Bianconi - World in motion.

Thomas A Croal

•

1877

The Mail-Coach Driver.

Few things are more true than that two distinct species of the *genus homo* have been extinguished within the memory of the existing generation, in the disappearance of the mail-coach driver and the mail guard. They were the true outside passengers—the constant occupants in sun or rain, in wind or snow, in floods or in dust storms, of the chief seats upon the coach, and no sketch of the old *regimé* would be complete, without special notice being taken of them. There were coach-drivers before Palmer's time, but it was the improvement of the roads, and the increased attractiveness of the outside seats on the mail, that made the driver the great character he became. The mail guard was distinctly born of the Palmer system, so that both coachman and guard may be said to have risen and fallen with that system. The driver, prior to that time, had no personal history, no place in literature such as he subsequently obtained. And his successor, the engine-driver of the day, though in his way a public character of no ordinary interest, entirely lacks that personality which was the mainspring of the coachman's fame. The latter lived to some extent with his life and the lives of the passengers in his hands, and a strong nerve, a wary eye, and a firm hand were often called into requisition to save—not always successfully—his charge from disaster. But he did not live under a constant strain, watching signals, or peering out into the darkness lest some unexpected obstruction should hurl his engine and train to instant destruction. When the sky was bright, the road in prime condition, and his gallant team in good fettle, the coachman bowled along with an abandon to which his successor on the iron horse is a stranger, and made for himself that name for skill, kindliness, joviality, and general attractiveness which must ever be associated with the history of the mail coach.

From the S*ketch Book* of Washington Irving we give the following picture of this bygone character—a picture which, as the writer observes, " may serve as a general representation of this very numerous and important class of functionaries, who have a dress, a manner, a language, an air, peculiar to themselves, and prevalent throughout the fraternity ; so that, wherever an English stage coachman may be seen, he cannot be mistaken for one of any other craft or mystery."....

" He has commonly a broad, full face, curiously mottled with red, as if the blood had been forced by hard feeding into every vessel of the skin ; he is swelled into jolly dimensions by frequent potations of malt liquors, and his bulk is still further increased by a multiplicity of coats, in which he is buried like a cauliflower, the upper one reaching to his heels. He wears a broad-brimmed low-crowned hat ; a huge roll of coloured handkerchief about his neck, knowingly knotted and tucked in at the bosom ; and has in summer time a large bouquet of flowers in his button-hole ; the present, most probably, of some enamoured country lass. His waistcoat is commonly of some bright colour, striped, and his small-clothes extend far below the knees, to meet a pair of jockey-boots which reach about half-way up his legs.

" All this costume is maintained with much precision ; he has a pride in having his clothes of excellent materials ; and, notwithstanding the seeming grossness of his appearance, there is still discernible that neatness and propriety of person which is almost inherent in an English-

man. He enjoys great consequence and consideration along the road ; has frequent conferences with the village housewives, who look upon him as a man of great trust and dependence ; and he seems to have a good understanding with every bright-eyed country lass. The moment he arrives where the horses are to be changed, he throws down the reins with something of an air, and abandons the cattle to the care of the ostler ; his duty being merely to drive from one stage to another. When off the box, his hands are thrust into the pockets of his great-coat, and he rolls about the inn-yard with an air of the most absolute lordliness.

Here he is generally surrounded by an admiring throng of ostlers, stable-boys, shoeblacks, and those nameless hangers-on that infest inns and taverns, and run errands, and do all kinds of odd jobs, for the privilege of battening on the drippings of the kitchen and the leakage of the taproom. These all look up to him as to an oracle ; treasure up his cant phrases ; echo his opinions about horses and other topics of jockey lore ; and above all, endeavour to imitate his air and carriage. Every ragamuffin that has a coat to his back thrusts his hands in the pockets, rolls in his gait, talks slang, and is an embryo Coachey.

" Perhaps it might be owing to the pleasing serenity that reigned in my own mind, that I fancied 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. The horn sounded at the entrance of a village produces a general bustle. Some hasten forth to meet friends, some with bundles and bandboxes to secure places, and in the hurry of the moment can hardly take leave of the group that accompanies them. In the meantime the coachman has a world of small commissions to execute. Sometimes he delivers a hare or pheasant ; sometimes jerks a small parcel or newspaper to the door of a public-house ; and sometimes, with knowing leer and words of sly import, hands to some half-blushing, half-laughing housemaid an odd-shaped billet-doux from some rustic admirer. As the coach rattles through the village, every one runs to the window, and you have glances on every side of fresh country faces and blooming giggling girls. At the corners are assembled juntos of village idlers and wise men, who take their stations there for the important purpose of seeing company pass ; but the sagest knot is generally at the blacksmith's, to whom the passing of the coach is an event fruitful of much speculation. The smith, with the horse's heel in his lap, pauses as the vehicle whirls by ; the cyclops round the anvil suspend their ringing hammers, and suffer the iron to grow cool ; and the sooty spectre in brown paper cap, labouring at the bellows, leans on the handle for a moment, and permits the asthmatic engine to heave a long-drawn sigh, while he glares through the murky smoke and sulphureous gleams of the smithy."

