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THE GEOGRAPHICAL PATTERN OF COACHING SERVICES IN KENT IN 1836

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The publication of Alan Bates' directory of stage coach services compiled for 1836 has provided historians and historical geographers with a valuable collection of raw data,¹ although it seems to have been surprisingly little used so far.² Of course, directory evidence has its limitations: practical details of daily working are not noted, nor is there any of the human detail, relevant to a social history of coaching, which is familiar from travellers' accounts and from the belletristic sources such as the novels of Charles Dickens. For all that, a good deal of information on the pattern of coaching may be gained, and Bates' compilation is used here to obtain a 'chronological slice', as it were, of coaching in Kent in its heyday. By 'Kent' is meant the whole county prior to the boundary change of 1888, whereby much of the north-west was lost to Greater London. The evidence is most effectively presented cartographically, and my text will for the most part be a commentary on the series of maps.

The great age of coaching was short-lived: for although coaching itself goes back to the seventeenth century, the great age began only after the Napoleonic Wars, reached a peak in the 1820s and '30s, and by the 1840s was 'disintegrating under pressure from the swiftly

¹ A. Bates, *Directory of Stage Coach Services 1836*, Newton Abbot, 1969.

² It has been used, along with other evidence (mostly from directories) in a series of papers by D.H. Kennett, 'The Geography of Coaching in early nineteenth-century Northamptonshire', *Northants. Past and Present*, v (1974), 107-20; 'The Pattern of Coaching in early nineteenth-century Norfolk', *Norfolk Archaeol.*, xxxvi, 355-72; 'Coaching Routes of the Cambridge Region, 1820-1850', *Proc. Cambridge Antiq. Soc.*, lxix (1978), 89-104. The approach of these valuable studies is different from that of the present paper, as are other local studies: 'The Coaching Age in Staffordshire', *Trans. North Staffs. Field Club*, lvi, (1921-2), 49-74; C. Noall, *A History of Cornish Mail and Stage Coaches*, Truro, 1963.

