

The Wonder Coach and the London & Birmingham Railway

By Tom Nicholls

The Wonder Coach with its route from London along the Holyhead Road was always going to be in competition with the railway from the moment of the railway's inception.

It could be argued that The Wonder was different from other coaches because of the pride invested in it, its precision and speed, and more over its position and reputation in the annals of the Britain's coaching days. Sadly this would not be enough to save it but for a time the railway company did afford the coach a special relationship.

It would appear that for a number of years the carriage worked all the way from London to Holyhead where it met with a 'ferry' to Ireland and onto Dublin. I have yet to find confirmation that this was all under one operation and suspect that the Wonder actually ceased as such at Holyhead. At other times the coach only went from London to Shrewsbury.

John Morgan, a descendant of Richard Evans states: 'Richard Evans, the elder, (1768-1841) had built up the Red Lion Inn in Wolverhampton in the first two decades of the century before handing the prestigious coaching business over to his sons in about 1820.'¹

The earliest reference to The Wonder coach running to Shrewsbury, I can find is 1825², in 1826 there is a reference to a Wonder Post Coach at Oswestry³ but specifically a reference to London-Shrewsbury-Holyhead Wonder appears in 1827. The Coventry City Hotel advertised that 'Wonder Superior Coach, at a quarter before Four, to the Lion Inn, Shrewsbury, same Evening, at Eleven.'⁴ In 1828 The Liverpool Albion reported that copies of the newspaper Morning Chronicle would be brought to Liverpool 'by the Wonder coach from the Bull and Mouth, [...] on the arrival of the coach at Birmingham, they are sent through the Postoffice by the Birmingham mail.'⁵ For a stage coach to meet with a Mail coach must mean that the coach is considered in the highest esteem.

In 1834 we can confirm that Edward Sherman was in charge of the coach at the London end, at the Bull and Mouth (also known as the Queen's Hotel from 1830 onwards) although it is likely that he was in charge of it before then.⁶

When the coach was in trouble it was national news⁷. A second coach was set up since demand was so great. Isaac Taylor, acting for the Lion Inn Coach office announced 'in consequence of the disappointment Passengers have had in not obtaining seats by the Wonder coach another day coach is added called The Stag'⁸.

In 1834, the Shrewsbury Chronicle coined the famous statement: 'the distance from Salop to London, 158 miles, now being performed in 15 1/2 hours certain.'⁹ Interestingly the coach is

¹ <https://www.morganfourman.com/articles/decline-of-the-stagecoach-in-england-1840s/>

² British Press - Saturday 08 October 1825 / Common Sense - Sunday 19 June 1825 / Staffordshire Advertiser - Saturday 14 May 1825

³ Chester Courant - Tuesday 17 October 1826 p1

⁴ Warwick and Warwickshire Advertiser - Saturday 03 February 1827 p3

⁵ 'Morning Chronicle -' Liverpool Albion - Monday 10 March 1828 p5

⁶ True Sun - Friday 16 May 1834

⁷ Travelling from Shrewsbury to London' - Devizes and Wiltshire Gazette - Thursday 12 September 1833 p4

⁸ Shrewsbury Chronicle - Friday 27 June 1834 p2

⁹ 'London' Shrewsbury Chronicle - Friday 25 July 1834 p1

referred to as 'superior' again and the timing as 'certain'. Words not usually associated with a 'common' stage coach.

In 1836 the coach was turned out for the King's Birthday celebrations in Shrewsbury commencing from the yard of the Lion Hotel. It must have been a magnificent sight with 'six white horses' in 'red harness'. Incidentally the driver on this day was Hayward.¹⁰ The white horses and red harness echoing perhaps the teams of the royal and coronation carriages, a bold statement indeed. Hayward was most likely Sam Hayward, who was also mythically known 'as a princely whip' who drove the 'The Wonder Coach' up the hill to the Lion at full trot and turned into the yard with just a foot to spare each side of his wheels.'¹¹

'The coachmen of The Wonder also deserve note for the uniformly good conduct and skill. Their names are Wood (who drives out of London) Lyley, Wilcox, Everett and Hayward'

Coming of the Railway

Discussions of a railway between London and Birmingham go back to the opening of the Liverpool & Manchester with the company being formed in 1833. Coach proprietors were already aware that change was coming, the biggest would survive amending their practice to serving shorter distances from the rail heads, some very profitably, others packed up and sold their horses. A smaller number, the biggest coach proprietors, diversified, moving at least some of their capital into railways.