Mr. Hooper, descanting, from a professional point of view, on the disappearance of public coaches, says :—" The mail or stage coachman of the olden time was the ' life of the road.' He was almost invariably a hearty, cheerful fellow, full of anecdote, fond of a chat, proud of his coach and of his horses, and willing to impart information to travellers as to any object of interest on the road. He frequently owned a share in the coach and horses he drove, was an ' artist' in his craft, managed his high-mettled team with great skill and courage, was full of resources in case of accidents, and was a sort of father to timid, nervous, and young persons when placed under his care. His skill was such that he would drive over a line of small coins placed along the road without missing one of them. The seat next to him was considered the ' seat of honour,' frequently reserved several days beforehand by gentlemen who wished to render their journey agreeable. He was, in addition, a professor of his art, and many were the noblemen and gentlemen who learned the art of driving four horses under his tuition, and handsomely rewarded him for teaching them."

Leigh Hunt, whose view of a mail-coach journey is not a little tinctured with the querulousness engendered by the smaller miseries of travelling, has, however, a genial word for " coachey." He says ; —

“ The mail or stage coachman upon the whole is no inhuman mass of great-coat, gruffness, civility, and old boots. The latter is the politer from the smaller range of acquaintance, and his necessity for preserving them. His face is red, and his voice rough, by the same process of drink and catarrh. He has a silver watch with a steel chain, and plenty of loose silver in his pocket mixed with halfpence. He serves the houses he goes by for a clock. He takes a glass at every ale-house ; for thirst when it is dry, and for warmth when it is wet. He likes to show the judicious reach of his whip, by twigging a dog or a goose on the road, or children that get in the way. His tenderness to descending old ladies is particular. He touches his hat to Mr. Smith. He gives ‘ the young woman’ a ride ; and lends her his box coat in the rain. His liberality in imparting knowledge to any one who has the good fortune to ride on the box with him is a happy mixture of deference, conscious possession, and familiarity. . . He knows the boys on the road admire him, and gives the horses an indifferent lash with his whip as they go by. If you wish to know what rain and dust can do, you should look at his old hat. There is an indescribably placid and paternal look in the position of his corduroy knees and old top-boots in the foot-hoard, with their pointed toes, and never cleaned soles. His beau-ideal of appear-ance is a frock-coat with mother-o’-pearl buttons, and striped yellow waistcoat, and a flower in his mouth.” In Dickens the dress of a coachman forms a frequent subject of remark, and, as usual with that writer, with some tendency to exaggeration. One inimitable picture is that where Tony Weller engages his coachman friends to assist in settling his worldly affairs. “ It was a kind of festive occasion, and the parties were attired accordingly. Mr. Weller’s tops were newly cleaned and his dress was arranged with peculiar care ; the mottled-faced gentle-man wore at his button-hole a full-sized dahlia with several leaves ; and the coats of his two friends were adorned with nose-gays of laurel and other ever-greens. All these were habited in strict holiday costume ; that is to say, they were wrapped up to the chins, and wore as many clothes as possible, which is and has been a stage coachman’s idea of full dress, ever since stage coaches were invented.”

The coachman upon his box took the place of the postillion of an earlier date, and derived much of his importance and interest from the personal intercourse this position gave him. Before leaving him, we may present M. Ramée’s sketch of the French postillion, who lived, as a driver of public vehicles, long after the English coachman was settled on his box, but who has now also disappeared ; and whose successor, as here depicted, contrasts so strongly with our mail-coach driver : —

“ To the postillions, national and truly classic ; to the postillions with queue plaited and powdered in the old style ; to the postillions with light blue jacket, having facings and collar turned up with scarlet and ornamented with some dozen little tin buttons with the arms of France ; to the postillions with yellow or green leather breeches, and round shiny hats with large flaps turned down over the ears ; with the splendid jack-boots, and the little whip trimmed bows,—to him succeeded insensibly in the conduct of the great diligences these prosaic and untidy drivers with blue and dirty blouse, cotton hat, and thick wooden shoes generally stuffed with straw. In spite of all this decay and this unceremonious negligence, there was, however, progress ; for these coachmen were seated on the seat of their carriage, and with long reins they drove with more confidence than before four or five vigorous and frisky horses *du pays chartrain*, and from this epoch the accidents of public carriages or diligences were much less frequent on the high roads. The French postillion finished by driving only the mail, the carriage of some great lords, of lucky financiers, and often of lovers. To-day he has nothing even of all that ; the love or the money has all lessened. Under the reign of Louis Philippe the postillion of the old style became eclipsed more and more, and we can see no more the perfect model but at the ball of the opera, or above all, at the comic opera, in the *Postilion de Lonjumeau*.” Perhaps some of the older amongst our readers may remember how

popular this *Postilion* once was in England, and how we all knew, as one of the current aiis of the day —

Quite a beau, quite a beau !
was the Postilion de Lonjumeau

The Mail Guard.

