ROAD THROUGH ANGLESEY . . . . . .

The Holyhead Road, Harper 1902

Long distance carriages were of two main types: Mail coaches & Stage Coaches. Although there were many other vehicles that also carried people, some mixing people and goods.

Mail coaches were the 4-inside elite stage coaches, running to strict timetables whilst also carrying mail bags with an armed guard. Their designs were strictly controlled by the Post Office and they were carefully maintained with a finessed livery.

Stage coaches varied greatly in quality. All were once well turned out but they varied in condition and age. 6 inside coaches were frowned on by the better off because of the increased 'mixing' with lower folk.

In between these two forms was with the light, post or fly coach, a slim stage coach with only 4 inside. In some cases these were nicely livered including liveried coachmen aiming for a slightly posher market than the standard stage coach. Bate's data shows that by 1836 the vast majority of the long distance stage coaches were 4 inside.

London & Liverpool Mail

Down		Up
7:30 pm	**Swan with Two Necks, Lad**	**7:00**
8:00	**Lane**	6:45
10:44	London General Post Office	4:01
1:26 am	Redbourn	1:09
2:12	Stony Stratford	12:22 am
3:25	Towcester	11:09
4:11	Daventry	10:23
5:18	Dunchurch	**9:16**
6:31	**Coventry**	8:03
9:02	Coleshill	6:03
10:41	Lichfield	3:53
11:33	Stone	3:01
1:52pm	Newcastle-under-Lyme	12:43pm
3:00	Knutsford	11:35
4:50	Warrington	**9:45am**
	Liverpool	

London & Holyhead Mail

Down		Up
7:30 pm	**Swan with Two Necks, Lad Lane**	7:15
8:00*	London General Post Office	7:00
1:26 am	Stony Stratford	1:34*
2:12	Towcester	12:49am
3:25	Daventry	11:32
4:11	Dunchurch	10:51
5:18	**Coventry**	**9:46**
7:08	Birmingham	7:31
9:01	Wolverhampton	6:14
10:14	Shifnal	5:01
11:59	Shrewsbury	3:01
1:45pm	Oswestry	1:17
2:57	Llangollen	12:13pm
3:57	Corwen	11:13
6:21	Bettws-U-Coed	9:49
7:02	Capel Curig	8:08
9:20	Bangor	6:50
10:55	**Holyhead**	**4:15am**

In 1836 two high status mails, the Liverpool and Holyhead Royal Mails, passed through Coventry. Both services were provided by the great coach proprietor William James Chaplin.

