

3.1.1.51a1 THE STONEY CROSS POST OFFICE MYSTERY.

Stoney Cross today consists of a handful of dwellings, a filling station, a Travel Lodge hotel, and a Little Chef restaurant; all alongside the modern A31 road between Ringwood and Cadnam, near Southampton. There is no post Office now, but there was one in the nineteenth century, despite there being no village to utilise it. In times past the main road from Southampton to Ringwood and all points west, ran across virgin heathland, and although there may have been a rough track which crossed the road at this point, there was no settlement as such.



Stoney Cross, as is now

Henry Compton, who built Minstead Manor House in 1719, known in his lifetime as the 'Gentleman Jockey', was probably responsible for organising the horse races known to have been run at Stoney Cross around that time. Races held there in later times, attracted extremely wealthy patrons, who wagered considerable sums on the outcome. Perhaps the Compton Arms was initially built not so much as an Inn to serve passing trade on the main road, but as accommodation for the racegoers. However, by the end of the century it was a fully fledged inn, and an advertisement in the Salisbury and Winchester Journal for Monday 20th. May 1799, indicates that Richard Spickernell, the innkeeper, offered every convenience for travellers on the road. There were at this time a couple of small dwelling houses sited close by, perhaps foresters cottages, or possibly staff accommodation for the Compton Arms. There was still no call for a post office to be sited here.

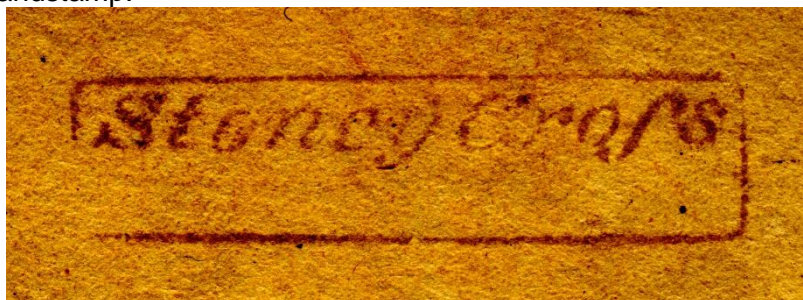
NEW FOREST,
 Eleven miles from Southampton, nine from Romsey, and nine
 from Ringwood.

RICHARD SPICKERNELL respectfully in-
 forms his Friends and the Public in general, that he has
 for hire **NEAT POST CHAISES** and **ABLE HORSES**,
 with every other accommodation necessary for Travellers.
 Those Gentlemen who please to honour him with their fa-
 vours will be punctually and gratefully attended.
 Relays will be always kept in readiness. [121]

1799 - Richard Spickernell advert

In the early eighteenth century, mail was carried across country by 'post boys', they were mounted on horseback, and although called boys, they could be of any age from mid teens to late sixties. However, by the later part of the century, mail coaches were in use on many of the major roads, and these needed servicing at regular intervals. A mail coach would normally be pulled by four horses, and they could maintain an average speed of 5 to 8 miles an hour for about twenty miles, at which point the horses were exhausted and needed to be changed for a team of fresh horses. Post offices were usually sited close to the establishments where mail coach horses were changed, and the closest of these to Stoney Cross on this road were at Southampton, Romsey and Ringwood, there was no call for the mail coach to change horses at Stoney Cross. There should never have been a Post Office at Stoney Cross. Even in the nineteenth century they were sited in reasonably large settlements or towns in order to make them financially viable, and not in the middle of nowhere.