The guard, with his horn, his pistols, his solitary seat of honour at the rear of the mail coach, and his authority and importance as director in chief of all the movements of the vehicle, is even more a lost memory than the mail-coach driver. Jehus there are, driving four-in-hand stage coaches, sometimes three-in-hand, after the manner of the modern city omnibus, in districts where the railway, omnipresent though it may seem to be, has failed to supply all the travelling accommodation the public demands. Their sphere is, however, more local than before, for the longer stretches of country are not now open to them, so that, as Leigh Hunt observes, they have to be the politer as their circle of acquaintance is less. The characteristic dress of the coachman is gone, but the weather-browned face, the strong arm, and the communicativeness of the race are here and there preserved, and at ticklish parts of the road—say for example when the loaded Gairloch omnibus of the tourist season rounds the unprotected corner where the ravine of the Kerry amazes or alarms the timid,—the passenger may admire the skilful " tooling" of the *nonchalant* driver or, if of an inquiring and recipient mind, may be regaled, as the writer has been, with stories of hair-breadth 'scapes at that very comer, when the nights were dark and the horses skittish.

But of the mail guard nothing remains beyond a memory and a tradition. The mail guard was in the pay of the Post Office, and represented in his scarlet coat and gilt hat-band—the royal livery—the authority of the State. Though, as a matter of fact, the driver was frequently also in scarlet, he did not wear the uniform as a badge of authority, as the guard did. It was the guard who saw to the mails, who carried the valuable chronometer provided by the Post Office for regulating the progress of the mail coach, and who interrupted the hurried meal at the wayside inn with the unwelcome intimation that time was up.

There are still, we believe, mail guards in the flesh, and within two or three years back, there was one—we presume the last of his race—who travelled from the *Ultima Thule* of railways, over the Ord of Caithness and on to John o' Groat's, or rather to Wick and Thurso. In the writer's first acquaintance with this " last man" of a passing race, he was travelling on the Carlisle road to Edinburgh. Then the railway came, and his occupation there was gone. Still, at Perth, there was room for one of the old *regimé* to take his stand, without the indignity (reserved for the men who still bear the official title of " mail guard"), of sitting in a railway mail van, or the Post Office compartment in a train. Than still farther drove the iron horse, and the guard found for a time a starting-place at Inverness, till finally he went we know not where.

" Had the pencil of a Hogarth," observes Mr. Lewis, " transmitted to posterity the *tout ensemble* of a London procession of mail coaches in their palmiest days, or even of one of them at an inn-door, the subject could not but have occasioned marked curiosity and pleasure. No doubt he would have given a distinguished place to the guard of the mail, who was no ordinary character, being generally *d'accord* with those who thought or expressed this opinion. Commissions of great importance were oftentimes entrusted to him, and the country banker, for instance, would trust him with untold wealth. Though he was paid only a nominal sum by the Post Office authorities for his official services, he was yet enabled to make his

position and place a lucrative one, by the help of the regular perquisites and other accidental windfalls which we need not further specify. Gathering *en route* scraps of local gossip and district intelligence, he was often ‘ private’ and sometimes ‘ special’ correspondent to scores of different people.” “ The *Muddleton Gazette*, perhaps the only newspaper on his line of road, was submissively dependent on him.”

Although it would be possible almost indefinitely to extend the story of the old mail coach, its passengers, its driver, and its guard, we may fitly close with the following sketch, written half a century ago, of some of the qualities which distinguished the mail guard : —

“ We know not, at this moment, any other class of lieges so thoroughly amiable as mail-coach guards. What bold, yet civil eyes ! How expressive the puffed-up cheek when blowing a long line of carters into deflection ! How elegant the attitude when, strap-supported, he leans from behind over the polished roof, and joins in your conversation in front with a brace of Bagmen ! With what activity he descends to fix the drag ! and how like a winged mercury he re-ascends when the tits are at full gallop along the flat ! See with what an air he flings kisses to every maiden that comes smiling to the cottage door, at the due transit of the loco-motive horologe ! You would think he had wooed and won them all beneath the dewy milk-white thorn, yet these fleeting moments of bliss are all he has ever enjoyed, all he can ever enjoy, for by the late regulations, you know mails go at the rate of nine knots an hour, stop-pages included, so all such little love affairs are innocent as in the days of gold and before the invention of paper money. The most bashful maiden, knowing that she is perfectly safe, flings towards the dickey her lavish return kisses, and is seen squandering them as if she had forgot that some should be kept for real use and sudden demand.”

