

LAST ROAD FATALITY OF THE COACHING ERA

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When Four-in-Hand Overturned at Brora

A HEAVILY laden four-in-hand coach rattled at top speed down the straight gravel track into the Sutherland village of Brora in the evening of June 2, 1864. The horses took the dip and sharp turn and hump-backed river bridge without slackening pace, and the coach, having been either bounced off its rear wheels or swung against the parapet of the bridge—subsequent accounts of the disaster varied—fell on its side and was dragged 100 yards to the door of the Sutherland Arms Hotel, where the horses stood still, trembling but unharmed.

No one, luckily, had been travelling inside. But roof, box and boot had been crammed with passengers, all of whom were lying about the road or crawling out of the river Brora. Vil-

lagers carried a Mr Donald Gunn into the inn and put him to bed. He had apparently suffered a broken arm, but there must have been internal injuries, too, for a few days later he died.

LAST FATALITY

So occurred surely the last road fatality of the coaching era. Although casualties of 100 years ago had to submit to such rough-and-ready doctoring that minor injuries often became serious and

THE accompanying article appeared in "The Times", of June 5 last. It was written by a special correspondent. Although the article deals with happenings 100 years ago, road deaths in Sutherland to-day average no more than one a year.

sometimes fatal, deaths on the road (unlike deaths on the railways) amounted to no more than one or two in the year.

By 1864, when all the last stage-coaches and mails had disappeared from England and only one or two remained in the northern parts of Scotland, an accident to one of them was news indeed.

The vehicle that made the headlines in 1864 was the mail-coach—what Caithness and Sutherland folk called the "South Mail" and everyone else the "North Mail", Thurso to Inverness every lawful day. It was the last long-distance coach in the British Isles and already, to people visiting the far North for the shooting and fishing, was a happy reminder of the days, not so distant yet vanished so completely, of that most romantic of transport systems.

WATCHED LOADING

Some folk went up to Thurso especially to make a sentimental journey in her. Old men watched her loading every morning in the forecourt of the Royal Hotel in the main street, and cast a professional eye over her brilliant black-and-maroon paintwork and royal cipher in gold on the panels, her driver in silver-buttoned "benjamin" and guard in pill-box cap, smart blue-and-red uniform and with yard-of-tin (horn) and her powerful team of whites and bays.

Although "cattle," like fodder, were becoming scarce in the North, the mail-coach managed to keep up the local tradition of always having one white "leader".

The North Mail left Thurso daily at 10.28 a.m. (a precision of timing that shows how strictly to schedule the old coaches ran) and delivered its letter-bags and a limited number of passengers to Inverness at 3.40 the following morning. Formerly, it had met the crack "Duke of Wellington" (Inverness to Perth) stage-coach, but in 1864 it kept its appointment with a train.

Thus it went about 156 miles, including official detours, in just over 17 hours—express travel for that era and a fine performance on up-hill-and-down-dale roads and along a breezy, twisting coast-line that included the Ord of Caithness, thought of by coachmen as the "Ordeal of Caithness," a stretch so windswept that lookouts were stationed there in rough weather if necessary to turn the coaches back, because the force of the gale had been known to blow them off the road.

MAKING UP TIME

On June 2 the mail, running late for once because of market crowds and flocks of sheep in Wick, had come down off the Ord and picked up Mr Gunn in the village of Helmsdale. The next stage, after one short ascent and descent, was a level canter through leafy lanes and the coachman put his horses along, making up time.

Long before he came in sight of the Sutherland Arms the distant winding of his guard's horn set in motion a practised routine of preparation for the "stop, change horses, dine and examine coach."

Not even a fatal accident could hold up the mail. Ostlers and staff righted the coach, a wheelwright did some emergency repairs, coachmen and guard with characteristic fortitude climbed up and were off without much delay and four hardy passengers, bruised, wet and still shaken as they were, went with them. The mail-bags were intact, which was the main thing.

"Wullie" McArdle, the guard, was fined for unpunctuality, but that was only to be expected. John Mackay, the coachman, faced a charge of manslaughter—it was alleged that he was drunk, was going too fast, and had picked up unofficial passengers on the road, hence the extra topweight. Being, however, "an extremely careful young man of steady reputation," he was acquitted and, in fact, drove the mail until it made headlines again, exactly 10 years later, on being finally withdrawn from service.