



**'Stuck Fast.' Fores 1843. (Illustrations courtesy The Post Office)**

## Back to the Good Old Days

by Glenn H. Morgan

AS HAS BEEN WIDELY REPORTED in the non-philatelic press, the mailcoach service in Britain recently celebrated its 200th birthday in tremendous style. The Post Office and the Norwich Union Insurance Company arranged for a re-run of the first-ever mailcoach journey from Bristol to London on 1 and 2 August 1984, aiming to establish new world records.

The mailcoach era has often been described as the beginning of the postal service as we know it today and I was determined to take part in this little chunk of history that was being re-enacted. Consequently, I rose at the crack of dawn to ensure that I could secure a good vantage point outside postal headquarters in London where the coach was scheduled to arrive after its gruelling 17 hour journey at 8 am. As so often happens in this country the weather let us down and it rained for the first time in weeks! Still, despite being soaked to the skin, it failed to dampen the enthusiasm that was so evident amongst the growing crowds.



London-Brighton Snowbound at Handcross

Reports of the mailcoach being 1½ hours late began to circulate, but by about 8.30 am it was clear that we would not have to wait much longer as the police reported that it was at Ludgate Circus and, sure enough, within minutes the Post Office Chairman's guests began to emerge in their finery and the coach was not far behind. Suddenly it appeared from around the corner and pulled up outside the London Chief Office amid much clapping and clicking of camera shutters.

### 'Shattered'

After a short exchange of greetings and official presentations the pressmen were able to fire a barrage of questions at the driver, John Parker, and his mail guard, John Drane. 'How do you feel?' one reporter asked, 'Shattered' came the reply, and well they might be. I overheard a member of the Norwich Union staff observe that nobody from the media wanted to interview *them* even although they had put in so much hard work changing over the 24 horses used for the 131 mile journey. The world record for changing a team of horses was broken on two occasions. Once at Pickwick by one second and again at Chiswick by five seconds, so the record of 46 seconds set in 1888 now stands at a mere 41 seconds. This is no small achievement and could not have been accomplished without the stoic support of the Norwich Union team.

John Parker, Britain's top coachman, succeeded in his attempt to be the first

person to complete the journey single handed and wore out eight pairs of gloves in the process due to the immense pressure required in holding on to the reins. Unfortunately the record for the fastest journey time was not able to be beaten as the unbelievable public interest all along the route delayed the mailcoach, but at the end of the day nobody seemed too concerned.

The Curator of the National Postal Museum announced that all guests with tickets to the celebration breakfast should proceed to the awaiting coach. No, not the mailcoach but a gleaming new luxury vehicle with air conditioning and a bright, roomy interior that was such a contrast that we were brought back to the 20th century with a jolt.

We have come a long way in the past 200 years with our coach design, but I doubt if we shall ever look back at today's coaches with the same affection and feeling of nostalgia as we show for the British mailcoach. Happy Birthday!



In a drift of snow, 1825