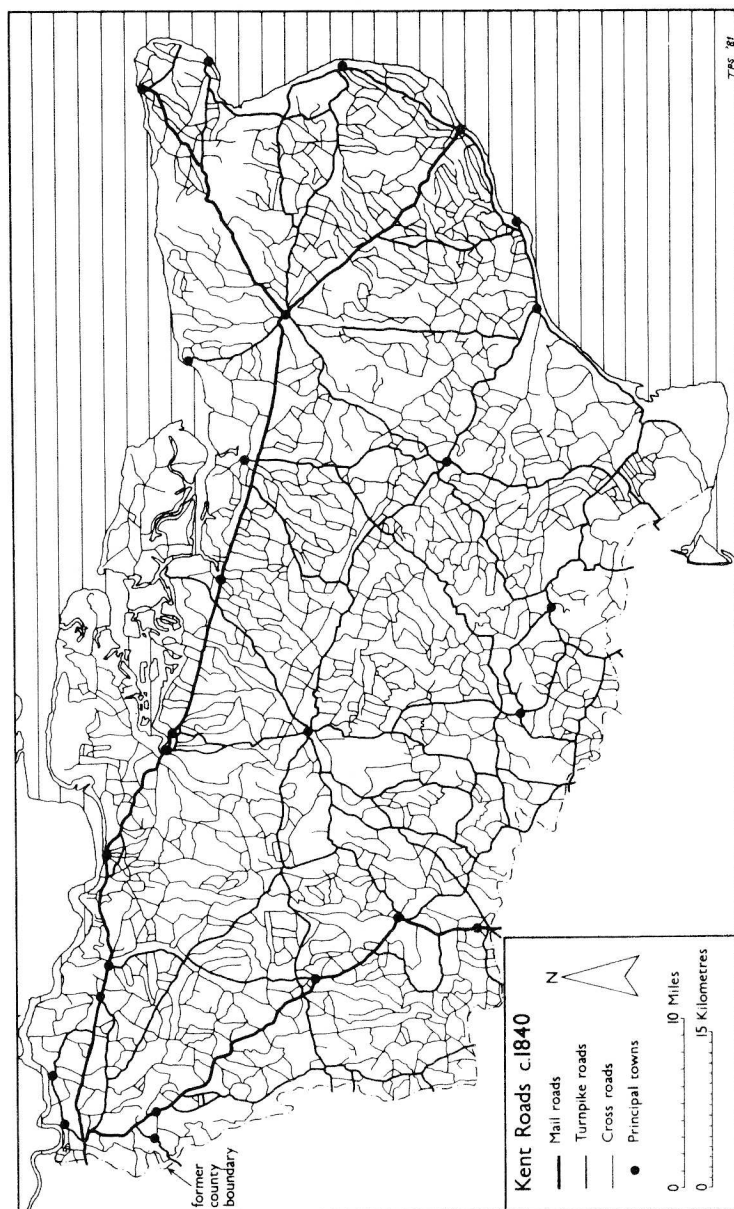


Fig. 1. Kent Roads in the first Half of the nineteenth Century.

spreading railways'.³ It is for this reason that Bates chose 1836 for his directory, since 'in this year the business reached its peak' although 'the clouds of doom were well in sight'.⁴ By this time a good network, focussed on London, had been established both by the Royal Mail and by private proprietors; supplementing this were a great many local services, sometimes running over the same routes as the long-distance coaches and sometimes infilling gaps left by the latter: so that, in 1836, there were few parts of the county without reasonable access to a coach service, even if not on every day of the week.

As a sort of visual propaedeutic to our examination of the situation in Kent, Fig. 1 shows the roads of the county at this time.⁵ Many of the cross roads were no more than tracks, some of them terminating abruptly at streams or rivers or at parish or lathe boundaries.⁶ It is clear, on the other hand, that local coaches worked over a few of these, which must therefore have been kept in reasonable repair even in the absence of turnpike trusts. More important, however, were the turnpiked roads, the tolls from which paid (or were intended to pay) for their maintenance. Turnpiking of roads began on a portion of the Great North Road in 1663,⁷ developed rather slowly until the middle of the eighteenth century, and thereafter accelerated fairly rapidly. Although the turnpike trusts were not always assiduous in their duties, and passengers frequently complained (as passengers will), there can be little doubt that the innovation was an important one and still more that it was a *sine qua non* for the full development of coaching services.⁸ In Kent,

³ D. Mountfield, *The Coaching Age*, London, 1976, 11. This is poignantly illustrated in Henry Alken's chromolithograph of c. 1841-45, which shows a railway train passing the sad remains of an abandoned Midlands stage-coach; conveniently available in A. Briggs, *Iron Bridge to Crystal Palace: Impact and Images of the Industrial Revolution*, London, 1979, 6.

⁴ Bates, *op. cit.*, Introduction (3rd unnumbered p. after title p.).

⁵ This is traced from a map, bound with maps of all other English counties, in the writer's possession. It was published by Pigot and Co. and is undated, but may be assigned to c. 1840.

⁶ Some impression of the condition of these roads may be gained by travelling the road to Harty Church in the Isle of Harty on Sheppey. Indeed, the church itself, which is lighted only by candles, is very evocative of the coaching and earlier ages.

⁷ C. Taylor, *Roads and Tracks of Britain*, London, 1979, 155; *id.*, *The Cambridgeshire Landscape*, London, 1973, 228; L.M. Munby, *The Hertfordshire Landscape*, London, 1977, 205. The relevant Act is 15 Cha.2, c. 1 (1663).

⁸ For a valuable assessment of the contribution of the turnpikes *vide* H.J. Dyos and D.H. Alderott, *British Transport: an economic Survey from the seventeenth century to the twentieth*, Harmondsworth, 1974 ed., 73 ff. For faults in the system *vide* Mountfield, *op. cit.*, 41-5.

