THE MAIL COACH AND ITS HALFPENNIES.

By H. Alexander Parsons.

The Government of this country is, perhaps, in nothing more conservative than in the designs which it adopts for its coinage. These designs have for centuries consisted largely of a heraldic nature, and even as far back as the reign of Queen Anne the desirability of a change was publicly manifested. Indeed, Dean Swift went so far as to suggest to the Government “that a Society be formed for finding out proper subjects, and that the coins should bear devices and inscriptions alluding to the most remarkable events of Her Majesty’s reign.” “By this means,” wrote the Dean, “old coins that are at present only a dead treasure, or mere curiosities, will perpetuate the glories of Her Majesty’s reign, reward the labours of her greatest subjects, keep alive a gratitude for great public services and excite the emulation of posterity.” The only result of these useful suggestions, however, was the issue of a few patterns, and it was left to private enterprise to make up for the deficiencies of the Government in this matter. On the tokens struck by various individuals and corporate bodies in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries to supplement the very scanty issues of regal coins, many allusions to public events, as well as to local institutions and industries, are to be found. Of these tokens those which form the subject of this article are amongst the most interesting, commemorating, as they do, reforms in that great social institution, the Post Office, second only in importance to the changes effected by Sir Rowland Hill when he instituted the penny post. There are three varieties of the Mail Coach Halfpenny, which may be described as follows:—
1. **Obverse.**—A mail coach drawn to the right by four galloping horses driven by a coachman with a whip in his hand. At the back of the vehicle is shown the guard, and a passenger’s head appears at the window of the door, on the panel of which is the Royal monogram “G.R.”

![Fig. 1.—Mail Coach Token. Type I.](image)

**Legend.**—Above, **MAIL COACH HALFPENNY**; below, **PAYABLE IN LONDON** in the exergue, **TO TRADE EXPEDEITION & TO PROPERTY PROTECTION** in three lines.

**Reverse.**—An inscription, **TO J. PALMER, E**<sup>5</sup>, **THIS IS INSCRIBED AS A TOKEN OF GRATITUDE FOR BENEFITS RECEIVED** in eight lines, with the letters **J &** beneath, the whole being encircled by crossed and tied palm branches.

**Borders.**—Ribbed. **Edge.**—Plain.

2. **Obverse.**—Similar to No. 1, but from a different die.

**Reverse.**—A similar inscription to that on No. 1, but the date, **1797**, takes the place of the initials **J &**.

**Borders.**—Ribbed. **Edge.**—Plain.
As their descriptions indicate, these tokens were issued as a result of the introduction of the carriage of the mails by coach. The post itself is, of course, a very old institution. Perhaps the first record which we have of it is in the reign of Hezekiah, for we read, in 2 Chron. ch. xxx, that “the posts went with the letters from the King and his Princes throughout all Israel and Judah, and according to the commandment of the King.” The word posts here signified runners, that is, men specially set apart to deliver despatches by running. The first recorded “riding” post was established by Cyrus, King of Persia. In Mediaeval Europe, Charlemagne first established a post in A.D. 807, but the institution did not survive him. Subsequently, the Hanseatic cities established a letter post in the thirteenth century; whilst in the fifteenth century Louis XI. of France revived the system of Charlemagne by organising a body of 230 couriers to convey state despatches. In England, although some attempt had been made to introduce a postal system in the fourteenth century, Edward IV. was the first to establish a regular “riding post,” and the service was improved by Henry VIII. who appointed a “Master of the Postes.” This official is the prototype of the modern Postmaster-General. It was not until the time of the Stuarts that a post was regularly established
for the convenience of the public as well as for state purposes. Prior to this time private letters, and they were not many, were carried by private means. The method of carrying the mails at this period was by post-boys on horseback, the letters being contained in a valise strapped to the animal's back behind the rider. In some instances, however, the mails were conveyed in carts. As time went on, the postal service became most unsatisfactory both as regards speed and security, and, by the middle of the eighteenth century, the mail had the reputation of being the slowest conveyance in the Kingdom. In this respect it was in striking contrast to the stage coach, since what coaches did in one day took the post-boys between two and three days.

