

THE STORY OF ALRESFORD'S POST - 1100-1801

By

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The passage of mails through Alresford is better documented than for most towns of its size because it was on the route between England's Capital at Winchester and the Administrative capital of London. The 'road' such as it was - from ALTON went through heavily wooded and hilly country between CHAWTON and a side track to "MAYSTED", through BIGHTON, past Old Alresford House, fording the river, and then kept to high ground round ABBOTSTONE; then through OVINGTON to WINCHESTER. It was along this route that the Royal Messengers (Cursores) carried Government Despatches and Duke Robert, on claiming the throne in 1101, moved his invading force from Portsmouth, by-passing Winchester. It is recorded that "he took the London Road via Old Alresford to Alton from the Winchester direction". The "Pipe Rolls" of the Bishop of Winchester record that in 1220 a letter was taken, by order of the Steward, from Alresford to London and the cost was 6d.

The construction of the Great Weir towards the end of the 12th century provided a better river crossing.

In the early 13th century the "Royal Messenger" within the County of Southampton was the Prior of Chichester (as part of his feudal services in his capacity as tenant). One of Henry 11's first acts on his accession in 1216 was to secure his lines of communication between the two cities.

He declared the ALTON/ALRESFORD route a "Royal Road", i.e. with width enough for 8 knights to ride abreast. In 1262 he created the "Passus de Alton" through the King's Wood, and until the 14th century the wardens of St. Giles Fair in Winchester paid five Serjeants-at-Arms to keep the Pass open during the Fair.

The invention of the coach in 1366 hardly affected the carrying of messages, as Royal Messengers (there was no private service) continued on horseback for about another 400 years. In 1482 the beginning of a Postal Service was created by the setting up of relays to carry the Royal Despatches. A rider was always in readiness every 20 miles and the Mail covered about 100 miles a day. The riders were called "Posts" and this word was soon used to describe the place and person where the riders changed horses. This concept of there being fixed places where horses could be hired was introduced by Edward I, with the original rider completing the whole journey. Neither system officially carried anything other than Royal letters, though wealthy noblemen occasionally used the Messengers, and some of their letters are known.

In the early 16th century Henry 8th appointed a "Master of the Posts" to take responsibility for the whole system. There is confirmation that his State Messengers had a "Post" at Alresford on their London/Southampton journeys. A "Chief Postmaster" was appointed in 1558 to control both Inland and Overseas Posts. Until 1675 roads were not shown on early maps but bridges are, so that routes can be roughly traced. Queen Elizabeth established six "Great Roads". That to Southampton went through Alresford, but by-passed Winchester, going through woodlands to Shawford. One of the earliest recorded letters to have passed through this Postal Service was one from Plymouth to Southampton reporting the coming of the Spanish Armada. It was marked "For Her Majesty's Service - HASTE, HASTE FOR LIFE", with instructions on it for all Constables and Tithingmen to "Haste its

Passage". To avoid the forests and swamps it came by way of Shaftesbury, Andover and, almost certainly, Alresford, averaging about 7 m.p.h. James I set up a "PACKET POST" for Government letters and a "THROUGH POST" for Private letters (an early 1st and 2nd class system!). Only Packet Post used the relay system; the Through Post used a special messenger going the whole way, changing horses at stages, and paying in advance, 21d per mile. The Packet Post impounded the best horse available, so it was common practice for owners to remove their best geldings to a safe distance!

In 1603 a Common Carrier is recorded as carrying goods, and no doubt letters, between Winchester and London, through Alresford. By 1625 Winchester had a "Postmaster" although it still lay on a "by-road" off the Great South Road. The year 1627 has a specific reference to "One Post Stage layde for the packet at Alford (sic) by order of ye Lords of Council". The allowance was 3/- a day, and it served Winchester, Southampton, Basingstoke and Alton. The first real attempts to establish a public postal service was when Charles I set up a "Letter Office of England and Scotland" in 1635 for "the carrying of His Subjects letters betwixt London and all parts of His Majesty's Dominions". The first postal charges were based on the number of sheets and the distance involved. The old "post-horse stages" became "POST TOWNS". Each of the six Great Roads was administered separately, and letters for places adjacent to them all went through London. By 1640 the London/Edinburgh post took six days return instead of the previous two weeks.

