

ROAD TRANSPORT BEFORE THE RAILWAYS

RUSSELL'S LONDON FLYING WAGGONS

DORIAN GERHOLD



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This book examines the road haulage trade in England when it depended on horses and waggons, chiefly through the letters and papers of one of the largest firms which operated between the West Country and London in the early nineteenth century. Other documents extend the coverage of the firm's history from the seventeenth century to the mid-nineteenth century, making it possible to examine how road transport changed during the course of two centuries.

The Russell letters are an extraordinary and unique survival, showing in detail how the firm managed to convey up to six tons at a time in all weathers, how dominated it was by the capabilities and needs of the horse, how reliable its services were, who it served and how important it was to a variety of users. Much new information is provided on the gradual spread of the influence of London, the effect of turnpike roads, the nature of the West Country economy and the role of transport in the regional and national economy. In sum the book provides the fullest account yet written of the road haulage industry from the seventeenth century until the coming of the railways.

ROAD TRANSPORT BEFORE THE RAILWAYS

For my parents

And of all inventions whatsoever, of all the machinery made use of, is there any one that can lay claim to much more importance? whose influence is wider spread, or productive of such interesting consequences, as the waggon?

(Daniel Bourn, *A treatise upon wheel-carriages* (1763), pp. 1–2)

Before any railways were made in the west and south west of England we had highly respectable firms as common carriers who went through the district from which we have our goods; in fact they arrived in London almost as regularly as the Mail.

(John Samuel Ewens, London butter factor,
HLRO, 1847 Vol. 15, 28 Apr., pp. 175–6)

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ABBREVIATIONS

C	Records of Chancery in the PRO*
Directories	Lists of carriers in London directories and elsewhere, listed on p. 297 below
DNHAFC	<i>Proceedings of the Dorset Natural History and Antiquarian Field Club</i> (subsequently <i>Dorset Natural History and Archaeological Society</i>)
E	Records of the Exchequer in the PRO*
<i>Econ. Hist. Rev.</i>	<i>Economic History Review</i> , second series
EFP	<i>Exeter Flying Post</i>
EPJ	<i>Exeter Pocket Journal</i>
HLRO	House of Lords Record Office, evidence in committees on Private Bills (Commons evidence unless Lords specified)
IGI	International Genealogical Index
<i>Jnl Tra. Hist.</i>	<i>Journal of Transport History</i>
L1816	Russell letters of 1816 in C112/91
L1817	Russell letters of 1817 in C112/92
L1818	Russell letters of 1818 in C112/93
L1819	Russell letters of 1819 in C112/94
L1820	Russell letters of 1820 in C112/94
L1821	Russell letters of 1821 in C112/94
Pigot	<i>Pigot & Co.'s London & provincial new commercial directory</i> (Manchester, 1822, Manchester and London, 1823, 1830). <i>Pigot & Co.'s royal national and commercial directory and topography</i> (Manchester and London, 1842).
POST	Records in the Post Office Archives
PP	Parliamentary Papers (Commons series unless Lords specified)
PRO	Public Records Office
PROB	Records of the Prerogative Court of Canterbury in the PRO*

RAIL	Records of the British Transport Commission in the PRO*
RO	Record Office or Records Office
SM	<i>Sherborne Mercury</i>
VCH	<i>The Victoria history of the counties of England</i>

*Abbreviation forms part of the PRO document reference.
Place of publication is London unless otherwise stated.

NOTE ON TREATMENT OF DOCUMENTS

Spelling remains as in the letters and punctuation has been added only where essential, but abbreviations have usually been expanded, and the use of capitals and the expression of sums of money and weights have been standardised.