Stage coaches were introduced into this country about the middle of the seventeenth century, but it was many years before they were cheap enough to come within the means of any but those in circumstances of considerable affluence. Indeed, not until late in the eighteenth century were they sufficiently cheap to be patronised by the poorer classes, who, as their fathers did before them, had to walk or ride in the long cumbrous waggons which were the first stages. The early stage coach usually held six, but sometimes accommodated eight passengers, who were screened from the weather by leather curtains, as it was not until 1680 that plate glass was sufficiently cheap to be used for windows. Behind the body of the vehicle and between the two great wheels was attached a basket for luggage, but sometimes this was also utilised for outside passengers who rode at a reduced fare. The position of these must have been extremely cramped and uncomfortable, sitting, as they did, in a very limited space and up to their knees in straw. About the third quarter of the eighteenth century increased accommodation was provided by seats being fixed on the roof of the coaches, and it was not very long after this period that the coaches began to assume the build and style of the present time.

In spite of the inconveniences attending the use of these early vehicles they soon became a popular means of conveyance with the wealthy. Indeed, in spite of spills, villainous roads and still more villainous "Knights of the Road," the aristocracy became so fond of coach riding that a bill was brought into Parliament "to prevent the
effeminacy of men riding in coaches." In spite of this, however, those who could afford the means continued to abandon the saddle for long distances, and naturally declined to walk.

As the speed of the coaches improved, people frequently forwarded parcels and letters by them instead of by post, although it was much more expensive, and, at last, John Palmer of Bath, to whom the Mail Coach halfpennies are inscribed, perceived that if the stage coaches carried the mails, a great improvement upon the unsatisfactory system of posting, then in vogue, would be effected. Originally a brewer, and subsequently founder and manager of a theatre at Bath, Palmer was distinguished by his untiring energy and perseverance. In his capacity as theatre manager he had frequently suffered the annoyance of being deprived of the services of some great "star" owing to the uncertainty and tardiness of the post or to the loss of letters. Moreover, having frequently to travel to London and other centres of fashionable resort, the superiority of the speed of the stage over the post became manifest to him. This suggested the ideas that the mails, instead of being entrusted to some idle post-boy mounted on an indifferent or worn out hack, and who was frequently robbed without the ability or, indeed, the inclination to defend himself, should, in future, be carried by coach, and that the coach should be furnished with an armed guard as a protection against highwaymen. In formulating these ideas, Palmer further suggested that strict punctuality should be observed, that each postmaster should be on the spot to receive the mails as soon as the coach arrived, and that if it failed to keep to time a man should be despatched on horseback to ascertain the cause of the delay, so that, if the coach had been stopped by highwaymen, an immediate pursuit could be instituted. It may be that the new scheme was not altogether Palmer's idea, as the mail coach was introduced into America as early as 1773, and many loyal postmasters of New England fled to the old country after the Revolution, possibly carrying with them the notion of a mail coach. However that may be, in 1783 or early in 1784, Palmer's suggestions were submitted to Pitt, at that time Prime Minister, and, although strenuously opposed by the Post Office officials, the plan was allowed a trial which proved entirely satisfactory. Early
in August, 1784, the first regular mail coach began to run. The course was between London and Bristol, and five inn-keepers held the contract at threepence a mile. The run was accomplished at the rate of about seven miles per hour, resulting in an unqualified success, and before two years had elapsed mail coaches were also established in the eastern and northern counties. The advantages of the new system were at once apparent to the public, and, in spite of the fact that the postage rates were slightly increased in order to meet the additional expenses of the scheme, the number of letters posted gradually rose until the revenue was benefited beyond all expectations. So great were the improvements in speed and security that, for once, the public bore the additional charges ungrudgingly. Prior to 1784 scarcely a week passed without the mail being robbed in some part of the country; and the post-boy riding between Bristol and London is recorded to have been plundered every week for five weeks. Roused by so flagrant a scandal the Post Office was prevailed upon to build what was called a robber proof mail-cart, which, however, had not long commenced its journeys before it was stopped by some facetious highwaymen and its contents rifled. On the other hand, from 1784 to 1792 not a single mail coach was stopped, to say nothing of being robbed.