The Wonder suffered the same fate as a number of coaches which came up against the railway. In April of 1838 hopes were still high:

*'The Wonder, Shrewsbury coach seems determined not to be outdone by its flying adversary without a struggle; it left London on Monday morning at the same moment that the trains left Euston square, and reached Birmingham just 20 minutes before them.'*¹²

The struggling coaches were sustained briefly by customers who felt loyal to the old ways and perhaps had reservations about railways. In May to fend off the competition they reduced the fares.¹³ By October they were offering customers the option of switching from the coach to the train at Birmingham or travelling on to London.

*'To London throughout, by the Wonder, at Reduced Fares; leaving at a ¼ to 7 o'clock instead of a ¼ to six, thereby giving ample time for refreshment in Birmingham, with the option of proceeding on by the ½ past 12 o'clock Train, or of continuing their journey on to London by the Wonder Coach.'*¹⁴

By November it would appear that Edward Sherman of the Bull and Mouth, was no longer involved in the Wonder. The coach was still running but now only between Birmingham and Shrewsbury having fallen under the long reach of Sherman's old rival William Chaplin. Interestingly the tickets for the coach were still available at the usual Chaplin coach offices in London, suggesting that the coach ticket from Birmingham to Shrewsbury may have been

¹⁰ Shrewsbury Chronicle - Friday 03 June 1836 p3

¹¹ 'A Book of Inns, Vol. 3', by William G. Luscombe, Wessex Press, 1940, p. 33

¹² 'Birmingham Railway' - Bury and Norwich Post - Wednesday 25 April 1838 p4

¹³ Shrewsbury Chronicle - Friday 04 May 1838 p1

¹⁴ Shrewsbury Chronicle - Friday 19 October 1838 p2

combined with train ticket and possibly the Omnibus ticket to the station from the coach office. In this way coaching offices still offered the convenience of 'through' ticketing. How this was arranged with the railways is not clear although on some occasions it is known that railway carriages were specifically reserved, or at least seats were, for passengers travelling onwards by a particular coach.

'Shrewsbury Wonder every morning at ¼ past 8. The proprietors of this superior Coach have made arrangements to leave London at this late hour by Railway, the Coach waiting at the Station at Birmingham on the arrival of the Train, from whence it departs direct to Shrewsbury, performing the journey in eleven hours.'¹⁵

The sad confirmation of the Wonder's discontinuation to London is further confirmed in November of 1838 by the sale of the horses by at least one of the proprietors at the Barbican;

'.. genuine known excellent stock that have been working those celebrated fast well-regulated day coaches the Wonder, Shrewsbury [...] sold in consequence of those coaches discontinuing on the 3rd instant.'¹⁶

Special relationship with the Directors of the London & Birmingham Railway

Isaac Taylor of the Lion coaching office for many years 'respectfully states' in November of 1838;

'that he has had an interview with the Directors of the London & Birmingham Railway, who are most anxious to afford every possible accommodation and comfort to those persons who have so long supported the respectable and superior Coach THE WONDER. The Directors have consequently given the Wonder proprietors leave to run their Coach into the Station Yard, thereby avoiding the inconvenience of changing Coach for Omnibus, and the consequent removal of Luggage from the Inn to the Station in Birmingham. In future future, therefore, the wonder will leave Shrewsbury at half past seven precisely; the Guard will accompany the Coach to the Station, and deposit the Luggage safely under the especial charge of the Conductor of the Train. Very superior Carriages appointed and fitted up for the Wonder Passengers, who will arrive in London by half-past five o'clock.