•

Now if you want a car, sirs, just come along with me,
I’ll drive you out in style, sirs, the country for to see,
My horse will trot along the road, just like a shooting star,
Step up, my boys, be drove along, by Mick of Castlebar.

Irish Song.

Irish Mails and Mail Coaches—Early years of Charles Bianconi—Origin of the car system—Extent and growth of the Cars—Effect of the Railways on the Cars—The Car drivers.

Irish Mails and Mail Coaches.

THERE is not a great deal in the history of stage coaches, in the ordinary acceptance of that term, to be specially gleaned from Ireland. The first mail coach was seen in that country in 1780, when mails from Dublin to Cork and Belfast were established, and others followed. Perhaps the chief subject of remark regarding them, as distinguished from those of England and Scotland, was that the introduction of Palmer’s coaches into Ireland did not put a stop to the highway robberies of the mails that were so frequent under the old arrangements. It is stated that though on some occasions the coach was accompanied by as many as four armed guards, the mails were robbed as frequently as had been “ the less aspiring riding post ;” and in the early years of this century a metal lining was advertised as having been introduced into some coaches as a protection to the passengers.

From an interesting paper on the history of the Post Office in Ireland, prepared by Anthony Trollope for the Duke of Argyll, and published in the third report of the Postmaster-General in 1857—we glean many particulars regarding the modes of communication in that country : —

“ Posts from England to Ireland were first established by Charles I. It was ordered in 1654 that packets should ply weekly between Dublin and Chester, and between Milford and Waterford. These latter, as well as the Dublin packets, did ply at first, but they were soon withdrawn, and were not re-established for 150 years. In 1662 the line of the packets between Portpatrick and Donagbadee was established, and direct communication between Scotland and the North of Ireland has been maintained without intermission since that date. [1] The service, however, has not always been done in a very complete manner. For some years previous to 1780 the mails were carried in an open boat ; and £l : 1s. was paid for each trip.

“ The annals of the Irish post office are very poor. It may indeed be doubted whether it had any. Could we absolutely learn and describe the very mode in which letters were conveyed on any route—could we portray the sorry beast of burden which carried the bag, the ragged boy who had it in charge, the mountain track which he perambulated, and the slow pace at which he proceeded, no doubt a striking picture might be presented ; but unless we have imagination, little interest can be found in the bald postal details of the times of Charles II., William, Anne, George I., and George II.

“ Nothing can give a clearer idea of the state of the country in 1784 as compared with its existing condition, than a review of the postal accommodation then afforded to the provinces. All mails were conveyed, or supposed to be conveyed, by the post-masters, to whom was allowed a certain sum for the service. There were no contracts, and, as far as I can learn, no fixed rules as to time. Three miles and a half an hour seems to have been the pace acknowledged to have been sufficient The bags were usually conveyed by boys. In the immediate neighbourhood of the Metropolis some sort of cart was used, but with this exception the bags were carried either on ponies or mules, or on foot

“ In 1788 it was represented to the Lord Lieutenant that robberies were committed on the first stages out of Dublin, the mails being conveyed in open carts driven by boys from 12 to 16 years of age ; and that the mails were thus ‘ an easy prey to the gangs of villains who infest every road leading into Dublin.’ Therefore they propose that covered carts shall be built, and ‘ stout resolute men’ employed to drive the carts. The question of the covered carts and the stout resolute men was, however, superseded by the mail-coach system, which was then on the eve of adoption.

“ At this time the bags were carried to Cork, Belfast, Limerick, and Waterford six days a week ; and three days a week to Galway, Wexford, Derry, and Enniskillen. There were three posts also to Ennis, which was the only town in the county Clare, except the village of Six-mile-bridge, which had any post at all. There were three in the week to Tralee, and three to Killarney ; but for these last the Government refused to pay anything. The Postmaster had a salary of £3, but the mail was carried by foot messengers, who were maintained at the cost of the inhabitants, and of the news-printers in Cork.

“ Carrick-on-Shannon was the only town in County Leitrim receiving a mail, and this it did twice a week. Now it has two every day. The county of Mayo was penetrated twice a week only, a post-rider going as far as Castlebar, and a foot messenger thence at Newport, and another to Killala. There was no office at Westport, and none at the now flourishing town of Ballina. Except at the county town, there was no Post Office in the whole county of Sligo ; and there were but sixteen in the province of Connaught.

