



The Story of the Christmas Coach



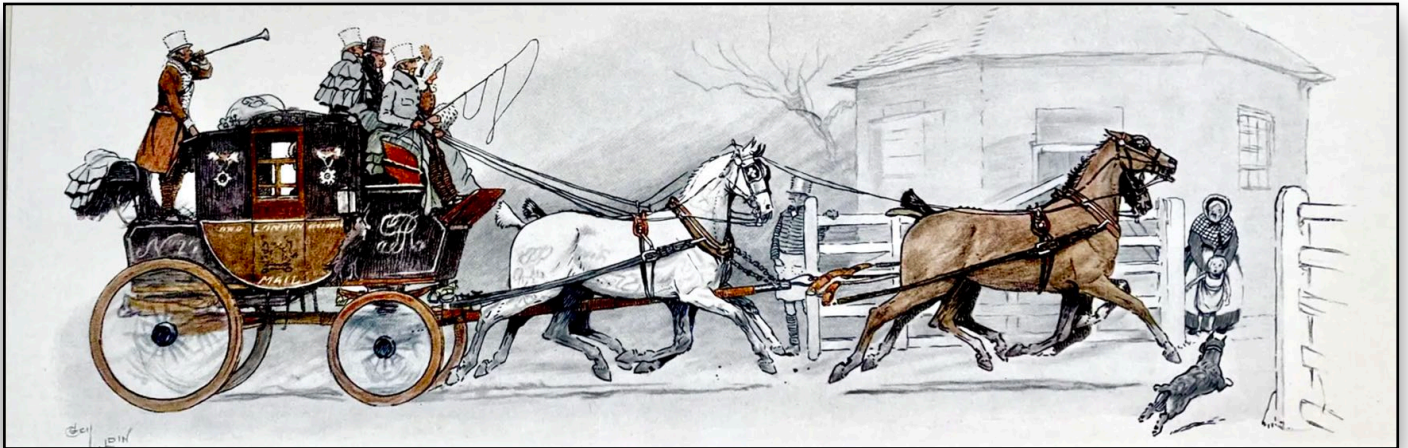
Cecil Aldin was one of this country's finest sporting artists. He was a great horse and dog lover and his ability to capture them was unique. Just as Nimrod defined the Englishman's passion for *"The Chase, the Turf and the Road"* in writing, so Cecil Aldin achieved this on canvas, capturing the essence of these very English pursuits of hunting, racing and coaching.

He was in great demand as an illustrator, helping to bring such iconic works as Anna Sewell's, *"Black Beauty"* vividly to life. His love of coaching in particular manifested itself in his own book, the *"Romance of the Road"*, full of wonderful depictions of the coaches, roads and inns, as seen when coaching was at its zenith in the 1820s. This made Cecil an ideal candidate to illustrate an edition of Washington Irving's *"Old Christmas"*, where the romance of the "Road" and the romance of Christmas come together to beautiful effect:

"In the course of a December tour in Yorkshire, I rode for a long distance in one of the public coaches, on the day preceding Christmas. The coach was crowded, both inside and out, with passengers, who, by their talk, seemed principally bound to the mansions of relations or friends to eat the Christmas dinner. It was loaded with hampers of game, and baskets and boxes of delicacies; and hares hung dangling their long ears about the coachman's box - presents from distant friends for the impending feast".

Irving's traveller is clearly taken by the spirit of the season and the romance of his journey: *"Perhaps it might be owing to the pleasing serenity that reigned in my own mind, that I fancied that I saw cheerfulness in every countenance throughout the journey. A stage-coach, however, carries animation always with it and puts the world in motion as it whirls along . . .*

.. Perhaps the impending holiday might have given a more than usual animation to the country, for it seemed to me as if everybody was in good looks and good spirits. Game, poultry, and other luxuries of the table, were in brisk circulation in the villages; the grocers', butchers', and fruiterers' shops were thronged with customers. The housewives were stirring briskly about, putting their dwellings in order; and the glossy branches of holly, with their bright red berries, began to appear at the windows..."