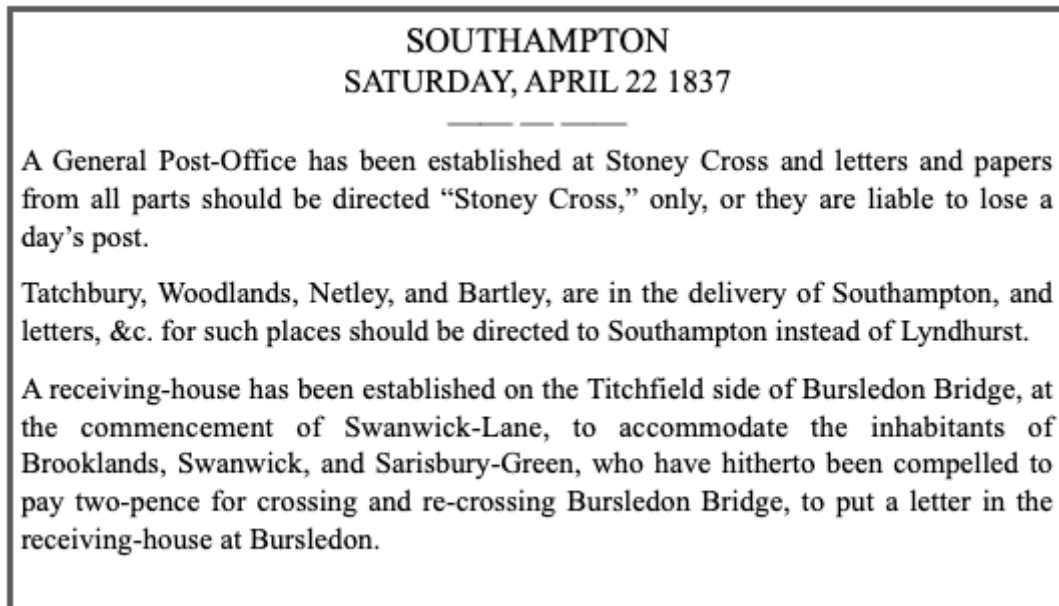
Some villages had what was termed a letter Receiving House, where local letters could be left for collection by a Post Office messenger, or Letter Carrier. The Letter Carrier would carry them back to his 'home' Post Office, for collection by the mail coach. Receiving Houses were usually the premises of a shopkeeper or trader in the village, who was known as the Receiver of Letters, and who was paid a retainer by the Post Office to take in the letters and keep them safe until the Letter Carrier arrived. By the nineteenth century the Receiver of Letters would have been issued with a circular hand stamp with which to mark the letters left with him for collection. That stamp image consisted of a circle, with the settlement name curved around within the outer ring, there would be no date recorded on it. Stoney Cross never had a Receiving House in the official sense, and therefore no receiving house handstamp.



colour enhanced Stoney Cross Penny Post mark

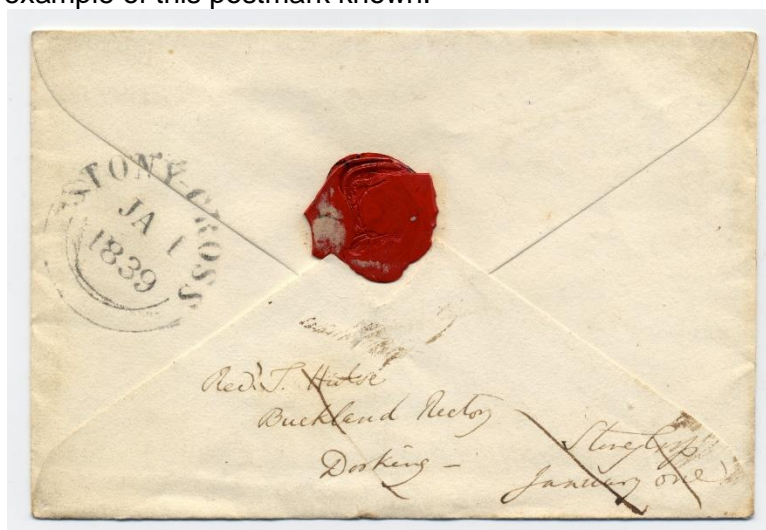
What Stoney Cross did have was a Penny Post hand stamp, which is most unusual. Villages, and even towns could be designated as penny post areas, and there are sixty three of them in Hampshire. With these, special charging arrangements were made, usually at the request of the local populace, and special hand stamps were issued. When applied to the letter, the image appears as a rectangular box with two lines of text, the settlement name on the upper line and the words 'Penny Post', below. Stoney Cross was issued with one of these, issued in 1830, but with the words 'Penny Post' removed, which is unique. Surviving examples of this mark are exceedingly rare, and less than five are thought

to exist. Penny Post status could only be sought by, and was only given to large settlements, towns and cities, who could assure the post Office of a healthy profit for the privileges it brought the local community. Stoney Cross, consisting of just the Compton Arms and a couple of associated dwellings, should never have been able achieve Penny Post status.