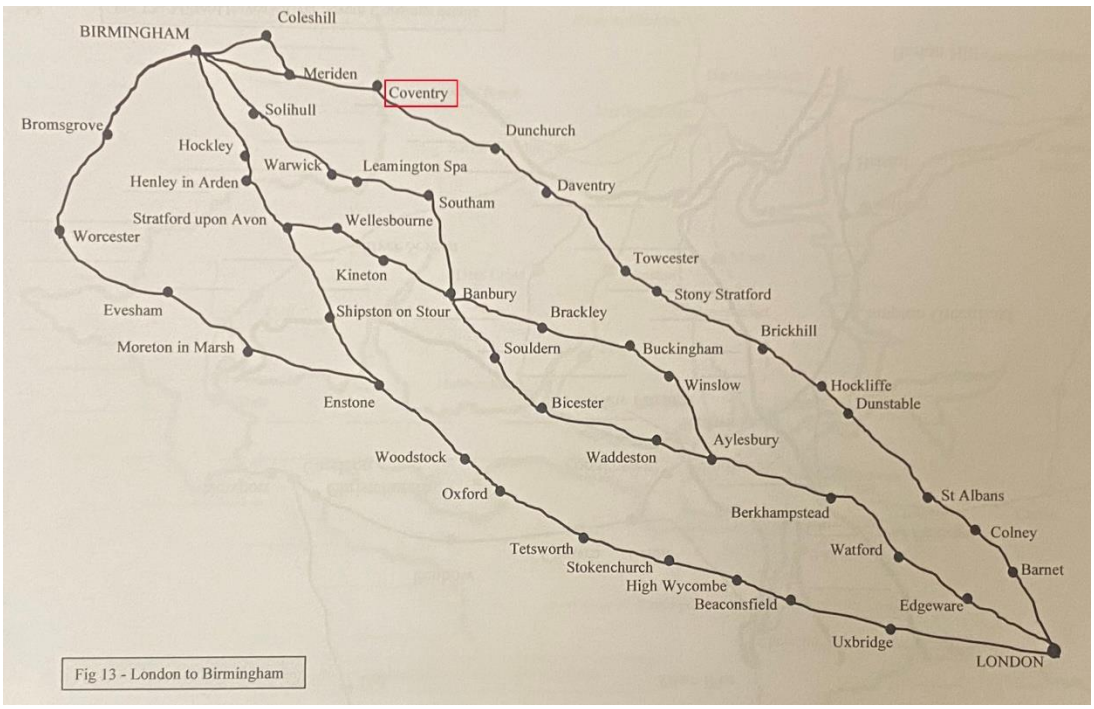


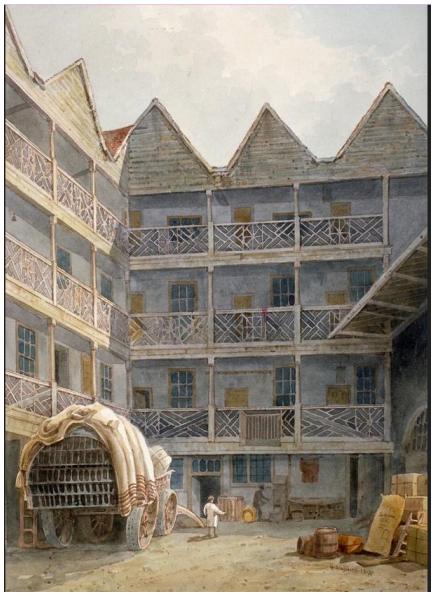
Fig 13 - London to Birmingham

George Ayres' mapping of the different routes to Birmingham. Coventry lies on the busiest and most historical route 'The Holyhead road'.

Long distance Coaches stopping at Coventry

In 1836 Coventry was served by a number of Stage Coaches from London, provided by the coach proprietors Edward Sherman and William Chaplin. Sherman and Chaplin between them provided more than half of the long distance Stage Coaches leaving London.

Sherman's coaches to Coventry from the Bull & Mouth, St. Martin's-le-Grand



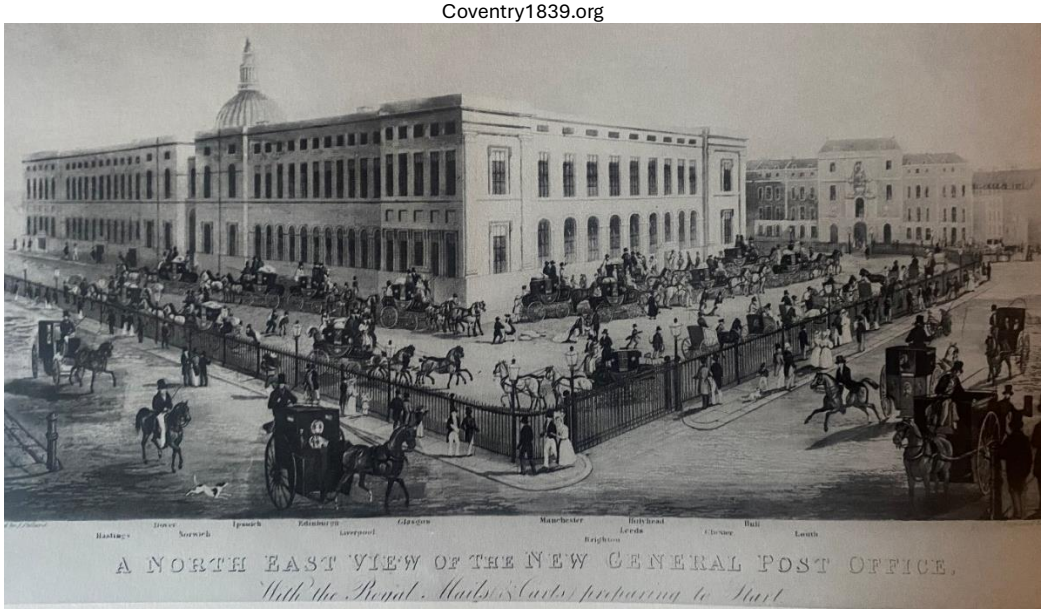
Yard at the Bull and Mouth Inn, St Martin's le Grand, City of London, 1817, by George Shepherd

Painting John Maggs[3]

The name was a tribute to Henry VIII who captured the Boulogne's harbour in 1544. The name 'Boulogne Mouth' was gradually corrupted to 'Bull and Mouth. Sherman's Inn was the last of three with this name in London and stood on St Martins le Grand.