Lion Office, Nov. 6, ` 1838.'¹⁷

What quite the 'very superior carriages appointed and fitted up for the Wonder passengers' were is not clear. This is intriguing. We might speculate that a compartment for the first class carriage was dedicated for the Wonder's inside coach passengers or even that they might have had access to the L&B's most luxurious carriages, the railway 'mailcoaches'. But of course this could also just be 'sales speak' aimed at luring customers in and giving them assurances.

Regrets and accolades with regard to the Wonder coach continued in the press. Articles praising the railway's progress were also tainted with regret at carriages being 'purchased off the road'. The Derby Mercury noted in November that the Wonder coach;

'has run from Shrewsbury to London daily for several years. And admitted to have been one of the best conducted coaches on the road for its regularity.'¹⁸

¹⁵ Globe - Wednesday 07 November 1838

¹⁶ Morning Advertiser - Thursday 08 November 1838 p1

¹⁷ 'I. Taylor' - Shrewsbury Chronicle - Friday 09 November 1838

¹⁸ Derby Mercury - Wednesday 21 November 1838

Edward Sherman's days were also numbered as a coach proprietor and his sale of the Bull and Mouth is confirmed in its new management being announced in December of 1839.¹⁹ Sherman as did William Chaplin, went hereafter into railway directorship and chairmanship.

In 1840 Issac Taylor was still advertising the Wonder's special status as 'the only coach permitted to take its passengers into the station yard at Birmingham, without change of conveyance.'²⁰

The story of Thomas Davies a guard on the Wonder coach, is an interesting and revealing one. In 1841 he sued his employers for non payment of wages. How this arose isn't clear but what is of interest to us is that it makes clear that in 1832, when Thomas was initially employed, or so he claimed, the Wonder coach ran most certainly between Shrewsbury and Holyhead. Indeed the case reveals that the coach proprietor in Holyhead was a Mr Spencer and that Isaac Taylor was in fact the Wonder's coach proprietor at the Lion in Shrewsbury. Unfortunately while it is referred to that other proprietors were included in the suit none are named since they were not seen to be liable. This most likely included Edward Sherman. Thomas was in employment until 1839 shortly after the coach to London ceased.

As a side note Thomas' case was that he was expected to survive on gratuities from passengers, for his service. He stated that 'Welshmen are very middling sort of payers to coachmen and guards' so it seems this didn't add up to much. He was awarded £39 12s by a jury.²¹

Tom Nicholls

February, 2025.

Appendix

1. The Holyhead Road



¹⁹ Globe - Friday 27 December 1839 p1

²⁰ Shrewsbury Chronicle - Friday 17 July 1840 p1

²¹ Thomas Davies - Shrewsbury Chronicle - Friday 26 March 1841

2. Operation of two coaches

“Because The Wonder from Shrewsbury travelled along the same road on the same day as The Wonder from London they had to pass each other at some point along the journey. The distance between Shrewsbury and London was 158 miles and the 79 mile half way point is between Daventry and Coventry, so I decided to work out where the passing place was.

Pigots directory for the Coventry City Hotel states the time each coach stopped and departed. Knowing the mean speed of travel for both coaches were identical I could then work out where these coaches passed each other.

The Wonder coming from Shrewsbury driven by coachman Wilcox departed from the City Hotel at 12:05 to travel towards Daventry. The Wonder from London arrived at the City hotel at a quarter before four driven by Jack Everitt. As the distance between Coventry and Daventry is 19 miles I calculated they passed each other along this length of road near the Dun Cow at Dunchurch.”

