

# At the Sign of the Red Lion Inn

By: Ken Wheeling

Outside the inn hung a huge sign proclaiming its presence, a rampant red lion, with a green tail glowering at the passerby. It was the scene of many a local fete, where “the farmers’ girls arrived on pillions, seated behind their beaux. “The inn, owned by Silas Pepoon, consisted of eight bedrooms and a large ballroom upstairs. The ballroom was what attracted all those “beaux” and all those pretty farmers’ daughters.



In 1800, the turnpike to Great Barrington was built, and “in 1807 the Stockbridge Turnpike was completed and a stage ran through the village, at first three times a week and then every day, stopping for a rest and change of horses at the Red Lion Inn.” As at all stage stops, the arrival of passengers brought a frenzy of activity. Luggage was unloaded, lunch was served, through passengers reclaimed their seats, and new ones jostled for what seats could be had. The rear seat was the choicest. What exactly was this stagecoach, and by what means did it operate?

The system, whether here in American or in England, where stage coaching was a art, was quite similar in its workings. In England, the coach was a peculiar sort of vehicle, having a coach body, and boots at the front and rear. A rear seat perched on the hind boot, and a front and back seat were built on the roof. A driver’s seat was perched on the front boot, which also offered one passenger seat called the box seat. It was the choicest seat on the coach. This type of vehicle was known as a road coach. Conceivably, it accommodated 14 people on top, 12 passengers, a driver and a guard; four passengers rode inside.

A route as laid out, say from London to Brighton on the southeast coast. Stops were arranged every eight to twelve miles, where the four horses were exchanged for fresh ones. The change took minutes and the coach was off again. On longer journeys, longer stops were arranged at inns where meals were served. Sometimes the guard and or the coachman went all the way; at other times they too changed. Thus, the journey processed in stages. Hence, the name of the vehicle! It was all too exciting, and all England was wooed to a nostalgic conception of travel by stage-coach.

Never mind the snow storms, or flooded creeks, or lioness attacks, turn-overs, or even the coaches that took off driverless, with a screaming passenger still aboard! The English were enamored of it all, and even to this day, the Christmas card trade is rife with scenes of the famous coaches such as the ROCKET, the WONDER and the PERSEVERANCE.

The key was precision timing and woe betide the sluggard driver that was late. A similar vehicle called a Mail Coach ran by government contract, all of them leaving the General Post Office in London at eight o’clock in the evening. These set the standard for all the rest. One consulted a book, MOGG’S ROADS, which put into print the routes and the various connections for the intrepid traveler.

The whole system came to a slow halt when the mail contracts, the lifeblood of stage coaching, were given to the railroads. However, as new wealth created a leisure class, driving four horses, even to established,

historic timetables, became a sport to which many gentlemen aspired. The old road coaches were brought out of dusty barns and refurbished, new ones built and even a third type brought into being. This was the park drag, somewhat lighter in construction, but painted in subdued colors; eschewing a guard, it carried two liveried footmen behind. The owner drove what was now also called a gentleman’s private coach.

In America, we developed an entirely different vehicle, the American stagecoach. It was a coach body, usually accommodating nine inside passengers and more on top, slung on leather thorough braces, a suspension system already abandoned when multiple layer, steel springs came into existence. Known first as Troy coaches, and later as the Concord coach, it became the most recognizable vehicle for long distance public transportation. Along with the prairie schooner, or covered wagon, the red body and yellow gear of the Concord coach became an icon of the American west.

American sportsmen and their families took up “coaching” a pastime which included drives to fashionable watering holes, annual parades, and trips to the race track by coach and four. The excitement of tooling a coach and four high stepping coach horses around the countryside or city parks or streets appealed to large numbers of society men and women.

The Coaching Club (New York) still makes occasional drives at such places as Newport, Rhode Island, where the summer homes of the great and famous vied with one another in expenditure and furnishings. “Coaching” was back again, the now, hosted by Mr. and Mrs. Harvey Waller (Orleton Farm, Stockbridge) it’s back once more to the Berkshires, for the second time. Coachmen, their families and guests will drive over three separate routes in and about Lenox and Stockbridge, Massachusetts.

Once again, road coaches and park drags, eight of them, horsed with fine coach horses of various breeds, wearing shining black harness with polished brass or silver “furniture,” will roll along the roadways, with the hum of coach wheels and the occasional sound of the coach horn echoing through the trees and byways. The Coaching Weekend in the Berkshires will again provide on-lookers with a glimpse of a nostalgic sport, practiced by few, but adhering to the high standards set by comrades of long ago. Here, where the Sturgis family, the Whitneys, the Fahnestocks, Schermerhorns, and both Havens, Senior and Junior, tooled their drags and breaks along the Berkshire byway, devotees of the art of coaching will return, and the pounding of horses hooves will awaken the passerby who lazily saunters by. Once coaching was merely a means of travel, albeit a delightful one which appealed to those who ventured forth into the lanes and turnpikes of England and America. Now it is a fine sport, and incidentally, no one rides inside at all.

The Concord coach, which preceded such cherished high styles coaches, became a vehicle more treasured by aficionados of western lore than eastern gentlemen. Quite by happenstance, although, the Pittsfield stagecoach that once stopped at the sign of the Red Lion with the Green Tail still exists, owned now by a private collector of horse-drawn vehicles.