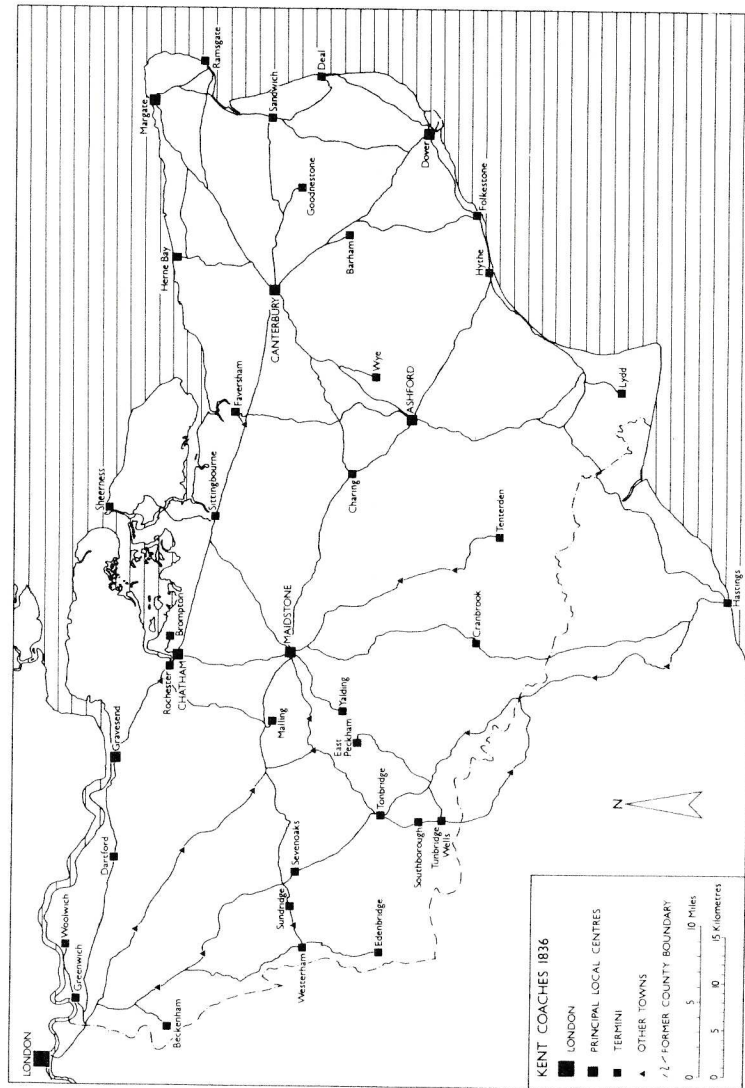


Fig. 2. Kent Coaching Routes in 1836.

turnpiking of roads began with an Act of 1709 for the road between Sevenoaks and Tunbridge Wells.⁹ By the mid-nineteenth century the system was complete, and Fig. 1 shows how the roads then turnpiked formed a network criss-crossing the county, giving ready access to the riparian and coastal ports, and centring on two major foci: the county town of Maidstone and the cathedral city of Canterbury. In addition, Ashford and Tonbridge were subsidiary foci, as were the Medway Towns, although, of course, the latter had no routes going north. By this means a system was established which, if not perfect, was by general consent superior to that in neighbouring Sussex.¹⁰ This nexus of roads, as we shall see shortly, formed the basis of the stage-coach service. As well as showing local foci, Fig. 1 also illustrates the importance of London, with three principal arteries radiating from the metropolis, one to Canterbury and thence to Dover and to Margate, one to Hythe, and one (of which only the Kent portion is shown on the map) to Hastings in Sussex. Of these, two were Royal Mail routes from the capital. The London-Dover road through the Medway Towns and Canterbury followed the line of the present A2 and the former Roman Watling Street, except that immediately east of Dartford it left the old Roman line and passed through Northfleet and Gravesend before resuming the old course at Strood – that is, it followed the line of the modern A226; by the end of the eighteenth century, and perhaps earlier, the section of Watling Street between Dartford and Strood had become no more than a footpath.¹¹ The other Royal Mail route was that through Sevenoaks, Tonbridge, and Tunbridge

⁹ 8 Ann c. 20 (1709); E. Melling (ed.), *Kentish Sources: I. Some Roads and Bridges*, Maidstone, 1959, 27. The Kent turnpikes are discussed in F.W. Jessup, *Kent History illustrated*, Maidstone, 1966, 48 with map on p. 49, and in F.W. Jessup, *A History of Kent*, London and Chichester, 1974, 127–31 with map on p. 129. By 1709 Tunbridge Wells had become a major spa town, having been one of Kent's 'new towns' of the seventeenth century; cf. C.W. Chalklin, *Seventeenth-century Kent: a social and economic history*, London, 1965, 156–8.

¹⁰ Cf. Mountfield, *op. cit.*, 21–3. For the Sussex roads *vide* P. Brandon, *The Sussex Landscape*, London, 1974, 177–84.