Post Office established, 1837 press cutting

In 1838, a newspaper advertisement, inserted by the Post Office, indicated that Stoney Cross had qualified as an official Post Office. This was just as puzzling as it being granted Penny Post status. Postal historians assumed that an appropriate hand stamp was made, since there is an imprint of it in the GPO archives in London, but since no example of the mark on a letter had ever been found, it was believed that the hand stamp was never issued. These circular 'Town' hand stamps show the settlement name, and sometimes the county, set around within the circle and with the date of posting on horizontal lines within. However, about six years ago a letter bearing this Stoney Cross circular handstamp, dated January 1839 was found, used on a letter from Stoney Cross to the Rev. Thomas Hulse at Buckland Rectory, Dorking. The letter is signed and dated on the front by Charles Compton. This is still the only example of this postmark known.



Stoney Cross postmark 1839

Post Offices in the mid nineteenth century, other than those in major towns and cities, were very like Receiving Houses, often sited in a shop, but with the shop keeper having the title of Deputy Postmaster, although the word 'Deputy' was usually dropped except in official Post Office communications. These Postmasters were in effect civil servants, and as such were pillars of the local society. They might have Post Office staff working for them in their premises, they organised the local mail collections and deliveries, wrote on each letter the postage to be charged on delivery (before mid 1840), sold postage stamps (after mid 1840), sorted the mail and bagged it up ready for collection by the mail coach. Because of their status as civil servants, each Postmaster was obliged to pledge a bond of money to the Post Office, often between one and five hundred pounds, which was payable should they be dismissed for bad conduct.

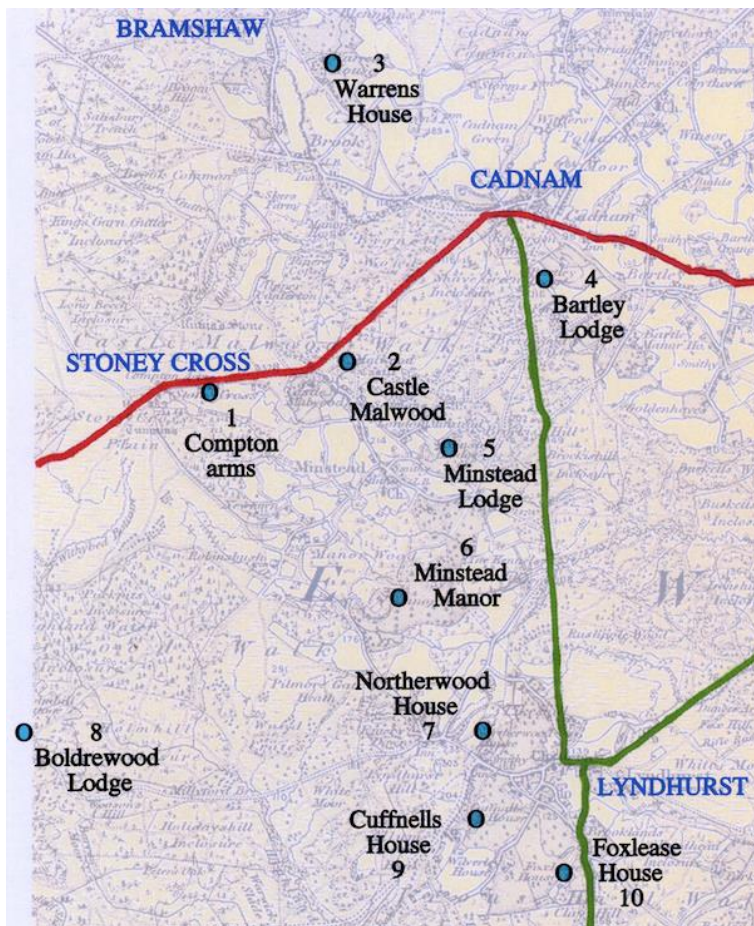
The British Post Office Appointment Book for 1837, has an entry for Stoney Cross (shown below), recording that the postmaster was officially appointed, and the office established on April 27th of that year.

Stoney Cross	John Walker	27	Innkeeper	Office established
200				

The 1837 Appointment Book entry shows that John Walker's appointment was on the 27th day of April, that he was an innkeeper, and that Stoney Cross post office was established on that day. The final figure records that he had pledged a bond to the Post Office for the sum of £200, which he was obliged to pay should he be dismissed for any reason whatsoever.

There is still the question of why was a post office ever established at Stoney Cross, a place apparently set in the wilderness. The answer to this question may just may lie with the high status of the individuals living in secluded areas around Stoney Cross.