Another traveller's story told of a slightly different Christmas journey: *"I had been travelling to London on the box of the Bristol coach during a long day of incessant snow. We were not many passengers, but it was the 24th of December, and the coach was hung all over with poultry and game, in such prodigious quantities, that it looked like a moving stack, rather than what it was. We had had six horses all the way, on the count of the load; but by the time we came to Reading, the snow was 8 inches deep on the ground, while the coach resembled a travelling avalanche; and here eight horses were put on to draw. It must have been near 10 o'clock at night, when we stuck fast in a ditch into which we had unluckily strayed, near Hounslow. There was whipping, and spurring, and shouting, and much shouldering of wheels to boot; but the coach would not stir, and seemed only to sink deeper in the snow as the team pulled the harder. In the middle of the hustle, a returning coal wagon came up. The huge wagon horses were harnessed on with the others, and all began tugging together under the influence of the lash. The result was most astonishing, but not exactly what was intended; instead of pulling the machine out of the slough and snow drift, they pulled away part of it only, leaving the overloaded body and the hind wheels, just as they were.*

At the sight of this catastrophe, there was a demonstration on the part of the shivering passengers of their intention to make for the nearest shelter. Off we set for the town as fast as we could, and as we carried the news of our shipwreck with us, it was not long before a posse of the inhabitants were on the scene of the disaster with tenders of assistance.

What was the nature of the assistance they rendered I never exactly knew; what I am prepared to avouch is the singular fact that when, three hours later, we, the passengers, were summoned to pursue our journey by a new coach, which had been fetched for our convenience, there was not a single item of all that mountain of luggage, which we had painfully hauled for nearly 100 miles, to be seen. The volunteers, who had come to the help of the foundered coach, favoured by the darkness, had taken the opportunity of providing for their Christmas cheer, and walked it clear off. Geese, turkey, hares, partridges, pheasants, woodcocks, ducks, fowls, hams, suckling pigs - each, and all of them had vanished utterly, and left not a rack behind - and the coach drove into London, about 2 o'clock in the morning, completely bare!", ("Wicklow Newsletter", June 28, 1882).



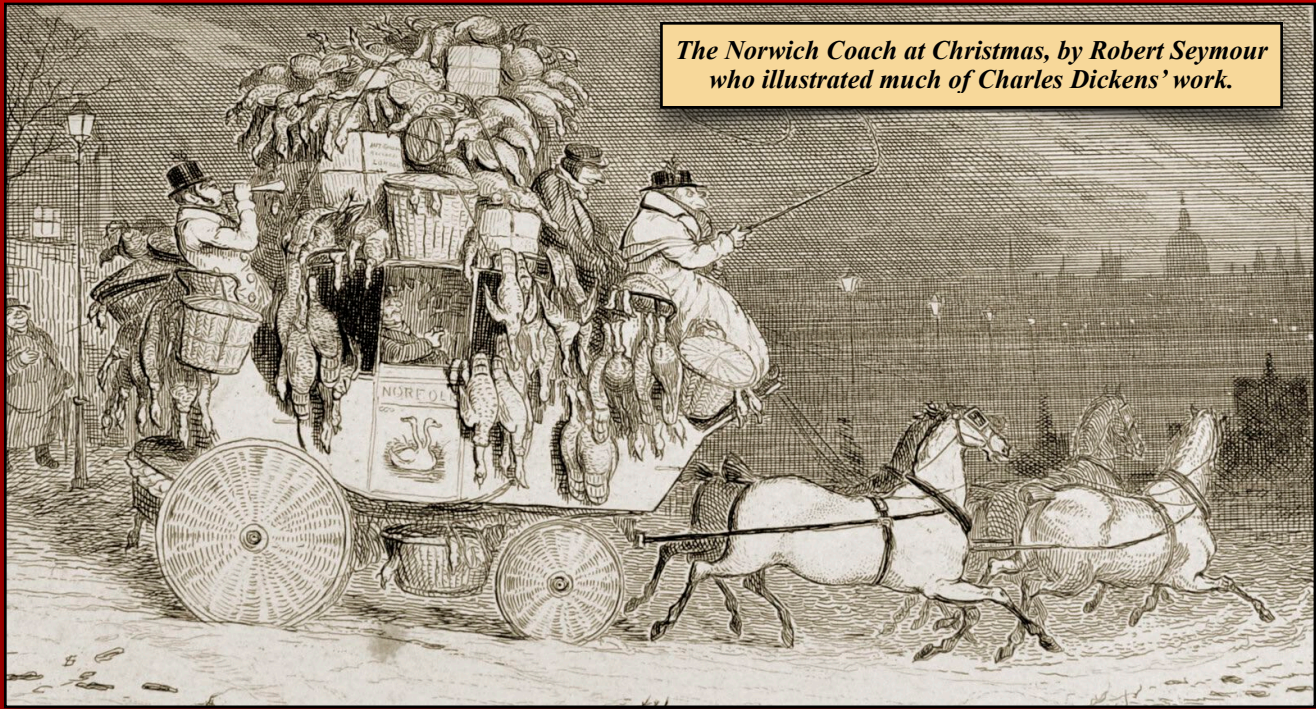
The story of the Bristol coach's stolen seasonal cargo and this George Cruikshank whimsical illustration, taken from **Tales about Christmas** (1838), both show how central the **“bootiful”** turkey was, and of course still is, to Christmas here in England.