¹¹ This was due to the pull of Gravesend itself. From before 1293 the Long Ferry from London had terminated at Gravesend, causing continental and east Kent travellers to make for the town; R.H. Hiscock, 'The Road between Dartford, Gravesend and Strood', *Arch. Cant.*, lxxxiii (1968), reprinted in M. Roake and J. Whyman (eds.), *Essays in Kentish History*, London, 1973, 255–73; this ref. to 255, 259. See also J. Whyman, 'Water Communications: Margate and Gravesend as coastal Resorts before 1840', *Southern History*, iii (1981), 112, 134, n. 7.

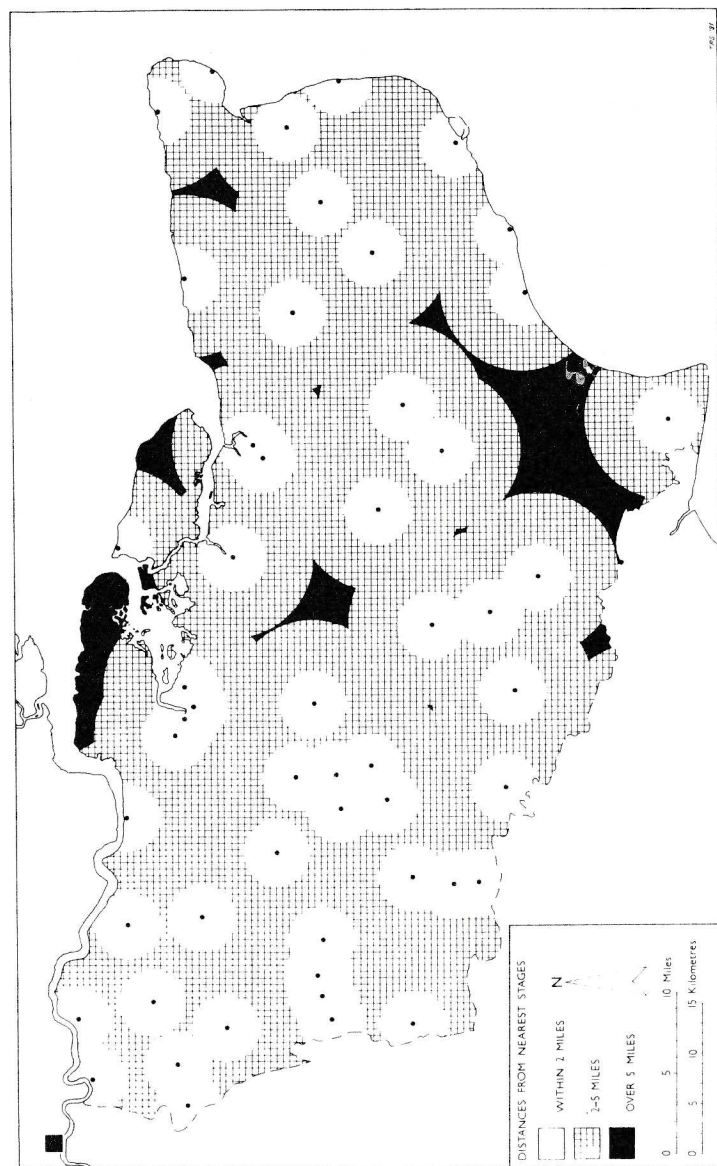


Fig. 3. County Coverage by Stage Coach Services in 1836.

Wells to Hastings (the present A21).¹²

Fig. 2 shows all coaching routes in Kent in 1836. It will be clear that there is a similarity between this map and Fig. 1, with coaches operating over all the principal roads, with, in addition, a few operating over minor or cross roads. Once again Maidstone and Canterbury appear as major local foci. The former was on the important route to Hythe and was, of course, the county town. Canterbury, even more importantly, was on the London–Dover mail coach road as well as being ideally situated as a local centre for coaches to and from Herne Bay, Sandwich, and the Thanet coastal towns, notably Margate. By means of this route-system a good coverage of the county was achieved, as shown in Fig. 3. In using this map, it has to be remembered that not all local services operated daily, so that some country districts were more remote on some days than on others. Nevertheless, there were few parts of the county which were not within reasonable walking distance (5 miles) of a service: a small area between Maidstone and Sittingbourne, the northern part of the Hoo peninsula, part of north-east Sheppey, and a large part of the Romney Marsh area, as well as a few insignificant areas. These were largely areas of sparse population, as indeed they still are. All urban areas had a service, many of them direct to London as well as a choice of local routes.¹³