“ The great northern line of posts was called the Dublin and Donaghadee road, on which Belfast was situated. Donaghadee, as the port for Scotland, was a place of considerable importance. It has now fallen into a very sere and yellow leaf ; hopes, however, are entertained of its revival.

“ There were three post towns in County Derry—Derry, Coleraine, and Magherafelt ; the two latter of which were served twice a week only. In the county of Donegal also there were three offices—Ballyshannon served three times a week, and Raphoe and Letterkenny, twice. No other trace, however, of a post to the town of Donegal can be found than that of the foot messenger, whose wages of £8, paid regularly to a clerk in Dublin, the Secretary had mentioned a few years previously as one of the awkward circumstances to be disposed of. Could the full history of that allowance for a foot post through the mountains of County Donegal be obtained, it would be very interesting. The distance was 30 miles ; the road, a mountain track. How did the clerk in Dublin obtain recognised permission to pocket that one special allowance of £8 per annum, and leave the town of Donegal steeped in Cimmerian darkness ?

“ In 1790 the mail-coach system was introduced into Ireland. It was at first confined to the Cork and Belfast roads, and the two contracts were limited to seven years. In the official report from the Postmaster-General, recommending the measure, it was stated that Messrs. Greer and Anderson, of Newry, would run mail coaches through to Belfast for the sum paid for the mail rides. It appears that Mr. Anderson’s name was inserted for some purpose now hardly intelligible, as there was no such, person concerned in it. The offer, however, was accepted, and Mr. Greer and his son have been employed in the service on the same road from that date up to the present moment The same report includes a tender for the Cork line also. The mileage allowance for the road to Belfast was £475 for 60 Irish miles ; that for the Cork road £1478, the distance being 126 miles—thus the whole cost was under £2000.

“ In recommending the measure, the Postmaster-General pointed out that this sum might be well expended, and with due regard to economy ; as any apparent increase of cost would be more than made up by diminution in the solicitors’ bills for prosecuting felons in cases of mail robberies ! And in support of this surmise it was urged that not a single attempt to rob the mails had occurred in England since the establishment there of the mail coaches. The saving, however, and the expected halcyon period of security did not arrive in Ireland. The mail coaches, though occasionally accompanied by four mail guards, were robbed as frequently as the less aspiring riding posts.

“ The mail-coach system gradually spread itself over the main lines of the Irish roads ; and it appears that it did so quite as quickly as the roads were ready to receive the coaches. Up to 1829 the practice prevailed of allowing to the Postmaster a sum for carrying the branch mails through the country ; a duty which was done in a very slow and slovenly way. The Postmasters were not themselves horse-owners, and consequently they let out the service to any one who would do it at the cheapest possible rate, without much regard to the manner in which it was performed. The Surveyors, it appears, had no control over the cross mails, and there was no other check than such as might exist at the head office.

“ In 1829, and for many years previously, the payment for this work was 5d. the double Irish mile. The average is still much the same, being 2d. the single English mile, which is within a small fraction equal to 5d. the double Irish mile. But though the article is no cheaper, it is much better. The old system of getting the cross mails carried by any animal that the conscience of the local Postmaster thought good enough for such a service does not, however, appear to have been interfered with by the authorities, but to have been gradually amended by the commercial enterprise of a foreigner.”

Considering internal communication by stage coaches as a strong proof of national prosperity, Wakefield, in his *Account of Ireland* in 1812 gives a list of about twenty-two different coaches then running in various parts of Ireland, many having the significant addition “ with double guard.” He shows that all the coaches (except a few mail coaches) started from the capital, that there were miles of country across which no post ever went, that there was no coach, except the mail, in the district from Boyle to Limerick, while east of Cork there was no stage the whole way to Wexford but the Waterford Mail and one mail “ dilly.” This he adds was not for want of towns, for they were numerous, nor for want of population, for it was abundant, but from, want of trade. Bad as this state of matters was, Wakefield adds, “ If we compare the present state of internal communication with what it was twenty years ago, we shall find that great improvement has taken place.”

If Ireland was not distinguished for her mail coaches, there arose, shortly after the time of which Wakefield wrote, that system of travelling cars which did so much to develope communications in the southern and western parts of that country. These benefits she owed to the “ commercial enterprise of a foreigner”—namely, to Charles Bianconi, an Italian who died in 1875, and whose life and labours deserve an honoured place in the history of travelling in Ireland.

Early Years of Charles Bianconi.

