

5.4 MAIL COACH DELIVERY SERVICES

In the early years of the Grey Valley gold rushes, horses were essential for the diggers to transport their goods and belongings to the diggings. Roads were virtually nonexistent and were simply tracks created by the traffic of previous diggers and their horses. Horse hire businesses flourished and those of John Hamilton and Gilmer Brothers with their chain of stables up the Grey Valley did very well. They had large numbers of horses for hire.

There were early signs that coaches would ultimately be used to transport people through the Valley. In May 1871 Cobb & Co introduced a two horse coach service between Totara Flat and Ahaura. The fare was 5 Shillings each way. At this time, the roads were still in very poor condition although some small improvements had been made.

Generally, the population of the Valley had been disappointed with progress and felt they were being neglected by the Nelson Government. There had been a meeting with the Superintendent of the Nelson Government at Gilmer Brothers Hotel, Ahaura, on 3 November 1870. He received a very hostile reception about the government neglect of basic services in the region and the direction of expenditure towards the larger towns of Nelson and Westport rather than towards the development of the Grey Valley.

In February 1872 there was another public meeting at Ahaura to consider the action necessary to make the main road to Reefton especially from Arnold to Ahaura and from the Little Grey to Inangahua. At the time there were no roads to speak of and with the population increasing *"there was not at present a safe and reliable means of transporting the mere necessities of life except during the most favourable of weather."* Money had been set aside but the risk was that it would be spent in other locations. This public meeting resolved that *"the time has now arrived for the residents of the districts lying between Greymouth and Inangahua to take such steps as will compel the Provincial Government to construct a main dray road between the said districts..."*¹ A committee was appointed to carry out the object of the resolution and to cooperate with the Greymouth Committee. The committee included two members of the Provincial Council as well as John Hamilton and a number of other prominent Ahaura residents

The Gilmer Brothers business had already been established at Reefton by January 1872 with Livery Stables there. These stables were strategically located on Section 2, on Broadway quite close to the river at the entrance to the town. The land was relatively small in area being a little under 2,500 square feet. The Reefton livery stables were included in the chain style advertisement that Gilmer Brothers was commonly using on 17 January 1872.

In November 1872, two contracts were let for the carrying of Her Majesty's mails for 1873. The first was to carry mail on the Greymouth/Reefton route and the second for Greymouth/Hokitika.

The Reefton contract was awarded to Ashton and Cassidy of Greymouth, who it may be recalled were competing with John Hamilton at Cobden and also Gilmer Brothers for the hire of horses. The key element of their contract was to use a coach (for the first time) to provide a more timely and reliable service. The Reefton contract provided a 250 Pounds payment to allow the mail to be carried by coach. For the Hokitika route the mail was to go by an inland road to Marsden and then by the two tramways instead of by coach direct. The contracts were for a one year period.

¹ Grey River Argus 13 February 1872

HAMILTON GILMER'S HOTEL, GREYMOUTH.

In carrying out the extensive additions to this Hotel, which more than renew it, and render it far and away the largest and most complete on the West Coast, a true regard has been paid to the elegance and solidity of its architecture, while all the internal arrangements of every department will be found to fully correspond.

Thoroughness everywhere has been a special aim.

Its central situation and vicinity to the Steamboat Wharf present great inducements to Commercial Travellers (for whom there are set apart Sample Rooms), and to Visitors, Private Families, and the Mining Community of Greymouth and the Up-Country Districts, this Hotel has not its equal for comfort and convenience.

THE BILLIARD ROOM,

which contains two tables by the best makers, are watched by competent and attentive markers.

THE MASONIC HALL,

the largest on the Coast, is the most suitable for Balls, Banquets, and Public Meetings.

In connection with the above Hotel are

LIVERY STABLES,

under efficient management; and the Horses having been selected by competent judges, are the best to be found in New Zealand.

POST OFFICE HOTEL, WESTPORT.

HAMILTON GILMER'S HOTEL, COPDEN.

GILMER BROTHERS' HOTEL, AHAUUA.

GILMERS' MELBOURNE HOTEL, CHARLESTON.

GILMERS' LIVERY STABLES, REEFTON.

