

COACHING Christmases



IT seems a pity to shatter any fond illusions at this season of cheer, goodwill and shells, but the myth of jovial coach journeys in the depths of an English winter belonged only in the imagination of the more sentimental Victorian authors. Unfortunately, Charles Dickens did much to foster the deception—but much may be forgiven him.

Stated bluntly, early nineteenth century coach travel could only be described as an endurance test that might well have blanched the cheeks of any commando. So far from inducing any joviality in the breasts of the intrepid passengers, the rigours of the journey usually reduced them to a state of surly hostility against each other and the world in general. The driver, more often than not, was an old curmudgeon who regarded all passengers with silent hate—but a hate which became vociferous if he did not receive the tip he demanded at the frequent stops for a change of drivers.

Long coach journeys to and from London nearly always started at five or six in the morning. And in winter time it was no joke to turn out in the darkness and bitter cold with a prospect of twenty hours of misery before one. The average rate of progress in these vehicles was ten miles an hour. Those inside would be half stifled with the windows tightly shut and the smell of damp, mouldy straw which the coaching companies tossed inside in the fiction it would keep their passengers' feet warm. True, those outside had fresh air and plenty of it, but as they were gradually frozen into rigid immobility, they were not as appreciative of the situation as they might have been.

Not infrequently a semi-comatose passenger would be hurled from his precarious eyrie on top of the coach

by reason of a spring system of the most primitive sort and the appalling jolting on the disastrous roads. The alleged guard-rail to which the unfortunate passenger was supposed to cling was totally inadequate for the job. Altogether, outside travelling was viewed with trepidation by all but the young and agile.

Ye Olde English Cooking usually associated with the coaching inns of fiction was, in fact, all that Continental visitors have accused English cooking of since time immemorial. A laconic reference is made in the *Sporting Magazine* of just over a hundred years ago to « . . . the usual coach dinner—a