On the map shown below, the locations of notable houses in the area are each marked, together with the name of the property, and following the map is a gazetteer of the houses and their owners. Stoney Cross was also on the mail coach route from London to Poole through Southampton (marked red on the map), and as the April 1837 press cutting on page 2 points out, letters to Stoney Cross, but not marked so, could be a day late, presumably because they would go via Southampton. It was probably worthwhile therefore, for individuals, even as far as Lyndhurst, to have a servant take and collect their mail from Stoney Cross post office, rather than use the receiving house in Lyndhurst itself. This was on a cross road, and not as well served by the mail coaches.



Map of nearby estates

To illustrate the use of status to influence the seemingly inflexible rules of the Royal Mail, the case of Mr. J.B. Evans Esq. who bought the Broxmore Park Estate near Romsey in the early nineteenth century can be cited. He lived beyond the reach of the foot postman who walked out from Romsey to collect and deliver letters, but successfully petitioned the Postmaster General to extend the foot post route so that it might take in Broxmore. The Post Office were reluctant to do this at first because of the excessive extra cost, but having it pointed out that he had some influential connections, and that his high volume of mail would exceed their extra expense handsomely, the adjustments were made. As yet, the writer has not seen a single letter to or from Mr. Evans during his residence at Broxmore Park, and the Post Office probably lost money on this extension.

It seems therefore, that high social status carried weight with the Post Office, and it may be that the following individuals and their friends, who included Royalty, would have been sufficient to bring about a rise in status for Stoney Cross from receiving house, to post office.

A GAZETTEER, with references, of NEARBY ESTATES, HOUSES AND THEIR OWNERS

1 COMPTON ARMS.

- 1799 RICHARD SPICKERNELL, hires 'neat post chaises' and 'able horses' etc. for travellers. 11 miles from Southampton, 9 from Romsey, 9 from Ringwood. (Salisbury and Winchester Journal, Monday 20 May 1799).
- 1859 **Compton Arms Inn and Post Office**, HENRY ROGERS, Stoney Cross. (White's Directory 1859).

2 CASTLE MALWOOD. (also Castle Malwood Cottage, White's Directory 1859).

- 1803 ROBERT DRUMMOND, banker, of Castle Mallwood (sic). (Paterson's Roads 1803), fought at Culloden, died 1804.
- ? House on the site between 1802 and 1840, it became property of Col., later LT. GENERAL THOMAS WILLIAM ROBBINS J.P. He served under Wellington and was wounded at Waterloo in 1815. ROBBINS and died at the house in 1892.
- Became General
- 1826 GEN. WYNYARD Castle Mallwood (sic) Cottage, (1826 Paterson's Roads).
- 1892-rebuilt. by CHARLES HILL, retired tea planter (The Victoria History of the Counties of England, (which is usually abbreviated to VCH), volume 4, 1911, Hampshire series)
- of the
- WWII house used for refugee children under management of Dr. Barnardo's Homes.

3 WARRENS

- 1798 Warrens estate was probably named after the WARREN family who held it from early C17th to 1746, when it was sold to SAMUEL YOUNG of Morecroft, near Romsey. GEORGE EYRE purchased
- Warrens in 1798 and built a large mansion, it became, (VCH vol. 4, 1911), the seat of his grandson GEORGE EDWARD BRISCOE EYRE.
- 1859 GEORGE EDWARD EYRE Esq. (White's Directory 1859).

4 BARTLEY LODGE

- 1798 Major Edward Gilbert inherited the house from his father, also named Edward, who built it in 1770. Gilbert spent little time there and so it was leased to Sir Charles Lyell, geologist and close friend of Charles Darwin. There was a break of one year (1837), when the Shore family leased it,

5 MINSTEAD LODGE.

- 1859 WILLIAM RT. (Robert ?) PRESTON, (White's Directory 1859).
? At one time home to successive members of PRESTON family, followed by the DUNCAN family. DR. DUNCAN was physician to QUEEN VICTORIA.
One daughter married JOHN COMPTON Rector of Minstead Church.