The London connection is brought out more particularly in Fig. 4, which isolates the long-distance routes and omits all local services.¹⁴ Particularly well served, not surprisingly, were the towns within a 30-mile or so radius of the metropolis, with Bromley receiving no fewer than twenty-four coaches daily,¹⁵ some of them terminating, some passing through. Not far behind were Dartford (twenty),

¹² The situation had not changed from the seventeenth century, when the London–Dover road was the most important, the London–Hastings (and Rye) road the second most important, and the London–Hythe road the least important of the three: *vide* Chalklin, *op. cit.*, 164–6 and map on p. 114.

¹³ The widespread nature of the service must not mislead us into assuming an equally wide *social* availability: coach travel was far from cheap, and therefore only feasible for the relatively well off. The more sparsely populated areas mentioned in the text may have been shunned by the gentry because of a (not unfounded) fear of the 'ague': cf. W.D.L. Smith, 'Malaria and the Thames', *The Lancet*, 270, 1956, 433–6.

¹⁴ The routes from London to Beckenham, Blackheath, Greenwich, and Woolwich are counted in Bates, *op. cit.*, 140–160 as local routes; because of the large numbers involved, and so to avoid overcrowding of the map, this has been followed here; however, Bromley, counted by Bates (p. 142) as a local route, is included in Fig. 4.

¹⁵ 'Daily' here means 'each day Monday to Saturday'; Sunday services were operative on many routes.

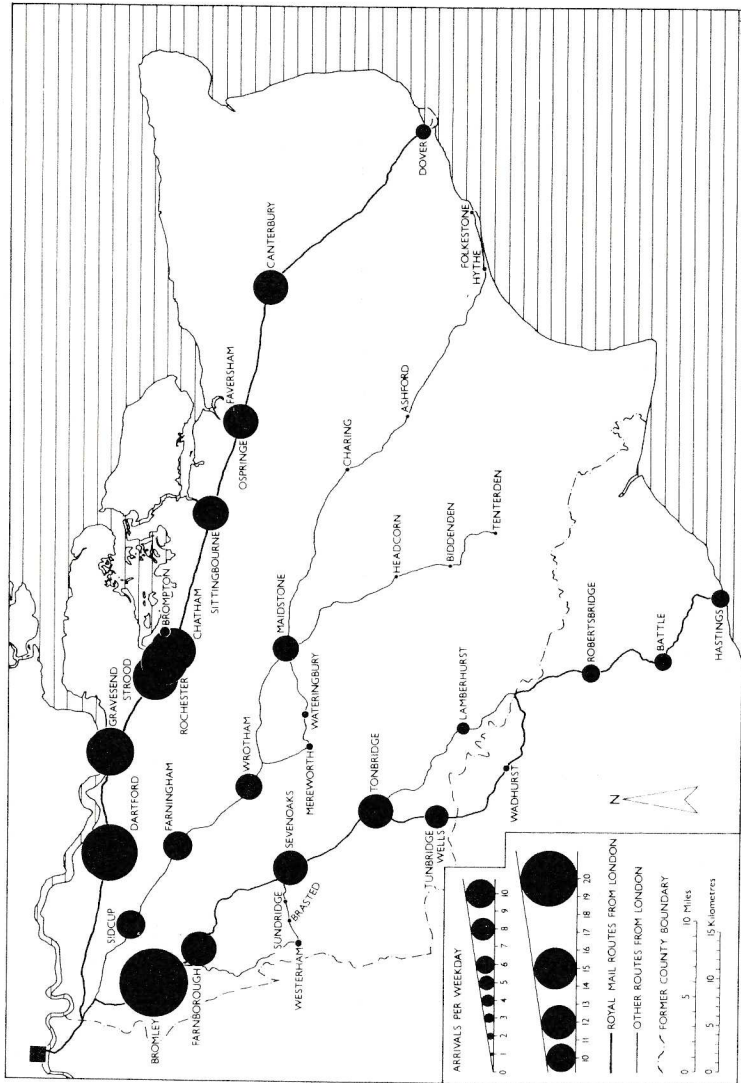


Fig. 4. Long Distance Services from London in 1836.