Charles Bianconi was born at Tregola, a small village near Milan, on 27th September 1788, from which place he was soon removed to the care of his paternal grandmother at Caglio. On attaining his fifteenth year, at which time he had learned little more in the way of education than the art of reading, his father entered into an arrangement with a person named Andrea Faroni to take the lad to England and instruct him in the trade of selling prints, barometers, and looking-glasses. The object of this exile is understood to have been a desire to avoid the conscription, for which Bianconi’s son was liable to be drawn. In the event of his not liking that occupation he was to be placed under the care of Colnaghi, of London, who afterwards became famous as a printseller, and who was a friend of the elder Bianconi, being a native of the same part of Italy. Faroni, instead of remaining in London, proceeded at once to Dublin with his apprentice and another Italian lad, also put under his care, and opened a small shop in Temple Bar. This was in 1802. Bianconi could not speak one word of English, and therefore laboured under special difficulties in the prosecution of his vocation. The appeal “ Buy ! buy !” was easily acquired ; but for some time he could only indicate the price of his wares by holding up as many fingers as there were pence to be paid for the inexpensive articles which he vended. On the termination of his apprenticeship of eighteen months young Bianconi had not only learned so much of his trade, but also so much of the country and how and where business could be done, that he determined to set up for himself. He procured a travelling case and stocked it with coloured prints and other pictures, unmounted and in small frames. With this stock-in-trade he set out, often walking 20 to 30 miles a day, with a pack-age weighing nearly a hundred pounds. His natural courtesy and politeness procured for the Italian lad much consideration, and he found no difficulty in procuring purchasers for his goods. It appears that the labour thus gone through in the prosecution of his business sug-

gested to the mind of Bianconi the desirability of some means of conveyance being provided for the accommodation of the poorer classes. After spending two years as an itinerant dealer, he settled in Carrick-on-Suir in 1806 as printseller, carver, and gilder. His business not being very successful, in the following year he removed to Waterford, where, again, though he worked incessantly, his labours were not rewarded with success. In 1809 he transferred his business to Clonmel, where in addition to his ordinary trade he commenced buying up guineas from the country people. This caused a rumour to be circulated that Bianconi was buying up gold for the purpose of secretly sending it to Bonaparte, but this only caused the people to enter into the business more cheerfully on account of their sympathies with Napoleon. Of course the transaction was purely a business one on the part of the Italian, who was able to sell the guineas at a handsome profit to the bank.

Origin of the Car System.

" We have thus rapidly traced Bianconi's career for thirteen years, and left him at last a prosperous tradesman. It was only then that he was able to realise what he had so often cogitated in his mind. " Coming to Dublin eighty years ago as a poor Italian image boy," says an obituary notice of this remarkable man, " he travelled far and near, through roads both rough and smooth, and thus gained an intimate knowledge of every part of Ireland. Often weary and footsore with his own travels, he thought there were many like him who were unable to hire a whole conveyance, but who would join with him in hiring a vehicle periodically, until they had money enough saved to enter upon another speculation. Hence arose Biancoin's car system, which did more to open up this country to traffic and pleasure tourists than can now be readily conceived."

From an excellent sketch of Bianconi's life by Mr. Smiles, published in *Good Words* while the subject of the sketch was yet alive, many interesting particulars are to be gleaned. We are there informed that on being asked, when well advanced in life, how it was he first thought of starting his car establishment, he replied, " It grew out of my back," while the time to think over the details and possibilities of the scheme was found by him in want of knowledge of the language. This was Bianconi's own explanation when examined before the Committee on Postal Reform in 1838—from which sprang the Penny Post—and to whom, in answer to the question by Mr. Wallace, " What induced you to commence the car establishment ?" Mr. Bianconi stated, " I did so from what I saw after coming to this country of the necessity of such cars, inasmuch as there was no middle mode of conveyance, nothing to fill up the vacuum that existed between those who were obliged to walk and those who posted or rode. My want of knowledge of the language gave me plenty of time for deliberation, and in proportion as I grew up with the knowledge of the language and the localities, this vacuum pressed very heavily upon my mind, till at last I hit upon the idea of running jaunting cars, and for that purpose I commenced running one between Clonmel and Cahir."

By the year 1815 Mr. Bianconi had amassed considerable property by his trading in Clonmel, and he then resolved to realise his long-remembered scheme of providing cheap accommodation for the masses of the people. His first venture, as stated in the reply above quoted, was an ordinary jaunting car drawn by one horse and carrying six passengers, which plied between Clonmel and Cahir, and which made its first trip on 5th July 1815. Almost from the commencement the car became a great success, and then the line was extended to Tipperary and Limerick, while another car was placed on the road between Clonmel, Cashel, and Thurles. As a proof of Mr. Bianconi's perseverance, it may be mentioned that the Thurles car ran for two weeks without a passenger ; but he was not to be daunted, and few could be found to enter into competition with the energetic foreigner. A year later, in 1816, the car system was extended to Waterford, and this city became one of the centres of operations. In

1818 cars were placed on the road between New Ross, Wexford, and Enniscorthy ; then followed conveyances reaching Dungarvan, Waterford, Kilkenny, Cork, Limerick, Tralee, and Cahirciveen.