"The Post Office, St. Paul's Cathedral, and Bull & Mouth Inn, London in 1829. Engraved by G.J. Emblem after Thomas Allom. St Martin's Le grand looking south, inn on the right".

[3] https://knowyourlondon.wordpress.com/2014/10/08/bull-and-mouth-inn/



The Bull & Mouth can be seen here on the right beyond the right corner of the post office. Note the top of St. Paul's dome emerging above the Post Office roof, to the middle left. J Pollard, 1832

Two long distance coaches originating from the Bull & Mouth that stopped by Coventry were '**The Wonder**' and 'The Stag'.

Coach Name	Type	Route	Dist.	Bull & Mouth	Journey
The Wonder	4-11	London (Bull'n'Mouth) – Barnet – St. Albans – Dunstable – Fenny Stratford – Stony Stratford – Towcester _ Daventry – **Coventry– (Hen & Chickens)*** Birmingham – Wolverhampton – Shifnal – Wellington – Shrewsbury (*1841 Pigot's Birmingham Directory)	153	7:00 am Arrives Shrewsbury Lion Hotel 5:45 am	15 ¾ hours
The Stag	4-8	London (Bull'n'Mouth) – Barnet – St. Albans – Dunstable – Fenny Stratford – Stony Stratford – Towcester _ Daventry – Coventry – Birmingham – Wolverhampton – Shifnal – Wellington - Shrewsbury	153	6:00 am Arrives Shrewsbury Lion Hotel 4:45 am	16 hours

The Wonder

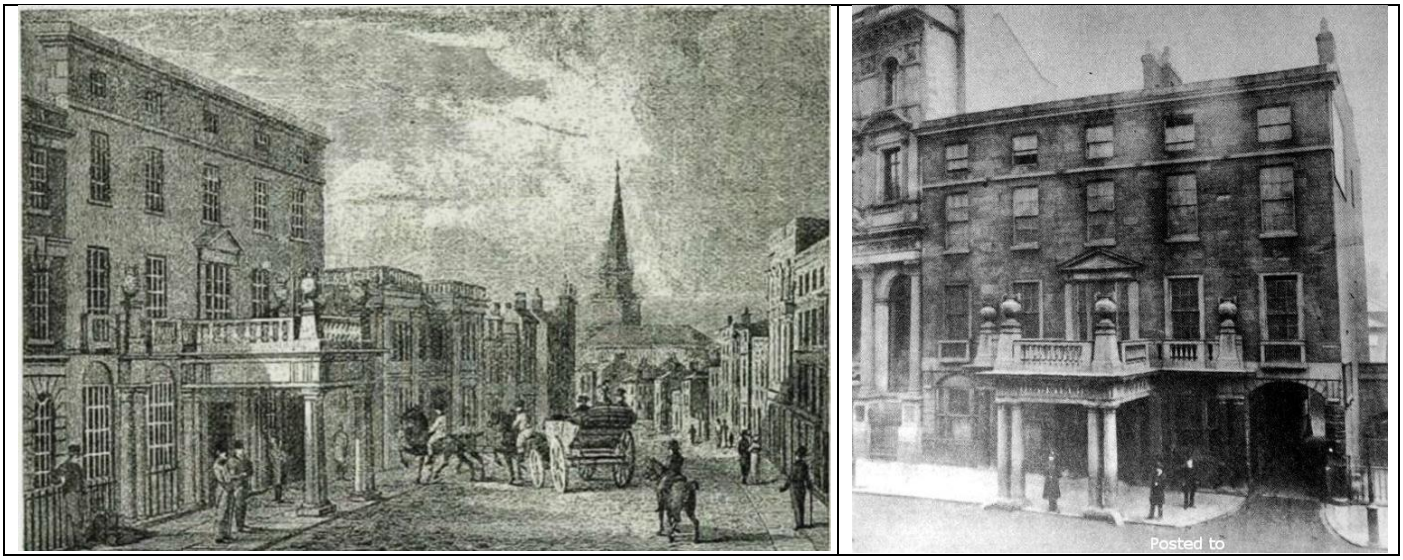
Fortunately we have the a beautiful painting of 'The Wonder' depicted by James Pollard, 1829. I've not found anything on the Stag sadly.

Detail: Note the coach proprietor's name J Hall on the central door and the destinations given as Birmingham and Shrewsbury and the Bull & Mouth London.

The Birmingham Wonder Stage Coach by James Pollard.

