

To London on Vanderbilt's Coach

By Jane Farquharson



The origin of one of Benson's well-known but puzzling historic photographs has at last been solved. In the photograph (above) of a stage coach leaving the Crown Inn, we can see that passengers and bystanders are dressed in Edwardian clothes. However, the days when the stage coaches changed horses in Benson ended in the 1830s when the railway came to Cholsey.

Miss Champion, who taught at Benson School in the 1940s, wrote, "In the early 20th century, the main road ran through the centre of the village to the Crown crossroads, down the Old London Road, across what is now the airfield and up the steep hill known as Beggar Bush Hill. This was the route taken by Vanderbilt's stage coaches which passed through Benson on their way from Birmingham to London." But who was Vanderbilt?

Mr Alfred Vanderbilt, an American millionaire, came to England in 1908, bringing with him some eighty of his horses in order to re-create the atmosphere of the old coaching days in England before the railways took away much of the trade. Forty horses were needed for each journey, with fifteen kept in reserve. On 4th May 1908, he made a trial run of the journey from London to Brighton in a coach named "Meteor" which he drove himself. He then set up regular stage coach services carrying passengers three times a week from London to Brighton and back in his coach called the "Venture". He told an American newspaper, "*Coaching is suffering from a slump at present but I see no reason why four-in-hand driving should not pick up again. The "Venture" does the journey throughout the season wet or fine.*"

He also ran services from London to Birmingham via Oxford, stopping at Benson, where it is probable that the horses were changed just as they had been a century earlier. Vanderbilt enjoyed driving his own coach on this route.

The photograph (below) shows Vanderbilt's "Venture" leaving London for Brighton. The coach and its painted panels look very similar to those of the coach pictured in Benson High Street.



Alfred Vanderbilt, a hero of coaching history, died a century ago on the Lusitania. His memorial on the side of the A24 near Dorking reads, *"In Memory of Alfred Gwynne Vanderbilt, a gallant gentleman and a fine sportsman who perished in the Lusitania May 7th 1915. This stone is erected on his favourite road by a few of his British coaching friends and admirers"*
