

# BOOK REVUE

## THIS ANCIENT ROAD

London to Holyhead: a journey through time.

Andrew Hudson

RedDoor £10.99

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Generally our gateway into the past is via monarchs, tyrants, dodgy politicians, archbishops, generals and assorted varieties of toffs, because these are people whose lives have been well documented, which the historian can then exploit to explain and interpret their various motives and achievements. The vast majority have led lives which are unremarked and which have left no record. It is therefore refreshing to find an historian who avoids this traditional path into our history and who seeks to explain our past in a novel and unexpected way.

Andrew Hudson uses as his historical template one of our most ancient roads, the trunk road from Marble Arch in London to Holyhead in Wales, some 250 miles, now known as the A5. An important route because it provided the most direct way to Ireland when it was still part of the United Kingdom. It began life as a Roman road from London to the Welsh border. It is however not certain that the Romans continued with the road through Snowdonia and north Wales, since this section was notorious for its poor quality and dangerous condition, and remained so until the 19th century when Telford was given the task of upgrading this section to make it more stage-coach friendly. It was named Watling Street in the medieval period, a name which it still bears. For the Romans it was part of Iter II in the Antonine Itinerary. Whether they also had a name for it is unknown. Moving through time from the Roman period till the present day Mr Hudson studies the history of the road and its wider impact on our culture.

I found his chapter on turnpikes and stage coaches particularly interesting since it tied in nicely with a talk I had recently put together on the routes across Standedge. The turnpike era has perhaps received a more negative press than it deserves. It was the first time since the Romans that a concerted effort was made to provide a network of roads across the Kingdom fit for purpose, i.e. able to cope with the rapid growth in the transportation of goods as well as the rise of stage-coach services between major cities. The speed of some of these stage-coach journeys, (Huddersfield to London in 24 hours for example, an average speed of 7 miles per hour), suggests that many, if not most turnpike trusts carried out their duties conscientiously. Paintings of stage coaches at this time show the horses galloping at what looks like break-neck speeds, and foreign visitors are full of praise for their travelling experience, especially in comparison with the situation on the continent.

One such foreign visitor was Baron Speck von Sternburg, (the father-in-law of Martha Stocks, born in Holmfirth in 1823 and who, in 1856, would become the second Baroness von Sternburg in Leipzig). Baron Speck travelled to this country several times in the first two decades of the 19th century in his role as wool merchant and kept a detailed travel journal of his experiences. Whilst critical of the high prices for food and accommodation in this country he repeatedly praises the comfort and speed of his many long distance trips by stage coach. In 1803 he travelled from London to Bath and Bristol, then on to Birmingham and Manchester, then over the Pennines to Huddersfield, York and Hull. He wrote in his travel diary:

*“One travels at extraordinary speed in this country (by stage coach). Every few miles fresh horses are provided and the change also takes place at great speed. The draught horses are*

*particularly strong and readily available. Stops are made from time to time where food is immediately available on demand at the inns. The landlord and his staff are always especially polite and obliging. In general the English are honest and seldom seek to take advantage of the foreigner, although sometimes they are a little shy and hesitant...*

*.....from Manchester I went via Delph to Huddersfield and Halifax. This region has many similarities with Wiltshire and Sommersetshire, although less fertile. Everywhere the hills and valleys are covered in cottages where cloth is manufactured. The inhabitants are polite and sincere....I visited Mr. Whitacre's cloth factory in Huddersfield where some 600/700 men are employed in producing the finest woollen cloth with machines starting with the raw wool.....*

Reisetagebücher des Ritters Speck von Sternburg (1776-1856), published Leipzig 2006.

In compiling his history Mr Hudson has brought together material from many different sources, all of which is carefully annotated, so that the individual reader might pursue his own particular line of interest. I would recommend to hand a detailed road map as well as the OS map of Roman Britain. My one small criticism concerns the quality of some of the pictures used. Presumably to save on production costs the picture are not printed on the usual glossy photo paper, but on the same page as used for the text, and some lack clarity. Otherwise I found this a very enjoyable and highly educational read from an unusual viewpoint. Recommended!



David Cockman for HDAS October 2017