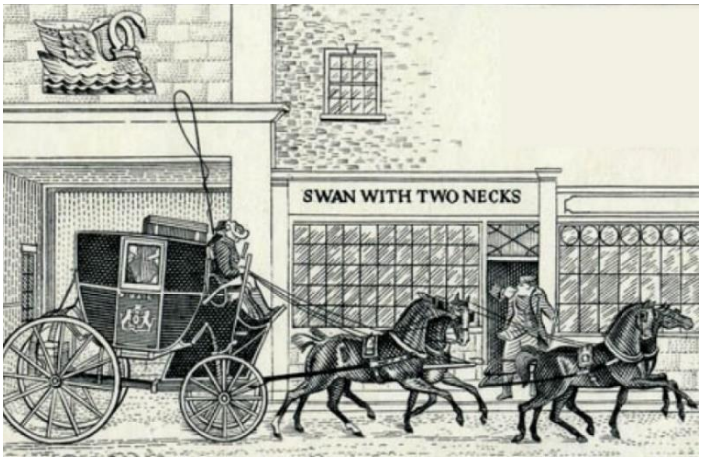
The Route of The Wonder - Birmingham's Hen & Chickens

The Wonder stopped at the Birmingham's Hen & Chickens on its way to Shrewsbury,



Left: The Hen and Chickens, New Street, originally engraved by Samuel Lines, 1833. Right: Uncredited photo https://birminghamhistory.co.uk

Chaplin's carriages to Coventry



Left from the artwork for the Postage Stamp note the coach entrance far left with the Swan insignia above and wright Chaplin's business card (Public Domain)

"Royal Mails preparing to start for the west of England". The Swan with Two Necks. Engraved by F. Rosenberg after a painting by James Pollard. Published by J. Watson, London, 1831. Public Domain

William Chaplin was a coach proprietor operating out of the Swan with Two Necks between 1831 and 1848, by which time he had also held the position of Charmain London & South Western Railway and Deputy Chairman of its predecessor the London & Southampton railway.

Coach Name	Type	Route	Dist.		Journey
The Greyhound*	4-11	London – Barnet – St. Albans – Dunstable – Fenny Stratford – Stony Stratford – Towcester – Daventry – **Coventry** - Birmingham	109	Leaves 7:45 am Albion Hotel 8:00 am	12 Hours
The Tally-Ho	4-8	London – Barnet – St. Albans – Dunstable – Fenny Stratford – Stony Stratford – Towcester _ Daventry – **Coventry** – Birmingham – Wolverhampton – Shifnal – Wellington - Shrewsbury	109	Leaves Saracens Head, Snow Hill and Swan with Two Necks London 7:00 am Birmingham, Swan Hotel, 5:45 am	11 hours
					
Detail from The 'Tally-Ho' London - Birmingham Stage Coach Passing Whittington College, Highgate. 1836, James Pollard					
London & Manchester Estafette		London – **Coventry** – Birmingham – Wolverhampton - Manchester		Leaves Quarter to 10 every morning for the Royal Hotel Manchester	

*From 8th October 1838 The Greyhound was removed from the Swan with Two Necks to the Bull & Mouth

Two more coaches, by Benjamin Horne & Co., and J. Everett & Co.

Coach Name	Type	Route	Dist.		Journey
The Independent Tally-ho	4-11	London – Barnet – St. Albans – Dunstable – Fenny Stratford – Stony Stratford – Towcester – Daventry – **Coventry** - Birmingham	111	Leaves Golden Cross, Charing Cross, 7:45 am Albion Hotel 8:00 am	11 3/4 Hours
The Economist	4-8	London – Barnet – St. Albans – Dunstable – Fenny Stratford – Stony Stratford – Towcester – Daventry – **Coventry** - Birmingham	109	Leaves George, Aldermanbury, 5:30pm Arrives Birmingham, 5:30 pm	14 hours

Other coaches

Coach Name	Type	Route	Dist.		Journey
Ruby 'fast day coach'		Ludgate Hill – Daventry – Dunchurch – **Coventry** -			
Red Rover		'through' **Coventry**			
Birmingham Old Post Coach	4 inside	'through' **Coventry**- Daventry		Leaves Bull in Mouth 6pm	14 hours

A few stories concerning the Birmingham Union Coach

The Birmingham Union Coach may have started as simply the Union in 1808.[4] Described as a 'new and elegant Coach, from London, through Birmingham, to Shrewsbury' the Union set off from the Dog Inn, 'Spiceal-street', Birmingham at 'Half past one o'clock in the Afternoon, and for Shrewsbury at Half past Nine o'clock every Morning.'