Grey River Argus 17 January 1872

Even by 1873 the roads were still in a very poor state. The few bridges that existed were also in poor condition. Development was slow and as a consequence so was the introduction of faster and more frequent mail services. It was only a month into the 1873 contract that complaints started about delays and failure to meet schedules. The finger was pointed at the coach operator but the coach services were introduced earlier than they should have been because the roads were not sufficiently developed to suit the coaches.


Throughout 1873, there were references to difficulties on the roads and, for example, land slips blocking the road and making it difficult, if not impossible, for coaches to pass. A further instance was quoted *"On the last trip of the coach one of the horses was submerged in a mud hole up to its ears, and the coach was several times given up for lost. We hear that under these exceptional circumstances, unless some urgently required repairs are immediately made to the road, it is not the intention of the mail contractors to continue running the coach - which means smashing coaches and drowning horses- during the winter months."*²

In September 1873, tenders were again called for the mail service between Greymouth and Reefton and intervening locations. Tenders were sought for horse and coach deliveries. This brought a reaction from the Grey River Argus which indicated that while the Post Office had

² Grey River Argus 23 June 1873

shown a preference for coach delivery they could be tempted to revert to horses because of lower costs which the editor called an “*unmistakeable retrograde step*.” The fact was that the initial establishment of the coach service had led to some improvement in the roads.³

On 31 December 1873, Gilmer Brothers advertised under the Royal Mail Crest the Grey Valley and Reefton Mail Line of Coaches. They had been successful in winning the mail tender for 1874. The previous contractors, Ashton & Cassidy, stopped operating their Reefton coach service immediately leaving Gilmer Brothers without any competition. However, as was their practice, Gilmer Brothers⁴ continued to advertise on a daily basis. With the coach service operating with a subsidy from the Post Office to carry the mail any incremental revenue from passengers substantially enhanced the profitability of the service.

V.  R.

**GREY VALLEY AND REEFTON
MAIL LINE OF COACHES, be-
tween Greymouth, the Grey Valley, and
Reefton.**

Start every Tuesday and Thursday at 7.45
a.m, from Gilmer's Hotel.

All carriage of parcels must be prepaid to
ensure responsibility.

**GILMER BROS.,
Proprietors.**

Grey River Argus 31 December 1873

In March 1874 Gilmer Brothers announced they had a new four wheeled coach intended to convey mails and passengers between Greymouth, Ahaura and Reefton and return. The newspaper reported:

“The coach which is a model of its kind, was manufactured to the special order of Messrs Gilmer Brothers, the mail contractors, by Howland and Co. of Christchurch. It is fitted with all the newest improvements, is strong in its workmanship, elegant in its decorations and proportions and calculated to carry eight passengers with ease and comfort.”

This contract placed Reefton firmly on their agenda. They had previously an interest there with their earlier foray into the Murray Creek Gold Mining Company and had investments in later gold mines. However, the thrust now was into providing services to people living in the area.

There were also signs that the Nelson government was prepared to increase its spending in the Grey District. In January 1874 the Government announced that they would raise a loan of 250,000 Pounds for public works. Of this it was indicated that 50,000 Pounds would be spent in the Grey District including:

- 5,000 Pounds for the Cobden Bridge
- 2,000 Pounds for the Ahaura River Bridge
- 8,000 Pounds for Grey Valley roads

³ Grey River Argus 26 September 1873

⁴ Grey River Argus 30 December 1873

- 10,000 Pounds for branch roads in the Grey Valley.⁵

The Gilmer Brothers mail contract, as with previous contracts was for only one year and in November Frederick Wilckens was awarded the contract for two years for 1875 and 1876. He was to provide a twice weekly mail service each way between Greymouth and Reefton. The contract price was 430 Pounds for each of the two years with a possibility that the government would agree to a thrice a week service before the contract commenced on 1 January 1875.⁶ This price was clearly lower than the previous contract price so it had been a lucrative service for Gilmer Brothers.

The deliveries were also to be coordinated with the Westport to Reefton mail service allowing for Westport to Greymouth mail deliveries independent of the uncertain steamers (because of rough weather and difficulties crossing the bar at Greymouth.)

On 2 December 1874, Wilckens had commenced advertising that he would operate a coach from Greymouth to Reefton every Thursday from the Albion Hotel (next to Gilmer's Hotel).