Norfolk was not only renowned for its top quality trotting horses, but was also a major centre for rearing geese and turkeys for the London market in the 18th and 19th centuries. Without refrigeration there was no way of transporting slaughtered birds to market and in the weeks running up to Christmas the roads to the country's capital were full of flocks of the hapless birds being slowly walked to their doom; their feet protected after being dipped in tar and then sand. (This Norfolk picture taken in 1931 shows what the roads to London might have looked like).

The stagecoach network provided the farmers with an alternative method of transportation. The birds could be slaughtered in Norfolk, loaded on to coaches, and then transported to London without having to walk off a good part of their condition. At no other time of the year would stagecoaches carry such unusual cargo; often carried in preference to passengers:

**“In trudging a few miles along the turnpike road with Mr. Charlton, I could not but observe the bustle that prevailed. Every traveller had a holiday appearance; there were an unusual number of caravans, wagons, and vehicles of all kinds, the coaches were unmercifully loaded, and the coachmen had an air of more than common importance. One stage coach could hardly get up a chalky hill that it had to ascend, though six horses were attached to it, so heavy was the pile of hampers, baskets, packages, and parcels piled on top.*

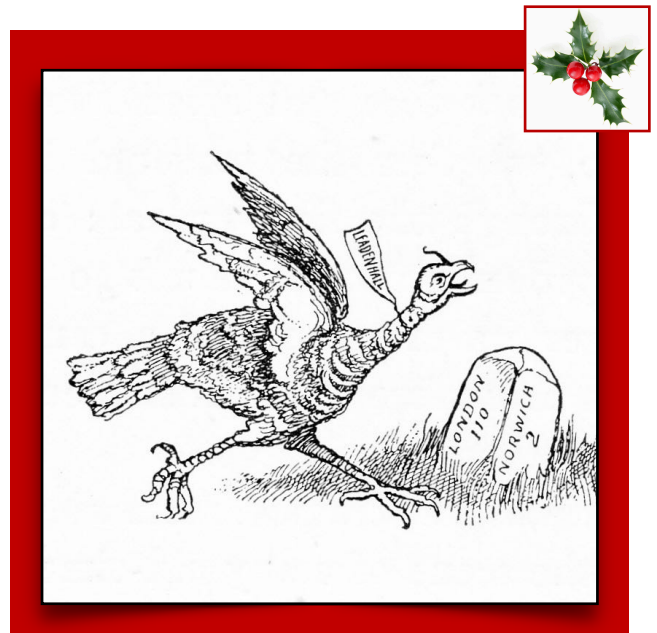


The Norwich Coach at Christmas, by Robert Seymour who illustrated much of Charles Dickens' work.