In a time when the Police were encouraging informants, even paying them, some were found guilty of engineering crime to entrap individuals. In a court ruling of 1814 "John Billing and Randall Levell described as 'common informers,' appear to have been found guilty of this, They were 'convicted of compounding certain

[4] Aris's Birmingham Gazette - Monday 19 September 1808 p1

penalties incurred by one Challoner, the driver of the Birmingham Union Coach, by taking more outside passengers than the coach was licenced to carry, were sentenced agreeably to the act of Parliament, “to stand in the pillory for the space of two hours, in the open market time, in the market place of Birmingham.’ It would seem they assisted in overloading the coach and then reported Challoner for the offence.[5]

In 1821, R. Middlemore and Co. launched a coach by the name Walsall and Birmingham Union Day Coach, travelling between the Turk’s Head Inn, Digbeth and the Castle Inn, Birmingham. Was Mr Middlemore cashing in on the kudos of the established name of the Union coach running between London & Birmingham?

The case of the Counterfeit Coins (1817)

In 1817 ‘Henry Miskins was indicted for having unlawfully procured 1500 false and counterfeit pieces, of the likeness of a sixpence, and having uttered and put in circulation the same; in Order to defraud his Majesty's liege subjects. The evidence to prove the facts charged in the indictment, was to this effect ; The prisoner came to town on the roof of the Union Birmingham coach, accoutred in a rough great coat ; his conduct excited suspicion, particularly when the coach was going up a bill, by holding at the buck of the carriage, and appearing as if lie had something bulky under his coat. When the coach arrived at the Old Hats, at Ealing, two Police-officers were in waiting for another person—when he pulled his great coat, threw it on the roof, and ran to the privy. This excited suspicions and they secured the prisoner, and on searching the premises they found three parcels, containing 80 dozen of counterfeit Is. 6d. pieces and 1500 sixpenny pieces, the subject of the present indictment. The Jury found him guilty, and the Court sentenced him to be imprisoned for two years.[6]

In 1824, a coach by the name Birmingham Union Post Coach, was running from the Bull & Mouth Inn, London to Birmingham via the High Wycombe, Oxford and Stratford-upon-Avon, every afternoon at 3 pm. Presumably it was this coach that was the scene of a theft in 1826’

Theft from the Birmingham Union Coach: Monies of Boulton & Watt (1826)

‘On Saturday, Edward Archer – aged 20, was fully committed to Newgate, charged with stealing Bank of England Notes, value 535*l*., the property of Messrs. Bolton and Watt, of Soho Birmingham. -On the 11th of April last, a parcel was sent by the Birmingham Post Coach, containing the property in question, from the house of Bolton and Watt, in London, addressed to Mr. Robinson, at their manufactory at Soho. The prisoner was an inside passenger by the coach, and paid his fare to Birmingham; but he stopped at Stoney Stratford, where the parcel was missed. He returned by the Birmingham Union Coach, in the middle of the night, and arrived in London on the morning of the 12th, and got sovereigns at the Bank of England the same morning, in exchange for part of the stolen notes. The case was clearly established, and the prisoner said nothing in his defence.”[7]

In 1830, a Mr Robinson at his Repository of Little Britain, near the New Post-office, Birmingham was advertising the sale of eighteen ‘Horses off the Union Birmingham Coach’. So either someone else was providing the horses or the coach had ceased running.[8]

A final note is that in 1834 a coach by the name of Birmingham Union Coach, was running from the George Commercial Inn, via Hay-Market, Leicester, Coventry, Warwick, Leamington to Birmingham.

[5] 1814 Birmingham union coach Aris's Birmingham Gazette - Monday 25 July 1814 p1
[6] MIDDLESEX SESSIONS. Johnson's Sunday Monitor - Sunday 27 April 1817