6 MINSTEAD MANOR HOUSE.

- 1719 HENRY COMPTON, the 'Gentleman Jockey', built the house.
- 1799 CHARLES A. COMPTON the first family member to be Rector of Minstead Church.
- late C18th. Sir JOHN COMPTON'S residence, (VCH 1911).
- 1802 JOHN COMPTON, Sheriff of the County of Hampshire, enlarged it.
- 1803 J COMPTON Esq., (Paterson's Roads 1803).
- 1833 March 23, Letter from Ann Sturges Bourne to her best friend MARIANNE DYSON, who was staying at Minstead Manor House shortly after the death of her mother. Ann says Marianne's visits will be more reposing than Southampton as 'all responsibility will be off your mind and all anxiety about your father's amusements, engagements and visitors,' and she 'will have 2 or 3 dull clergymen at dinner, less tiring than Southampton society'. Ann sends greetings to the Compton family. Ann Sturges Bourne correspondence - Hampshire Record Office (HRO 9M55/F11/11).
- brother March 24, Letter from MARIANNE DYSON, staying at Minstead Manor House, to Ann Sturges Bourne, 'Mr. WILLIAM STANLEY, the bride's Manordined at Minstead today', she 'wishes that people there [at the would be House Stoney Cross] had more Sunday-like ways, which been at all 'frighted' at satisfying in such a large family'. Marianne has not the Manor House at Stoney Cross" Ann Sturges Bourne correspondence - (HRO 9M55/F38/8).
- 1842-1898 Canon JOHN COMPTON Rector of Minstead ch.
- 1859 HENRY COMBE COMPTON, (White's Directory 1859).
- 1928 CHARLES HENRY COMPTON, Rector of Minstead ch.
- 1928-1932 JOHN COMPTON.
- WWII Royal Army Service Corps billeted here, it became so dilapidated it had to be pulled down. New Manor house built post war.

7 NORTHERWOOD HOUSE / MOUNT ROYAL.

- 1803 MRS. MAUD. About a mile from Lyndhurst, also known as Mount Royal (so named by the King when at Lyndhurst), formerly Northerwood.
(Paterson's Roads 1803)
- 1859 ALEXANDER HUGH L. POPHAM Esq. (White's Directory 1859).
- 1911 Residence of Col. FENWICK BULMER de SALES La TERRIERE JP.
(VCH 1911)

8 BOLDREWOOD LODGE.

- 1803 'Three miles beyond Castle Malwood on left', residence of the DUKE OF GLOUCESTER. (Patterson's Roads 1803). see also Duke of Gloucester at King's House, Lyndhurst.
- 1822 LORD STEWART. (Patterson's Roads 1822).
- 1826 '3 miles beyond Stoney Cross', residence of the DOWAGER MARCHIONESS of LONDONDERRY. (Paterson's Roads 1826).

9 CUFFNELLS

- 1803 GEORGE ROSE M.P. 'The king and Royal Family were several days here in June 1801'. (Paterson's Roads 1803)
- 1811 Home of GEORGE ROSE MP., friend of KING GEORGE III, who was a frequent visitor. (VCH 1911)
- 1859 JOHNATHAN HARGREAVES Esq. (White's Directory 1859).

10 FOXLEASE

- formerly COX LEYES (1604). Late C18th house. (VCH 1911)
- 1859 Mrs. POWELL & MARTIN & HENRY BUCKWORTT. (White's Directory 1859).

LYNDHURST Other notable residents.

- 1859 Shrubs Hill. Admiral ROBERT AITCHISON. (White's Directory 1859).
- 1859 Holmfield. Rear Admiral SIR CHARLES BURRARD.
(White's Directory 1859).

It is entirely plausible that the social standing of the notables listed above, was quite sufficient for the Post Office to raise Stoney Cross to full Post Office status.

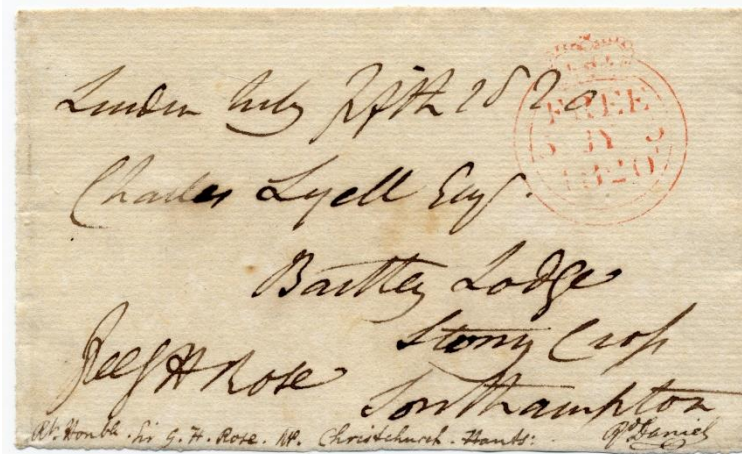
SIGNED FREE LETTER FRONTS

Illustrating mail inward and out bound from the Stoney Cross area.