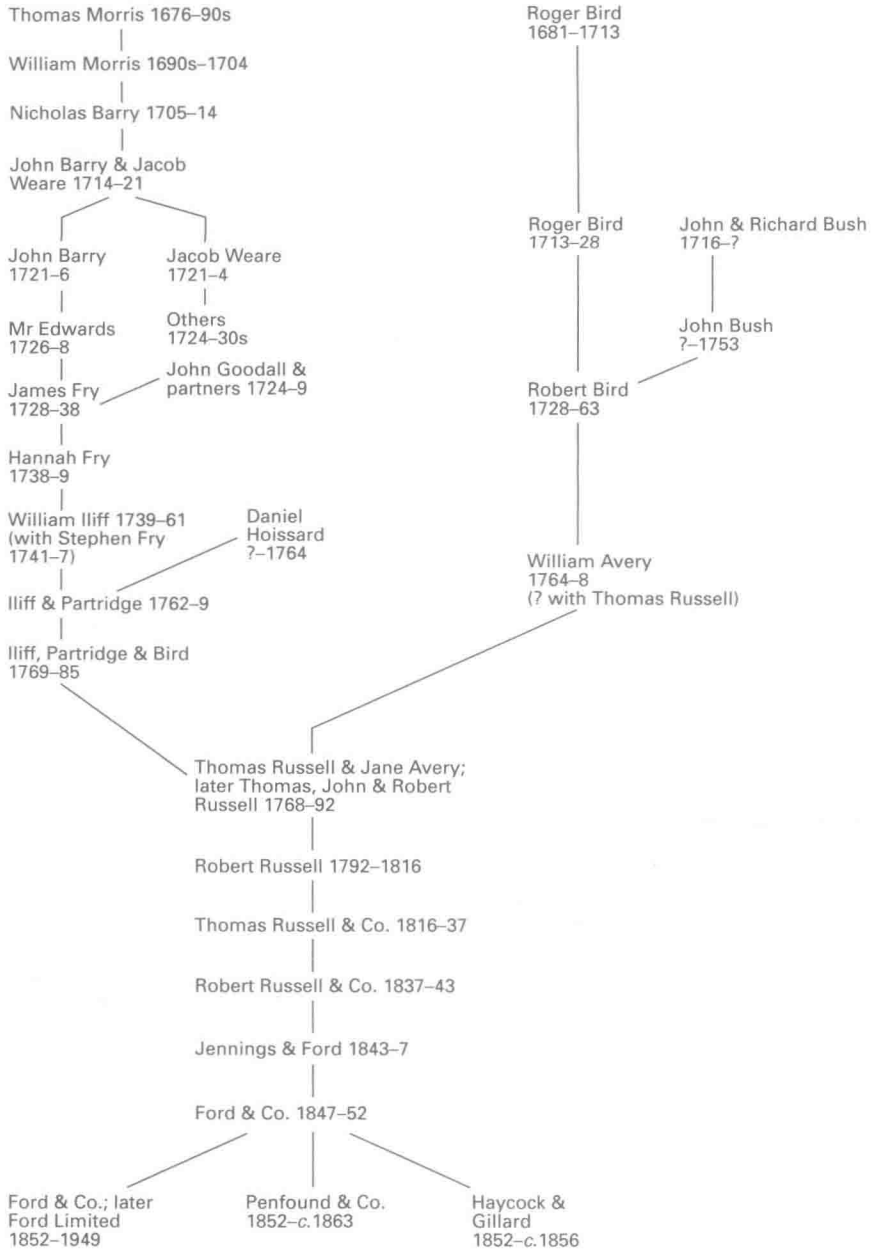


Figure 1 Lineage of the Russells' carrying concern

Note: other connections are likely, but uncertain ones are omitted above, as are short periods of control by executors or widows prior to sale.

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1 INTRODUCTION

It used to be widely believed that Britain's roads until the eve of the railway age were so poor that there was little road traffic. The roads, it was alleged, were 'little more than grassy tracks' which in winter became a sea of mud in which horses, waggons and coaches 'wallowed helplessly' and travellers risked drowning.¹ Important routes, such as the main road from the West Country to London, were believed to have been impassable in winter.² Any idea of regular, timetabled road services was out of the question. Packhorses, of course, could operate over any sort of terrain, but their small loads made them prohibitively expensive for any but the most valuable goods. More efficient conveyance by wheeled vehicles required better, harder road surfaces if they were to get through at all, let alone to carry goods at reasonable cost. Even when, by the late eighteenth century, the roads were sufficiently improved by turnpike trusts to allow widespread stage coach and wagon services, carriage by road was still considered to have been too expensive for most goods to bear the cost. Britain's main form of transport during the Industrial Revolution was therefore believed to have been water transport, along the coast or by inland navigation.³

More recently, historians have recognised that a greater volume of goods was carried by road than these earlier impressions of intolerable road conditions suggested. London, in particular, had a large network of carriers by road as early as 1637, and the number of services multiplied at least three-fold between 1681 and 1838. By the latter date about a thousand waggons entered and left London every week, many of them drawn by teams of six or eight horses and carrying loads of up to six tons.⁴ The London carriers connected with a series of extensive provincial carrier networks, which themselves linked provincial towns and cities with each other and with their hinterlands. At a more local level, there was considerable road traffic even in a bleak and inhospitable area like the Peak District.⁵

Historians also now understand better the advantages of road transport over water transport, and the criteria on which manufacturers and others chose between them.⁶ Compared with coastal vessels, which might be delayed weeks or even months by adverse winds, and inland waterways, which could be obstructed for weeks at a time by ice, water shortages or maintenance work,⁷ road transport was fast and reliable. Therefore it was