Unlike Ashton's, despite losing the contract, Gilmer Brothers continued to operate in competition with Wilckens. On 6 January 1875 they advertised a price to and from Reefton of 2 Pounds each way which we believe was a discount on the previous price. On 7 January, Wilckens immediately responded dropping his price to 35 Shillings each way Gilmer brothers maintained their price at 2 Pounds until 12 January when they dropped it to 30 Shillings each way. On the same day Wilckens reduced his price to 1 Pound each way. Gilmer Brothers maintained their price for a month until matching Wilckens at 1 Pound on 12 February. Gilmer Brothers also committed to pay passenger tolls at all bridges and ferries along the road. This was later committed to by Wilckens.

GREY VALLEY AND REEFTON
LINE OF COACHES, between Grey-
mouth, the Grey Valley, and Reefton.

SUMMER EXCURSIONS.

GREAT REDUCTION IN FARES.

Start every morning, from Gilmer's Hotel,
at 7.45 a.m., for Ahaura; and for Reefton,
on Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday, at
7.45 a.m., returning alternate days.

Fare to and from Reefton, £2 each way.

Great Reduction in the charge for Parcels, &c.
GILMER BROS.,
Proprietors.

COBB & CO'S

GRA 6 January 1875

FURTHER REDUCTION OF FARES.



COBB & CO'S TELEGRAPH LINES
OF ROYAL MAIL COACHES.

FRED. WILCKENS, PROPRIETOR.

Leave the Booking Office, Albion Hotel,
for Reefton and all parts of the Grey Valley,
on TUESDAY and THURSDAY, at 7.45
a.m.

Fare to or from Reefton 35s

Wilckens GRA 7 January 1875

⁵ Grey Valley Argus 28 January 1874

⁶ Grey River Argus 19 November 1874

**WEBB & CO.'S TELEGRAPH LINES
OF ROYAL MAIL COACHES.**

FRED. WILCKENS, PROPRIETOR.

Leave the Booking Office, Albion Hotel,
for Reefton and all parts of the Grey Valley,
on **TUESDAY** and **THURSDAY**, at 7.45
a.m.

| | |
|-----------------------------|--------|
| Fare to or from Reefton ... | £1 0 0 |
| Fare to or from Ahaura ... | 0 7 6 |

GREY VALLEY AND REEFTON

Wilckens GRA 12 January 1875

CHEAP FARES.

**GREY VALLEY AND REEFTON
LINE OF COACHES,** between Grey-
mouth, the Grey Valley, and Reefton.

SUMMER EXCURSIONS.

GREAT REDUCTION IN FARES.

Start every morning, from Gilmer's Hotel,
at 7.45 a.m. for Ahaura; and for Reefton,
on Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday, at
7.45 a.m., returning alternate days.

| | |
|------------------------------|-------|
| Fare to and from Reefton ... | £1 10 |
| Fare to and from Ahaura ... | 0 10 |

Great Reduction in the charge for Parcels, &c.

**GILMER BROS.,
Proprietors.**

Passengers' tolls **WILL BE PAID** at all
bridges and ferries on the road.

GRA 12 January 1875

CHEAP FARES.

**GREY VALLEY AND REEFTON
LINE OF COACHES,** between Grey-
mouth, the Grey Valley, and Reefton.

SUMMER EXCURSIONS.

GREAT REDUCTION IN FARES.

Start every morning, from Gilmer's Hotel,
at 7.45 a.m. for Ahaura; and for Reefton,
on Tuesday and Thursday, at 7.45 a.m., re-
turning Wednesday and Saturday.

| | |
|------------------------------|------|
| Fare to and from Reefton ... | £1 0 |
| Fare to and from Ahaura ... | 0 10 |

Great Reduction in the charge for Parcels, &c

**GILMER BROS.,
Proprietors.**

Passengers' tolls **WILL BE PAID** at all
bridges and ferries on the road.

GRA 12 February 1875

Prices were kept at this level all through 1875 and passengers had benefited from at least a 50% reduction over the previous year. This would have been significant for Gilmer Brothers because they did not have the support of the Post Office subsidy. However, it also put pressure on Wilckens who was not as financially strong as Gilmer Brothers and he did not have the allied interests of hotels at Greymouth and Ahaura along with Livery Stables at both places and, Reefton.