As regards the speed of the mail coaches, six or seven miles per hour was at first maintained, but subsequently in the palmy days of coaching, a speed of nine or ten miles per hour, including all stoppages and kept up for long distances, was secured. So great was this speed considered, that apoplexy was popularly supposed to be induced by the rapid motion. It is said, too, that the mail coaches were so punctual that people were in the habit of timing their watches by them.

As a result of the success of his system for conveying the mails, Palmer was rewarded with the special and almost independent appointment of Controller-General of the Post Office at a salary of £1,500 per annum, with an allowance of 2½ per cent. upon any excess receipts over £240,000, which was the revenue at the time of his appointment. During his stay in office Palmer effected many internal reforms, amongst others the introduction of a separate newspaper office. On his advice, also, England was divided into six instead of three postal
districts, with a spare surveyor for emergencies. Hitherto the salary of a surveyor had been £300 per annum, but Palmer reduced this to £100 per annum with an allowance of a guinea a day when absent from headquarters. Thus the surveyors were stimulated to visit the towns in their districts. Many other, more or less, important reforms were effected by Palmer, sometimes with and sometimes without the authority of the Postmasters-General, for two of these acted together at this time. The reformer appears to have been possessed of a somewhat fiery and energetic disposition which could ill brook interference, and this frequently brought him into conflict with the Postmasters-General, especially when any of his reforms were opposed. His principle seemed to have been, that any improvement which suggested itself to him should, in the interests of the public, be brought into force at once, and so he frequently effected a change first, and sought the requisite authority afterwards. These acts were strongly resented by the Postmasters-General, and finally relations between them and Palmer became so strained that the matter was brought under the notice of Pitt, who in 1792 reluctantly consented to what was, in effect, the dismissal of the Controller-General. There was no doubt that the Postmasters-General had some just grounds for the course they adopted in this matter, but, on the other hand, it must be remembered that Palmer entered the Post Office late in life, and could not, therefore, readily change those habits of independent action to which he had been so long accustomed in his former occupations. He was granted a pension of £3,000 per annum, but, in consideration of the inadequacy of this reward, his son subsequently obtained a grant from Parliament of £50,000. John Palmer died in 1818.

It is remarkable that not long after the introduction of mail coaches, various improvements in them, and also of the roads on which they travelled, were effected, which went far towards making Palmer's scheme a continued success. At first the mail coaches were faultily constructed and break-downs were of almost daily occurrence, but these were rendered very much less frequent by the improvements in carriage construction which culminated, at the opening of the
nineteenth century, in the introduction of elliptic springs for carriages, thus dispensing with the heavy combined wood and iron perches and cross beds which had, up to that time, been invariably used. In consequence, many complicated parts in wheeled vehicles were dispensed with, and coaches, etc., became lighter and easier. Their safety, comfort and accommodation were proportionately increased, and the cost of construction was considerably lessened.

Then again, passengers on the old stage coaches were subject to various annoyances and delays owing to the state of the roads, and in some extreme cases, days were lost by reason of floods and other impediments. This state of affairs was largely improved by John Loudon MacAdam's new system of dressing the roads. He substituted, on roads formerly constructed of gravel and round, or carelessly broken stones of poor quality, surfaces of granite, flints and other hard stones carefully broken into small angular pieces which, after the passage of heavy traffic, dovetailed into each other and formed a hard and even surface. The process was, of course, gradual, but most of the post roads were macadamised before 1820. MacAdam received a grant of £10,000 from the national funds, and the appointment of Surveyor-General of Metropolitan roads in consideration of his services.

Again, a few months after the introduction of mail coaches they were exempted, by Act of Parliament, from toll, and inn-keepers and others were induced therefore to contract for the carriage of the mails on merely nominal terms.