Gravesend (seventeen), and the Medway Towns (sixteen, with three terminating at Brompton, the rest continuing). Twelve coaches daily arrived at Sevenoaks and Tonbridge, nine at Maidstone. Intermediate stages at Farnborough, Sidcup, Farningham, and Wrotham were also well served.

Beyond this area of 'metropolitan pull', places were less well served, with Tenterden, Hythe, Folkestone and localities between receiving only one coach each daily from London. Tenterden was a small country town, whilst Hythe and even Folkestone at this period were of no great importance.¹⁶ Places on the Royal Mail route to Hastings – especially the fashionable spa at Tunbridge Wells – were better served; four coaches by-passed Tunbridge Wells to call at Lamberhurst before rejoining the road to Hastings through Robertsbridge and Battle in Sussex. But the best served route was the Royal Mail through Sittingbourne, Ospringe, and Canterbury to Dover. Dover was the embarkation point for the packet ships which carried passengers as well as the mail and, because of its excellent harbour, developed more quickly than the seaside resort towns.¹⁷ And yet many of the long-distance coaches did not travel the full distance, terminating at Canterbury, as is shown more clearly in Fig. 5. This indicates proportions of terminating and through traffic as well as daily arrivals for this important road. A quite small proportion went no further than Dartford, which was a stage on the main road, not a local centre in its own right. More proceeded to Gravesend, where only a few terminated, the rest continuing to the Medway Towns. All London coaches arriving at Strood and Rochester continued their journey, though some terminated at Chatham. Of those continuing, some went no further than Brompton, off the main route, whilst others continued through Sittingbourne and Ospringe, whence a few each day travelled the short distance to Faversham, where they terminated, and the rest continued to Canterbury. Like Dartford, both Sittingbourne and Ospringe/Faversham were more important as stages on the main route than as local centres of coaching. Well over half the coaches arriving at Canterbury ter-

¹⁶ Folkestone's development was both as seaside resort and as rival to Dover as a cross-Channel port, and was notable only after the arrival of the railway in 1843. The population figures are: 1811 – 4,200; 1821 – 4,500; 1831 – 4,300 (a decrease); 1841 – 4,400; 1851 – 7,550; Jessup, *op. cit.* (1974), 146; that is, between 1841 and 1851 there was an increase of nearly 72 per cent.

¹⁷ Jessup, *op. cit.* (1974), 144–5. For an earlier period cf. W. Minet, 'Extracts from the Letter-Book of a Dover Merchant, 1737–1741', *Arch. Cant.*, xxxii, (1917), reprinted in Roake and Whyman, *op. cit.*, 135–69.

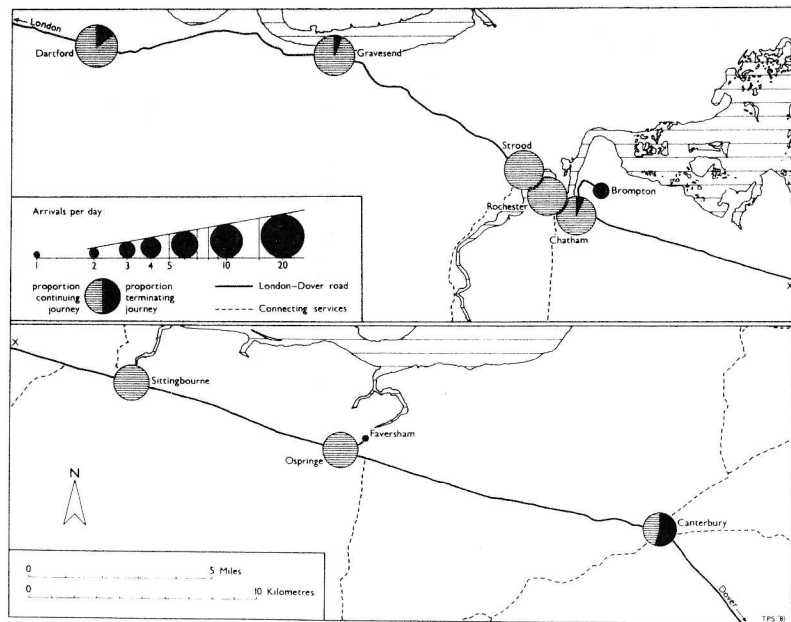


Fig. 5. The London-Canterbury-Dover Road: Coaching Services from London in 1836.

minated there, marking the importance of the city in general terms as well as a local centre for coaching; the rest continued to Dover.