It was also evident that Gilmer Brothers clientele would not necessarily have been as price sensitive as Wilckens'. They had a wide network of people doing business in Greymouth and the Grey Valley who would have supported them. As an example, it was reported on 11 February 1875, Gilmer Brother's coach brought 2723 oz. of gold to the national Bank in Greymouth from Reefton. The coach was accompanied by Sergeant Neville and Mr. Simpson of the bank.⁷ Businesses like the bank would have provided support for fellow

⁷ Grey River Argus 11 February 1875

business people they had known for many years and who had a reputation for being responsible and reliable.

The financial strength of Gilmer Brothers also enabled them to improve their fleet of coaches." *Messrs. Gilmer Brothers handsome and commodious new coach arrived at Ahaura at noon Sunday, during the height of hail, rain, thunderstorm and after encountering fearful weather on the road from Greymouth. The coach was for the first time drawn by six horses. Times are certainly altering- it is not so very long ago since the arrival of the solitary mailman perched on his saddle bags was an event at Ahaura, but now it requires a four horse mail coach running four times a week and a daily six horse passenger coach...*⁸

Both Gilmer Brothers and Wilckens continued to advertise but in August Gilmer Brothers stopped their advertisements. This would have saved them money and it also would have given them the opportunity to increase their prices if they wished. Wilckens continued to advertise the discounted rate.

On 23 August it was reported that Wilckens would introduce a third service on Saturdays leaving at 7.45 am as had been foreshadowed with the letting of the contract. This was to commence on 1 October 1875. For this increase in service, the annual subsidy was increased from 430 to 630 Pounds.⁹

However by September 1875 there were visible signs Wilckens was under financial pressure. The newspaper reported that a mortgagee for Mr. Frederick Wilckens at Reefton had sold his entire drapery stock at a 50% reduction. Given the unusual name we assume that this was the Wilckens who also operated the mail coach. On 24 October there was a judgment against him for 10 Pounds and he was ordered to pay 3 Pounds a month or else receive one months gaol¹⁰ These were indications that Wilckens was having difficulties paying his creditors.

A further newspaper report indicated that Wilckens was also trying to reduce his costs by playing "a hands on" role driving the coach himself rather than employing a driver. This report was about his coach being washed away at a ford of the Inangahua River. The two lead horses were drowned but the six passengers were rescued.¹¹

On 14 December 1875, Gilmer Brothers introduced a daily service to and from Reefton. This placed substantial additional pressure on Wilckens. With an additional four days a week being offered, passengers would have more flexibility in travel dates at the same price as offered by Wilckens. He had to lose customers.

Finally, Wilckens succumbed, selling his business to Gilmer Brothers. It was reported in the West Coast Times of 22 February 1876 that "*Coaching competition on the Greymouth to Reefton road for the present time has ceased Messrs Gilmer Brothers having bought out Mr Wilckens's Plant*"¹² This was confirmed in the Grey River Argus on 10 March 1876: "*Messrs. Gilmer Bros. who have undertaken to carry out Mr. Wilckens contract are prepared to perform a daily service "without additional consideration".*" As they were already operating on a daily basis, this would not have involved any additional expense or hardship. The catch was that they wanted to extend the duration of the contract. The newspaper enthusiastically

⁸ Grey River Argus 18 May 1875

⁹ Grey River Argus 23 August 1875

¹⁰ Grey River Argus 24 October 1875

¹¹ Grey River Argus 29 November 1875

¹² West Coast Times 22 February 1876

supported the proposal as being a reasonable one and called on the Postmaster General to accept the offer.¹³

A meeting was held at Reefton that resolved: "*That this meeting affirm the desirability of obtaining a daily mail service between Reefton and Greymouth and of presenting a memorial to the Postmaster General in order that the necessary arrangements to that effect be carried out.*" A committee was established to draw up a memorial obtain signatures and forward it to the Postmaster General.¹⁴