Mail coaches existed for about sixty years, and they attained to the height of their prosperity in the reign of William IV. It was during this time that they became so favourite a subject with English painters, engravers and lithographers, who depicted on canvas and stone the mail coaches of the day in every conceivable position and circumstance except, perhaps, in the act of overturning or breaking down; and we still very frequently come across paintings and engravings of mail coaches starting from, or arriving at, the prominent inns of the country; of coaches winding through the lanes, along the high roads or across the commons and heaths; and of coaches in the rain,
sleet or snow, when often, at the end of a journey, the driver and guard had to be lifted off their perches because of the numbness engendered by excessive cold. There is little doubt that Dickens gleaned the name of Pickwick from the West of England coach, known as the “Pickwick,” and owned by the firm of Moses Pickwick and Co., of “The White Hart Inn,” Stall Street, Bath; and the guard of a coach called the “Monarch” is said to have been the prototype of Sam Weller.

With the introduction of railways, mail coaches gradually fell into desuetude. The change commenced with the opening of the Liverpool and Manchester Railway in 1830, when the mails of the district were consigned to the new company for carriage. Nevertheless, the railway system developed but slowly, and for the first few years exerted little influence on the Post Office, for as late as in 1838 the high roads still held their traffic. Indeed, some new coaches were even put upon them. Several reasons account for this. In the first place the new method of carriage was not popular, and the cost of conveyance of the mails was also very much more than by coach. Again, rail accidents were more frequent and fatal than coach breakdowns, and it was not an unusual sight to see a disabled locomotive being towed by horses to the nearest station, in the same way as, in recent times, motor-cars have been similarly and ignominiously treated.

In the early days of railways an accident was fraught with more serious consequences than a coach upset, and a famous beau of this time, in language as picturesque as his dress, summed up the matter as follows:—“You got upset in a mail-coach—and there you were. You get upset in a rail-car and—d---e, where are you?”

The early rail-cars went through much the same process of development as the early road coaches. They were at first merely wagons, not unlike the open goods wagon of to-day, very often seatless; the passengers being protected by an awning which, in exposed districts, and when most wanted, was sometimes carried away by a boisterous wind. As time went on, the carriages were improved by being entirely covered in and fitted with more comfortable seats. The railway carriage owed much to the road coach it displaced. It was
even named after the manner of the stage conveyance. The guard, with his horn and in his scarlet cloak, was retained and still continued to occupy a prominent position, perched aloft at the back of the last passenger "coach." The old methods of booking, seating and of carrying luggage were also closely followed. The racks and arm slings were introduced into the carriages, the gauge of the wheels was retained and the language of the "road" was transferred almost word for word to the requirements of its metal rival.

Intense rivalry naturally existed between the owners of coaches and the early railway companies, but not long after the commencement of the reign of Queen Victoria it became evident to the former that their occupation was rapidly going. Still, the old time coach has not entirely been driven off the roads. It is even now a popular summer vehicle in the country, and takes many a joyous company through the dales and over the hills of the north and west. Nevertheless, the halcyon days of coaching have long since passed away, and with this decay many of Palmer's reforms have been forgotten, and his name has ceased to be a household word. That the people of his time recognised the benefits which he was the means of bestowing upon them is abundantly evident from the tokens which form the subject of this article, and so long as these exist the name of Palmer will not entirely pass out of memory.

The Mail Coach Halfpennies were issued in large numbers and are comparatively common to-day. Of the three, however, No. 2 is the scarcest. Little can be said in favour of the design and execution of these tokens as the coach, horses and figures of driver and guard are crudely drawn, and the lettering and arrangement of the inscriptions are very defective. The reverse of No. 3 is, perhaps, neater than the other designs. The appearance of all the tokens is, however, often adversely affected by bad and uneven striking. They were engraved by Wyon and manufactured by Mynd, both of Birmingham, but were primarily intended for circulation in London. In all probability they were also readily accepted at the inns along the mail coach routes, which were so greatly benefited by the improved system of coaching introduced by Palmer.