

JOHN BENNETT fine paintings

The London to Exeter Royal Mail Coach

English School Circa 1830

Sold



Description

ENGLISH SCHOOL circa 1830 The London to Exeter Royal Mail Coach Oil on canvas laid down 49.7 x 61 cms 19 1/2 x 24 inches Overall framed size 60 x 71.5 cms 235/8 x 281/8 ins
THE ROYAL MAIL COACH SERVICE

The Royal Mail coach or Post coach depicted here is an example of a service that had started in Britain in 1784 and was faster than the stage coach as passengers were of lesser importance than the mail and stops were made only at mail reception points. The coach was drawn by four horses with the mail contained in a box at the rear of the vehicle and guarded by a Royal Mail officer who stood beside it. There was room for four passengers inside but after a while extra passengers could travel on top with the driver.

This horse-drawn mode of delivery replaced the earlier delivery service, initiated in 1635, where a mounted carrier had ridden between posts and been received by a postmaster who would separate the letters for his area before handing the edited bundle plus his additions to the next rider who would continue on. It was expensive and not a particularly efficient service, especially as the riders were often preyed upon by highwaymen.

It was the Bath theatre owner John Palmer, who had run a coach service to deliver his actors and props between venues, who had the vision to see that coaches would greatly improve the postal service. He proposed his idea to the London Post Office in 1782 and despite opposition from various officials, William Pitt, who was Chancellor of the Exchequer at that time, agreed that he could trial a run between London and Bristol. This experiment went ahead on 2nd August 1784 and was a success as it cut the delivery time of thirty-eight hours by twenty-two hours and as a consequence, Pitt authorised that route and the expansion of the service. By the end of 1785 there were regular mail runs from London to Exeter, Poole, Portsmouth, Dover, Norwich, Worcester, Gloucester, Holyhead, Liverpool, Carlisle and Leeds. John Palmer was rewarded for his initiative by being created Surveyor and Comptroller General of the Post Office.

The early teams, drivers and coaches were supplied at first by contractors and the latter were poorly constructed but there was stiff competition to win these lucrative contracts. However, by the turn of the century, the Post Office had its own staff and teams and they were all painted in the official livery of scarlet and black. The first coaches were designed to carry four passengers with only the driver outside at the front with the mail guard at the back. This guard was deemed very important and was well paid to protect their charge. They were dressed in scarlet and gold and armed with pistols and a blunderbuss and carried a timepiece to ensure punctuality. Unlike the drivers who changed over at certain points when the horse teams were changed, the guard remained with the coach for the duration of the journey and had to ensure the delivery of the post whatever circumstance or problem arose. There were stories of guards dying from exposure during winter.

It soon became evident that profits could be incre...