The Civil War disrupted the Postal system. Colonel Norton's armies found letters concealed in boots, wrapped round a baby, and ten sewn into the lining of a spare suit! The King's Oxford Headquarters dominated the Southampton Road at Farnham, and later at Winchester and by the Basing House garrison. But several letters from Ralph Hopton from Alresford and from the Bishop of Winchester from Basing, show that mail did get through. In June of 1644 a "convoy" of 16 wagons and 40 pack horses were captured by the Royalists at Andover with a quantity of letters from and for both sides. On 7th February 1644 Waller (who was besieging the Royal Castle at Winchester) heard that three regiments of Royalist cavalry were at Andover, and sent a party "to beat up their quarters". A warning letter was sent from Alresford and the Royalists retreated to safety.

The Parliamentary "London Brigade", which fought (somewhat ignominiously) at Cheriton was raised by the City of London and was accompanied by "An Eyewitness" sent by the Lord Mayor of London to report on its proceedings. He would appear to be the first "war correspondent" and no doubt sent his report from Alresford after the battle!

In 1652 the Franking System was set up so that M.P.'s, Officers of the State and some others could send letters without charge, by signing and dating the front. This system lasted 200 years and was much abused, as can be seen in the Baring and Tierney correspondence in the Winchester Record Office. Other local authorised users were Sir Wm. Heathcote M.P., Mr. W.B. Baring, Mr. G. Heathcote, the Bishop and Lord Ashburton.

The earliest recorded Stage Coach journey was in 1629 from Cambridge to London - 54 miles in two days. The first reference to a London-to-Southampton stage coach is in 1655. The "Ordinary", drawn by 4 horses, averaged 30 miles a day, while the "Flyer", with 6 horses and using relays, averaged 50 miles a day. There was one public coach a week through Alresford, frequently booked by one family for its own use! The "great houses" had their own coaches. A letter from Winchester

School in 1655 says "the TWELVE (sic) miles from Winchester to Southampton took seventeen hours because the roads were so bad". Both private and public coaches carried letters and parcels.

Probably the most important year in our Postal history was 1657 which saw the passing of an Act which set up one General Post Office and a Postmaster General (in London) and forbade any other person to operate a Post. The office was rented ("farmed") to Henry Bishop who paid 121,500 a year for it. Almost at once he was faced with complaints about the slowness in the handling of letters. To counteract this he introduced a stamp to be applied to all letters passing through London. Impressions of this hand stamp (appropriately called the "Bishop Mark") can be found on most letters to and from Alresford between 1660 and 1787. (1)



One of the carriers of the period was Waldrons of Winchester who carried goods and mail, for the Cathedral Chapter and others, for well over 100 years. In 1675 Ogilvy's Road Survey described how the road "goes through a small river called "SEWERS WATER", and on his Map (97) has "SEWERS BRIDGE" ("sewer" was an artificial waterway for draining marshy land). By 1800 the name had become "SEWARD". By this time regular bags of mail were made up in Winchester for post-nights. Alresford had its own bag. Letters between Alresford and other towns on the London to Southampton "Mail Road" were put in a separate "By-Bag" for the post-boy (the mail was still carried by Horsemen).

It was not until 1710 that Parliament authorised "CROSS STAGES" connecting one Post-Road with another. In this year the Exchequer took 1700 a week from the profit of the Post Office revenue - establishing an unfortunate precedent!

The year 1720 saw the general issue of Post-town handstamps (2). This was the name of the town (on one or two lines) or - later - in one line with the mileage from London underneath. The earliest date I know for "ALRESFORD" is 1787 for "ALRESFORD/60", 1805, (3). Later the "Mileage" was removed and the handstamp became circular (4).