From Joe Harlech

(<https://harlechjoe.wordpress.com/2021/06/03/cycling-along-the-coaching-route-to-holyhead>)

3. Known Drivers names

Some of the Drivers	Location	Proprietor
	Bull and Mouth, London	E Sherman
'Wood' / Sam Clark*	Peacock Inn, Islington	
'Lyle'	White Hart, St Albans	
	The Bull, Redbourn	
	The Swan with Two Necks, Dunstable	
	Cock and Bull, Stoney Stratford	
Handsome Jack Everett ('Spicy Jack')	Saracens Head, Birmingham	
	Dun Cow, Daventry	
(Midway)		
	City Hotel, Coventry	(John Ashton)
Sam Hayward / Wilcox	The Albion Hotel, Birmingham	(1825-1830)
	Hen & Chickens, Birmingham	(1831-1839)
	Star & Garter, Wolverhampton	
Sam Hayward's Brother	The Lion Shrewsbury	Isaac Taylor
	Llangollen / Oswestry	
	New Inn Hotel, (Owain Glyndwr), Corwen	
	Betws y Coed	
	Capel Curig	
	Penrhyn Arms, Bangor	
	Mona Inn, Caer-Mon	
	Holyhead	Mr Spencer

* Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News - Saturday 11 May 1889 p15

3. Known Guards

Thomas Davies (1832-1839)	Shrewsbury to Holyhead
John Hackworth	London – Shrewsbury (assumed)
Dicky Ash	London – Shrewsbury (assumed)
Yates (Died in accident while working 47years old 1833)	London – Shrewsbury

4. Mail Coach Timings – (Overnight)

MILES.					
	LONDON	dep.	8.0	P.M.	
15	South Mimms	arr.	9.40	„	
25	Redbourne	„	10.44	„	
45	Little Brickhill.	„	12.32	A.M.	
52 $\frac{1}{4}$	Stony Stratford.	„	1.26	„	
60 $\frac{1}{4}$	Towcester	„	2.12	„	
72 $\frac{1}{2}$	Daventry	„	3.25	„	
80 $\frac{1}{4}$	Dunchurch	„	4.11	„	
91 $\frac{1}{4}$	Coventry	„	5.18	„	
100	Stonebridge	„	6.8	„	
109 $\frac{1}{4}$	Birmingham	{arr. 7.8	„		
		{dep. 7.43	„		
117 $\frac{1}{4}$	Wednesbury	arr.	8.28	„	
122 $\frac{1}{4}$	Wolverhampton	„	9.1	„	
137 $\frac{1}{2}$	Shiffnal	„	10.14	„	
141 $\frac{1}{2}$	Haygate	„	10.59	„	
152	Shrewsbury	{arr. 11.59	„		
		{dep. 12.4	P.M.		
160 $\frac{1}{2}$	Nesscliff	arr.	12.53	„	
170	Oswestry	„	1.46	„	
182 $\frac{1}{2}$	Llangollen	„	2.58	„	
192 $\frac{1}{2}$	Corwen	{arr. 3.55	„		
		{dep. 4.0	„		
198 $\frac{1}{4}$	Tynant	arr.	5.1	„	
205 $\frac{3}{4}$	Cernioge	„	5.39	„	
220	Capel Curig	„	7.2	„	
228	Tyn-y-Maes	„	7.46	„	
234	Bangor	{arr. 8.20	„		
		{dep. 8.25	„		
237	Menai Bridge	arr.	8.43	„	
247 $\frac{1}{2}$	Mona Inn	„	9.43	„	
260 $\frac{1}{2}$	HOLYHEAD	„	10.55	„	

5. Harper's schedule for The Wonder

Proprietors	Places	Miles	Time allowed	Should arrive
Sherman	St Albans	22 ½	2 hrs 3mins	8.48
J Lilley	Redbourne	4 ½	25 mins	9.13
			(Breakfast 20 mins)	
Goodyear	Dunstable	8 ¼	48 mins	10.21
Sheppard	Daventry	29%	2 hrs 54 mins	2.15
Collier	Coventry	19	1 hr 47 mins (Business 5 mins)	4.02
Vyse	Birmingham	19	1 hr 39 mins (Dinner 35 mins)	5.46
Evans	Wolverhampton	14	1 hr 15 mins (Business 5 mins)	7.36
Evans	Summer House	6 ½	35 mins	8.16
J Taylor	Shifnal	6 ½/2	35 mins	8.51
H J Taylor	Haygate	8	43 mins	9.34
I Taylor	Shrewsbury	10	56 mins	10.3