" People did not know," says Mr. Smiles, " what to make of Bianconi's car when it was first started. There were of course the usual prophets of disaster, who decided that it would never do ; many people thought that nobody would pay eighteen pence for going to Cahir by car, when they could walk there for nothing ! There were others who thought that Biancoui should have stuck to his shop, as there was no connection between picture-dealing and car-driving." His determination, in the case of the Thurles car, was rewarded by seeing in the course of a few years four large and well-patronised cars running daily on that line of road. In extending his scheme, Bianconi had to give up his original business, but not until the cars increased so in popularity and success as to engross his whole time. " The cars soon became very popular. Everybody was under obligations to them. They greatly promoted the improvement of the country ; people could go to market and buy or sell their goods more advantageously. They made it cheaper for them to ride than to walk. They brought the whole people of the country so much nearer to each other. They virtually opened up about seven-tenths of Ireland to civilisation and commerce, and among other advantages they opened markets for the fresh fish caught by the fishermen of Galway, Clifden, Westport, and other places, enabling them to be sold throughout the country on the day they were caught. They also opened the magnificent scenery of Ireland to tourists, and enabled them to visit Bantry Bay, Killarney, and the wilds of Connemara, in safety, all the year round." Sir. Smiles in those words admirably sums up the benefits which the cars of Charles Bianconi conferred on Ireland in their earlier days.

Extent and Growth of the Cars.

To accommodate the growth of traffic, however, Bianconi was constrained to introduce larger vehicles and to increase the number of horses. When the number of passengers was increased to eight, two horses were allowed, and eventually the two-hone car was enlarged to carry ten. Then followed a four-wheeled car, to which three horses were attached, carrying six passengers on each side, and subsequently the car was enlarged, and a fourth horse added, till the total number of passengers carried was increased to eighteen, including the driver.

As regards the connection of Mr. Bianconi with the postal system, by which his conveyances became to a large extent the mail coaches as well as the stage coaches of Ireland, Mr. Trollope, in the paper already quoted, gives the following particulars : —

" In 1815, Mr. Bianconi first carried his Majesty's mails in Ireland ; but he did so for many years without any contract. He commenced in the county Tipperary, between Clonmel and Cahir ; and he then made his own bargain with the Postmaster, as he did for many subsequent years. The Postmaster usually retained one moiety of the sum allowed, as his own perquisite, and Mr. Bianconi performed the work for the remainder. What Mr. Bianconi received was thus very small ; and he could not and would not therefore run at any hours inconvenient to his passenger traffic, or faster than was convenient to him.

" From 1830, when the English and Irish offices were amalgamated under the Duke of Richmond, the public, as Mr. Bianconi says, got something like fair play ; and he and others were allowed to carry the mails by direct contract with the Post Office.

" From that time till 1848, Mr. Bianconi continued to increase his establishment ; and in the latter year he had 1400 horses, and daily covered 3800 miles. The opening of railways

has, however, so greatly interfered with this traffic, as to expel his cars from all the main lines. But Mr. Bianconi has met the changes of the times in a resolute spirit He has always been ready at a moment's notice to move his horses, cars, and men to any district, however remote, where any chance of business might show itself ; and now, in the winter of 1856-1857, when nearly the whole of that district in which he was working ten years since has been occupied by railways, he still covers 2250 miles, and is the owner of about 1000 horses working in the four provinces, from the town of Wexford in the south-east, to the mountains of Donegal in the north-west

" Mr. Bianconi has done the State good service. By birth he is, as is well known, an Italian, but he is now naturalised, and England as well as Ireland should be ready to acknowledge his merits. It may perhaps be said that no living man has worked more than he has for the benefit of the sister kingdom."

The cars were so arranged that intercommunication between distant places was maintained with regularity and at a low price—about a penny farthing per mile. Altogether it is stated that the promoter had a hundred cars at work, giving employment to thirteen hundred horses, and performing in all journeys amounting to about one and a quarter million miles annually. Bianconi conducted his establishment upon such strictly honourable principles as to win golden opinions from all who encountered him. The sobriety and honesty of his drivers was a matter of constant remark, it being his principle to encourage truthfulness by the rule of instant dismissal of any man who was detected in a falsehood. It may be noticed, as characteristic of his system, that no purely passenger cars run on Sundays, the traffic on that day being limited to the cars which carried mails. " Truth, accuracy, punctuality, sobriety, and honesty, being strictly enforced, formed the fundamental principle of the entire management."

In a short speech made at the Social Science meeting in Dublin in 1861 , Mr. Bianconi made special reference to a result from the establishment of his cars similar to what we have observed in reference to public vehicles generally, namely the advantages of personal intercourse and knowledge of different classes it promoted. But Bianconi put it on a singular footing, namely, the fact of passengers having at times to walk up hill when the road was too steep for them to be dragged up on the cars.