By this time most of the local "big houses" did much of their London shopping using the Common Carriers. Carriage of cash was risky and local records show that the Carrier often collected and paid for goods and parcels in London, and was paid on his return when he delivered the goods. The Purefoys of Preston Candover did much of their shopping this way, and (illegally) letters were frequently carried too. By 1742 there were seventeen main roads in the County, ten of them through Winchester; "main" means "much used" and they were often little better than cart tracks. However, the coming of the Turnpike Roads greatly improved communications and 1754 saw the present London/Southampton road, through Bishops Sutton, replacing the road over the Great Weir.

In 1754 the first Stage Coach route was from "London to Manchester in 41 days D.V." This was quickly followed by others. They were not cheap -4d a mile inside and 21d a mile outside. Anyone who could not afford "inside" was known as an "outsider"! When the Mail Coaches ran from 1784 they charged twice as much, and a Post Chaise cost 1/6d a mile. The horse provider was always an inn keeper. Several had more than 2,000 horses. Cobs were best for uphill, thoroughbreds for downhill, with a grey or piebald in the lead (easier to see in the dark). By 1762 the London Post arrived in Alresford on Wednesday/Friday between 5 and 7 p.m., and left on Sunday, on Tuesday/Thursday about 3 p.m. An advertisement in the Hampshire Chronicle of 24th August 1772 names Linden & Richardson as running a "common Stage Wagon", taking goods to London at 3/-d a cwt., from Southampton on Friday, back next Thursday, collecting from the Bell Inn at Alresford. No doubt they took letters and parcels also.

During the whole of this period the postage on a letter was not paid at the time of posting but collected from the addressee. Some Postmasters made an extra charge for local delivery, others made no delivery at all. In 1774 it was ruled that all letters should be delivered without any local charge. So far as is known, letters within Alresford were delivered free, but those outside the town had to be called for. A daily post, Sundays excepted, was finally established for Alresford in April 1775.

French prisoners of the Napoleonic War were housed in Alresford, as in several Hampshire towns. In 1793 the Secretary to the Postmaster General reported to him - "the Postmaster of Winchester states there is correspondence between some of the emigrants in Winchester and certain of the French prisoners, including those on parole in Alresford". He thinks "such a correspondence may have improper motives", and that "it is only an act of duty to inform your Lordship. How far his conclusions may be just, I know not.... Perhaps the Commission to the French Prisoners might be rendered serviceable....where the circumstances are suspicious". The results of any enquiry are not reported.

A set of stamps issued in 1984 commemorated the first Mailcoach run from Bristol to London. (In the Centenary run last year mail carried by a coach was delivered in London before the normal First Class mail -posted that day in Bristol reached London)! The journey took about 16 hours, double the Post boys' speed. It was later reduced to 8 hours as the new Macadam roads were built.

Memo of 1784 - Alresford's first Postmaster. In the Postmaster General's Minute Book of 10th February 1802, there is an entry "The Postmaster at Alresford some time since intimated his intention of resigning immediately. It is not known to whom this refers. The 1801 Census shows entries for "a rural Postman", lodged in West Street, and also "The Postman" (also a shoemaker) lodged at 23 Broad Street, which was to become the town's Post Office. It is now "The Old Post House".

With the introduction of the Mail Coach and the establishment of a Post Office, Alresford became a Post Town and a busy postal centre for what was to become, and is today, an extensive area of local villages. The development of the Post Office and its sub-offices is the second part of this story.

The writer is greatly indebted to G.P.O. Postal Archives AND ITS HELPFUL STAFF, by whose permission much of this information is reproduced. Also some books, which are too numerous to specify. There is much research still to do, particularly about the village posts and sub post offices. Any information additional to what has been written here, or to add to the second part of the research, would be greatly appreciated by the writer.

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