Mr. Charlton said that it reminded him of once seeing the Norfolk Coach, so loaded with turkeys, that it ought to have been called the “Turkey Stage”. There was scarcely any thing to be seen but turkeys, so piled was the outside of the coach, and so crammed the inside, that they wanted nothing in the world but a turkey for a coachman, and another for a guard to render the thing quite complete. ” I should hardly have been surprised,” added he, “to see a turkey or two running after the coach, labelled round the neck “for Leadenhall Market,” and screaming out that their places had been booked three days before.” (“Tales about Christmas” by Peter Parley, 1838).

Although some of the poultry were still walked to London, transporting the birds by coach did catch on. A Norwich newspaper reported that over a four day period in 1793 over 2500 turkeys were sent by passenger coach. Some coach proprietors turned fare paying inside passengers away because the turkeys “pay better”; even going so far as to lay on extra coaches to deal with the increased business.

Cecil Aldin’s wonderful sketch of an escaping bird shows that not all the turkeys en route to London were dead. The label round his neck may say “Leadenhall Market”, but this escapee is wisely running back in the direction from whence he came!



In writing about *“What Christmas is to a bunch of people”* in 1851, even the iconic Charles Dickens talked of the *“The Turkey Drover”*, who, *“also has a very busy time of it just now; and the Goose-drover even more so”*. Apparently the flocks were only biddable if the right birds were chosen: *“It is to be remembered that the warlike turkey-cock (so aptly called in Scotland the bubbly-jock) and the mature, fierce-necked, wing-threatening, universally-assaulting gander, being preserved by their toughness, are not present in these festive processions. We speak only of the young and middle-aged turkey and goose...”* Whoever would have thought that this particular literary master would have been acquainted with the vagaries of such things as transporting turkeys and geese destined for the Christmas table.

As the big day is fast approaching, and being a bit of a “foodie” myself, I thought it appropriate to find out a little more about some of the traditions surrounding the Christmas Turkey and how it was cooked 200 years ago.

Apparently, the goose or turkey was not just a food for the well to do and middle classes. The slang name for all kinds of poultry was *“hollow”*, possibly because they were hollowed out before they were cooked. This, of course, also ties in with the use of the ubiquitous stuffing, whose recipe appears to have changed little in the ensuing 200 years: *“sausage meat with chopped shallots, breadcrumbs and a beaten egg. Sausages and bread sauce are served separately along with the gravy”*. Alongside *“Bubbly Jock”*, the turkey was also referred to as a *“Gobbler”* or *“Cobble Colter”*. Interestingly, when garnished with a string of sausages, a roast turkey was known as an *“Alderman”*, in reference to the chain of office. (One wonders how it would need to be presented to be called a *“Master”*). That part of the chicken we call *“parson’s nose”*, is the *“pope’s nose”* in the turkey, and *“The Devil”* was a dish made with the gizzard, scored and peppered until it was very hot and then broiled. (*“To broil”*, to cook by direct exposure to radiant heat: grill).

My source of information was, *“A New System of Domestic Cookery; formed upon the principles of economy”* by *“A Lady”*. Various editions were printed in the early 19th century and the one I have quoted from is a version from 1829. The book gives advice for the *“prudent housewife”* and contains various turkey recipes, including a version of *“The Devil”* as mentioned above, referring to it as: *“an Incomparable Relish, or Devil, of Turkey”*:

“On the rump, gizzard , and a drum-stick, put salt, pepper and cayenne. Let them be broiled, and brought back as hot as possible; cut them in small pieces, pour over a ladle of mustard, ditto of melted butter, a spoonful of soy, ditto of lemon-juice, and some of the gravy out of the dish; mix quickly, and hand round”, something for Boxing Day perhaps?

In the hope that the stories surrounding the Christmas Coach have helped lift your seasonal spirit, it only remains for me to wish all my fellow coachmakers a very merry Christmas.

The Norwich Stage arriving at London’s “Bull” Inn.