" The state of the roads," he said, " was such as to limit the rate of travelling to about seven miles an hour, and the passengers were often obliged to walk up hills. Thus all classes were brought together, and I have felt much pleasure in believing that the intercourse thus created tended to inspire the higher classes with respect and regard for the natural good qualities of the humbler people, which the latter reciprocated by a becoming deference and an anxiety to please and oblige. Such a moral benefit appears to me to be worthy of special notice and congratulation." The Irish car is one of the most thoroughly democratic of all known modes of conveyance, having no " outsides" and " insides" to regard each other with mutual jealousy, no arbitrary divisions into first, second, or third classes, like our iron railways, or anything like the " coloured car," of the United States.

Effect of Railways on the Cars.

With the advent of the railway system in Ireland, everybody but Mr. Bianconi thought his system of conveyances doomed to extinction. It had, however, been his principle to believe there was room enough for all, and he welcomed " the great civilisers of the age," not as rivals who were to destroy him, but as fellow-labourers in the work of improving and developing the country. The result is thus sketched by Mr. Smiles in the articles already quoted—

“ When the railways were acually made and opened, they ran right through the centre of Bianconi’s long-established system of communication ; they broke up his lines, and sent them to the right and left. But though they greatly disturbed him, they did not destroy him. In his enterprising hands the railways merely changed the direction of his cars. He had at first to take about 1000 horses off the road, with 37 vehicles, travelling 2446 miles daily. But he re-modelled his system so as to run his cars between the railway stations and the towns to the right and left of the main lines. He also directed his attention to those parts of Ireland which had not before had the benefit of his conveyance. And in thus still continuing to accommod-ate the public, the number of his horses and carriages again increased until in 1801 he was employing 900 horses travelling over 4000 miles daily, and in 1866, when he resigned his business, he was running only 684 miles below the maximum run of 1845, before the rail-ways had begun to interfere with his traffic.”

In an interview with Mr. Bianconi in 1873, which is detailed by Mr. Smiles, the venerable gentleman said—“ The secret of my success has been promptitude, fair dealing, and good humour. And this I will add, what I have often said before, that I never did a kind action but it was returned to me tenfold. My cars have never received the slightest injury from the people. Though travelling through the country for about sixty years, the people have throughout re-spected the property entrusted to me. They have passed through lonely and unfrequented places, and have never, even in the most disturbed times, been attacked.” That Mr. Bianconi thought was a remarkable testimony to the high moral character of the Irish people ; and certainly the fact that at all times and through the centre of the most disaffected districts, his cars were allowed to proceed, carrying the mails, without molestation, presents a striking contrast to the period Wakefield speaks of, and shows that the Irish, when trusted and treated with good humour and fair dealing, are, if not the “ finest peasantry,” certainly a people who show many excellent traits.

Charles Bianconi, who was naturalised in 1831, and had the honour of being appointed a magistrate and deputy-lieutenant in his adopted country, died at his residence in Ireland on 15th September 1875, within a few days of completing his 88th year. In 1843, Signer Mayer, addressing the British Association at Cork, expressed the pride with which he heard his countryman eulogised, and said the Italians would ever hail him as one whose industry and virtue reflected honour on the country of his birth ; and in the Report of the Irish Railway Commission, Thomas Drummond refers to the enterprise of Bianconi, holding that the results he achieved were the more striking because done in a district which had long been rep-resented as the focus of unreclaimed violence and barbarism, where neither life nor property could be deemed secure.

“ At the Dublin Exhibition of 1863, one of Mr. Bianconi’s compact and inexpensive four-wheel outside cars was shown, than which, says Mr. Hooper, few contrivances are more suitable for conveying a large number of passengers on a minimum weight of carriage.” Though somewhat unsuitable as regards shelter in bad weather, they possessed many advant-ages over the conveyances in London and elsewhere as omni-buses. The weight was kept low, thereby affording safety in case of collision or breakage in any part, and the seats being low were easily accessible for passengers to mount and alight quickly ; if the passengers got wet, they at least had what is of infinite importance to human beings—fresh air. These con-veyances have been copied and used with much success on the temporary railway annually laid down at the National Rifle Association camp at Wimbledon.”

[1] The mail line is now (1877) between Stranraer and Larne.

A Book about Travelling, Past and Present ... (1877)
Author : Croal, Thomas A
Publisher : W.P. Nimmo
Year : 1877
Language : English
Digitizing sponsor : Google
Book from the collections of : University of Michigan
Collection : americana
Source : Internet Archive
http://www.archive.org/details/abookabouttrave00agoog

Edited and uploaded to www.aughty.org
October 10 2011