Faversham, on this principal communication line, is somewhat anomalous. Its position as a minor estuarine port pulled it towards the river and its creeks, hence away from the main road.¹⁸ Thus Ospringe, on the main road and less than a mile from the centre of Faversham, became the principal stopping point for the stage coaches.

The great importance of the London-Canterbury-Dover mail coach road is also brought out in Figs. 6 and 7, which show the

¹⁸ For the earlier history of the port of Faversham *vide* J.H. Andrews, 'The Trade of the Port of Faversham, 1650-1750', in Roake and Whyman, *op. cit.*, 127-33.

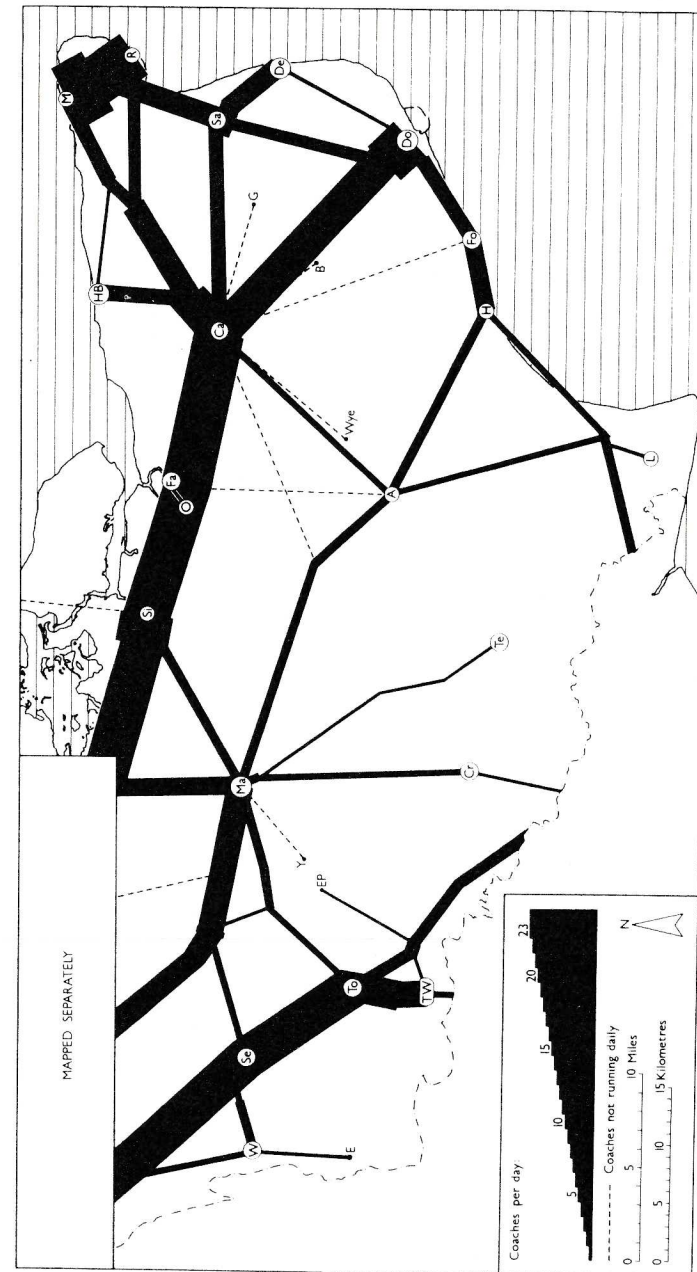


Fig. 6. Daily Services, 1836 (Key to place names: A, Ashford; B, Barham; Ca, Canterbury; Cr, Cranbrook; De, Deal; Do, Dover; E, Edenbridge; EP, East Peckham; Fa, Faversham; Fo, Folkestone; G, Goodnestone; H, Hythe; HB, Herne Bay; L, Lydd; M, Margate; Ma, Maidstone; O, Ospringe; R, Ramsgate; Sa, Sandwich; Se, Sevenoaks; Si, Sittingbourne; Te, Tenterden; To, Tonbridge; TW, Tunbridge Wells; W, Westerham; Y, Yalding). See also Fig. 7.