

For the flavour of an early journey by Cobb & Co coach across Arthur's Pass, follow the fortunes of James Wylde in September 1868, as described in letters to his children . . .

8 September 1868

My Dear Children,

The coach left Christchurch at 6 o'clock in the morning. We took up no passengers on the road, so had plenty of room, one always riding on the box seat. We had splendid teams of four horses all the way and travelled at a rattling pace. Dick Greening drove the first half of the journey. The first thing he did was to appropriate my old white hat and wear it transferring it to the other coachman when he met. I wearing my Danish fur cap was sorry for this afterwards as the cap heated my forehead and made it very sore and it has not yet recovered. As we passed our house in the morning twilight I waved you a good-bye, but I suppose you were all fast asleep.

As we got onto higher ground on the plains we found the snow lying thick in drift — sometimes up to the top of the hedges which were broken down in many places with the weight.

We reached Whites Hotel on the Waimakariri at 9.45, breakfasted and changed horses. At 10.45 one of the pole horses was taken ill and dropped down, his mate, 'Crazy Jane' began plunging and kicking and we had a nice job with them, none of the passengers being used to horses but myself. Dick gave Jane into my charge whilst he released the other, and she behaved in a very crazy way indeed. However, we got all right at last and went on with three horses, leaving the other to die. At noon we reached Willis' and changed horses, at 36 miles. At 2.15 we arrived at the foot of Porters Pass 52 miles and dined at the Inn. Then walked up the pass 3 miles through 3 ft of snow and slush. You must look at my book (<http://www.enzb.auckland.ac.nz/document/?wid=4729>) to see how high the pass is. It is a terrible drag.

At 4.45 we reached Castle Hill, close to where the man was murdered by the Chinese, and changed horses 61 miles. After dark we passed Mr Pearson's, also Station 'Craigiebum' now Mr

Campbell's. Mr Campbell came out to meet the coach dressed in Highland costume with kilt and bare legs.

Another pole horse got troublesome and set to work kicking the coach, so we put him in the lead and he *caught it*. As it is a strict rule with Cobb & Co that the leaders shall never be hooked on till the driver had the reins in his hand, I had a nice job fastening the traces behind the vicious brute_ At 7.30 we reached the Cass, 76 miles. We should have left the next morning at 6 o'clock but it was beginning to rain heavily and the weather looking bad we were afraid of being stopped

at rivers rising so started at 3.30 in the morning. It was very dark and the wind strong, we carried three large lamps in front of the coach and they are needed as the road along the Waimakariri passed along the face of a hill with hundreds of feet perpendicular below it and hundreds of feet above which numerous cataracts of water were falling and there is not 6 inches to spare in many places but the wind blew out all the lamps several times so we had to go in the dark. Luckily for the nervous members of the party it was too dark to see, but looking out of the side of the coach I

could see occasionally a glimpse of the white foamy water below us, into which I could have dropped a pebble 500 feet by holding out my arm.

Just as it began to be light we got down into the river bed and after crossing the main stream the coachman lost his way and we found ourselves lumbering along amongst drift timber and shingle banks. We all got down and dispersed ourselves in different directions and at last found the telegraph stations at the Bealy and got the coach onto the tracks again.

Now began the most beautiful part of the road. The drive up the Bealy and Arthurs Pass is magnificent. I saw it in perfection for the rain which had cleared off and left a beautiful morning had caused every waterfall to be in full force and beauty. The hills on each side are densely wooded, the snow was lying in many places on the tops of the green trees and the waterfalls in every direction falling sometimes thousands of feet had a grand effect.

We reached the top of Arthurs Pass, 94 miles, at 7.15 and there we suddenly met the West Coast weather! and came upon most awful scenery my eyes have ever beheld. But I must stop now.

God bless you all dear children.
Your affectionate father. J. Wylde.

9 September 1868

My Dear Children,

I think I said good-bye to you at the top of Arthur's Pass at 7 o'clock on Sunday morning. The drive up the Pass was most beautiful, the sun having risen beautifully and the morning being fair and warm, but the moment we reached the summit everything was changed. A fierce driving rain met us in the face, the whole valley below us was filled with cloud and rain whilst overhead towered up the snowy peaks with one great glacier just

then through the cloud. The appearance of the road at the descent the almost, if not quite perpendicular face of a precipice nearly 3,000 feet in height is nearly enough to frighten any one. The road is cut out of the face of the precipice on a zig-zag manner and at each turn it appears as though the horses and coach must drive right over and be dashed to pieces. Add to this that the rain had caused continual slips to take place which could not be seen till too late to avoid them and that in many places there was not three inches to spare in the width of the road and you will not wonder that we all wished to get out and walk down. We told the coachman to and he said he would stop directly, but instead of that he started off at a dashing rate and all we could do was to hold on and be as calm as we could.

Mr Kenrick's face was a picture of fear and I assure you I never felt a greater "sensation" in my life. It appeared almost miraculous that we should have reached the bottom of the mountain in safety but we did so, and then galloped on as fast as the horses could go through the narrow gorge of the river Otira till we reached the house where we should have breakfasted at 8 o'clock. No time however was to be lost unless we chose to be

bailed up by the rapidly rising rivers, so all had to help in changing horses as fast as possible. I darted into the house and secured a loaf of bread and then away we went again on our race against the water; every stream we had to cross increasing in depth as we advanced. It rained so frightfully the whole of this day's journey after we got to the top of the Pass that I could see nothing of the scenery so can't describe it.

The Typo was the last bad river we had to cross and we just reached it in time, at 11 o'clock. Fortunately, a wide foot bridge had lately been put across it, the large wooden bridge being swept away. So, we now crossed on foot, the coach just managing to get over empty. Ten minutes later we should have been stopped.

We got safely into Hokitika at three o'clock, the total distance being 148 miles . . .