Members of Parliament, Senior members of the Clergy, and some senior members of Government departments, had, until mid 1840, the privilege of free postage, or franking, on a certain number of letters concerning their official business. This was widely abused, and so many attempts were made to stop the practice, the first real attempt was in 1650 and many more attempts followed. Between 1705 and 1840 there were eleven separate Acts of Parliament, aimed mainly at MPs who were the worst offenders.

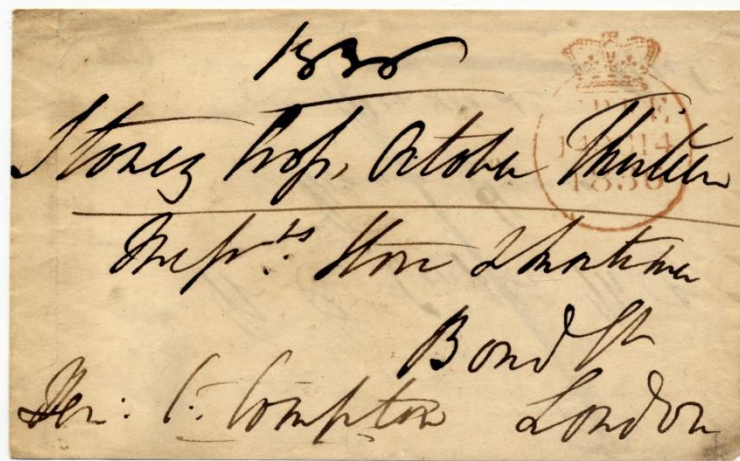
The last of these Acts instructed the writer to sign the front of the letter, and to write above the address the name of the place where the letter was posted, together with the date of posting. This had very little positive impact on reducing the amount of fraud, but it does give modern postal historians some extra useful material with which to work.

Following, are some images of 'Free Franks' as they are called, which relate to Stoney Cross.



1820 George Rose free front

Signed: George Rose MP. (for Christchurch),
posted in London to Charles Lyell (later Sir Charles), geologist, at Bartley Lodge, July 5th. 1820.



1836 H.C. Compton

August 14th 1836

signed: Henry Combe Compton, MP. (for South Hampshire), posted at Stoney Cross.

to Messrs.&....., Bow Street, London.



The Compton Arms in the 1930s

STONEY CROSS Postscript

STAMFORD MERCURY
Friday 28 April 1843

Mail Coach Accident.

On Saturday morning the Exeter mail was overturned near Stoney Cross: the leaders shyed (sic) away at a cart which had upset, and ran up a steep bank. Cherry, the coachman, falling underneath, was killed on the spot: the guard and passengers, eight in number, escaped unhurt. Cherry has left a widow and 6 children.

ILLUSTRATED LONDON NEWS
Saturday 6 May 1843

Mail Coach Accident.

The subscription which has been set on foot in Southampton and its surrounding neighbourhood, for the benefit of the widow and six orphan children of Cherry, the coachman, who was killed by the upsetting of the Exeter mail on the night of the 21st ult., at Stoney Cross, on its way to Southampton, already amounts to above £700.

Transcript of April 1843 press cutting

Transcript of May 1843 press cutting

£1 in 1840 is equivalent in purchasing power to about **£102.54** in **2020**

The coachman, William Cherry (aged about 37), lived in Dorchester with his wife and children. An inquest held in Winchester on April 29th, undertaken by a Mr. Todd, found that William 'Died by visitation of God at Stoney Cross, in the Parish of Minstead'. William is buried in Holy Trinity church, Dorchester. His widow, Mary, later returned with her children to her home town of Walsall in Staffordshire.

The mail coach, together with its driver were contracted to the Post Office by a private firm, who was responsible for the cleaning and maintenance of the coach, the hire of horses, and the payment and welfare of the driver: the guard, however, was a Post Office employee.

Mail coach drivers who were injured or killed in service, may have received varying amounts of financial help from the Company they worked for, whilst mail coach guards would normally have all their medical bills paid for, and should he be killed, a lump sum of money or a pension for life would be given to the widow. The pension would cease, however, if she married again.

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Roger Harris 2020