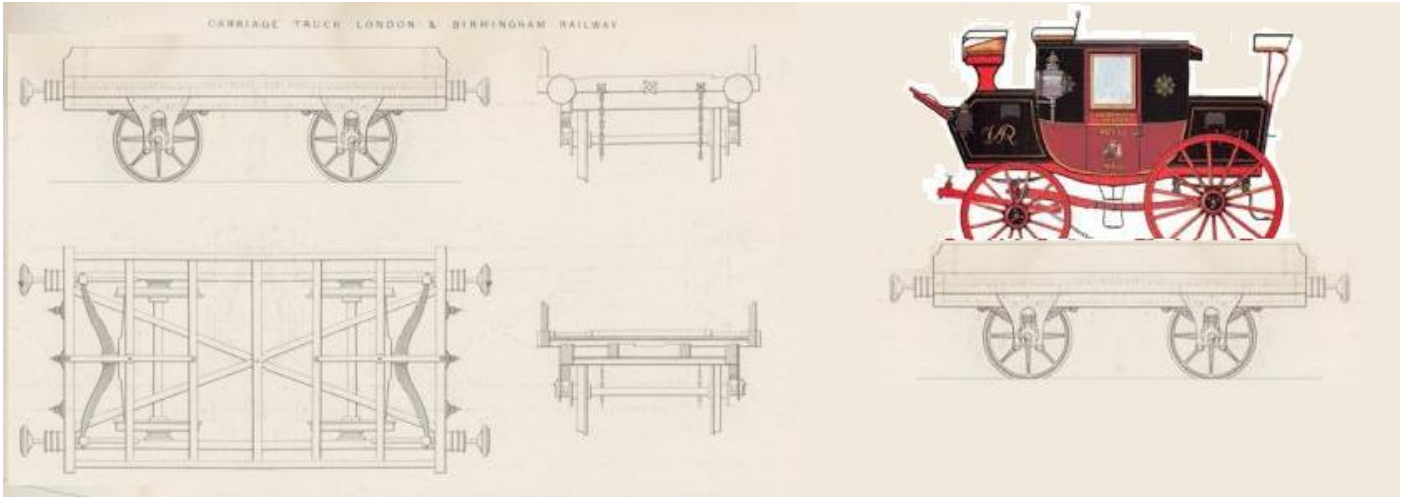
[7] BOW-STREET. Saint James's Chronicle - Tuesday 20 June 1826 p.4

[8] Birmingham Union Coach Johnson quits Morning Herald (London) - Monday 05 July 1830 p1

With the opening of the London & Birmingham Railway …

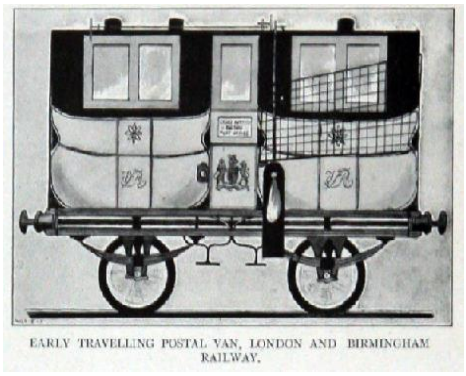
The London & Birmingham opened from Euston to Boxmoor on the 20th of July 1837 and to Tring on the 16th of October. The Birmingham section opened from Curzon Street to Rugby, including Coventry, on April 9th 1838 nine months later. The line was still not complete due to the problems with the Kilsby Tunnel.

While perhaps holding off from fully embracing taking the mail by rail, having got their fingers burned, due to problems with the reliability of the GJR, who were having a locomotive crisis, the Post Office decided on retaining Mail coaches for the time being and sending them instead, passengers, guards and all, of railway carriage trucks in a form of piggy backing. They were reacquainted with horses at Denbigh Hall and either continued by road from that point or rejoined the rails at Rugby.



'The mails to Holyhead, Manchester, Liverpool, and Carlisle were despatched on Tuesday night for the first time by the London and Birmingham Railway. The coaches are drawn by horses to the terminus at Euston Square, and there are placed on trucks, and so run on the railway, retaining their coachmen, guards, passengers, &c. &c, and only requiring horses when they reach the end of the railway, to proceed on their respective destinations. Despatching these four miles by this conveyance accelerates the arrival of letters, to a great part of the North of England and Scotland by, we believe, about two hours.[9]

From early in 1838 the London & Birmingham had been testing moving mail with a sorting carriage, following on from the experiments and on going service of a sorting carriage on the GJR. The first full TPO must have been ready with mail bag apparatus must have been around October of 1838 when bag apparatus was installed at Leighton Buzzard. The Piggy backing of mail coaches can't have lasted that long before the mail trains took over. Incidentally throughout this period, 1838-1839 that saw the development of the TPO, the GJR, L&B and L&M ran their luxury railway mail coach carriages with Royal Mail branding, on all their first class trains.


EARLY TRAVELLING POSTAL VAN, LONDON AND BIRMINGHAM RAILWAY.


1838. London and Birmingham Railway Mail Bed-Carriage

[9] 'Alteration in the mails and railway trains', Staffordshire Advertiser - Saturday 26 May 1838, p.3