The newspaper keenly pursued the issue calling for it to be added to other issues to be put to the Premier by a deputation to Wellington which was awaiting an appointment. The primary purpose was to discuss harbour works at Greymouth but the paper saw the opportunity to add to the agenda the lack of expenditure on the Reefton road and acceptance of Gilmer brothers offer on the basis that it was reasonable to have a longer contract because of the extra expenditure on coaches and horses caused by the poor state of the road. There was great value in a daily mail service and "*Gilmer Brothers are in every way a responsible and substantial firm*".¹⁵

The memorial or petition signed by 600 residents of the Grey Valley and Reefton was forwarded to the Postmaster General. It gave the following reasons for accepting the offer:

- The increasing population of the Reefton District
- The large business relations between Greymouth and Reefton makes extension of postal facilities necessary
- Nearly all of the Inangahua district trade is with and through the port of Greymouth

The newspaper made the case strongly for the acceptance of the offer¹⁶ almost as well as Gilmer Brothers could have written it themselves. There have been many times when this looks to have been the case.

After a couple of months a response was received from the Postmaster General rejecting the offer. The reasons were:

- It was believed if tenders were invited reliable parties would be found to convey the mail on a daily basis for a smaller subsidy than is being paid for a tri-weekly service
- It would be unfair to other contractors without submitting the service to public competition, more particularly as the public has already been led to believe that there would be another tender at the expiration of the current contract
- There was no good reason to introduce the service with the approaching winter and the difficulties the poor state of the road causes to the point of not being able to convey mail.

The Postmaster General had decided to invite tenders for a daily service should it be found one could be performed throughout the year with the successful tenderer receiving a contract of two, if not three years.

¹³ Grey River Argus 10 March 1876

¹⁴ Grey river Argus 10 March 1876

¹⁵ Grey River Argus 24 March 1876

¹⁶ Grey River Argus 28 March 1876

An alternative offer from Gilmer Brothers to perform a daily service during the currency of the existing contract for additional payment of 400 Pounds was also declined.¹⁷

Gilmer Brothers was successful in winning the next tender for a daily mail service between Reefton and Greymouth. The price was 350 Pounds with the service to commence on 1 January 1877. The newspaper commented¹⁸ *"We believe that there were a considerable number of tenders for the service."*

We do not know the duration of the contract but given the response from the Postmaster General it would have been at least two years and very possibly three years. It is clear that they had the contract again in 1878 when there was advertisement under the heading of *"Royal Mail Line of Coaches"*¹⁹ for a special coach from Ahaura on 18 March 1878 to take passengers to the Greymouth Races.

There was also a reference on 23 October 1878, again indicating that they had the contract in that year, but also showing that while the roads may have improved there were still serious issues with the rivers and stream after the continuous rains in Grey Valley *"How Messrs. Gilmer Brothers have managed to push their coaches through during the past two months with only occasional delay is simply due to the stability of their vehicles, their excellent team of horses, and the care, skill and courageousness of their drivers. On many occasions the mails and passengers have been carried through almost against the dictates of Providence."*²⁰

There was also a reference that indicated that they had the contract for a third year in 1879. In March the Grey River Argus referred to an item in *"the Reefton papers to the effect that Messrs Gilmer Bros. the present contractors for mail services between Greymouth and Reefton have found their present contract so unprofitable that they must receive some compensation if only in the direction of reducing the mail service."*²¹ In April they wrote to the Grey County Council asking that the toll for the mail coach using the punt across the Ahaura River be charged only one way and passengers be allowed to cross free.²² This was agreed to by the Council and it was a substantial advantage to the firm as they had always carried the cost of tolls for crossing rivers.

Despite these references the newspapers were strangely quiet about the Gilmer Brothers mail coach delivery service. There were few if any articles and more to the point there were no specific advertisements in the Grey River Argus for the service where previously these were published almost a daily basis. The business economized by including the coach service in their Hotel advertisement as they had previously done with the Horse Hire business.

Also, Gilmer Brothers no longer needed to advertise on the scale they had previously. They had a monopoly and had succeeded in establishing their superiority, knocking out the small operators and demonstrating that they could provide a regular and reliable service more efficiently than most. However, they did include details of the mail coach service in their hotel advertisement and this included fares.

The prices advertised in November 1876 were 1 Pound 11 shillings for Reefton an increase of 11 shillings and for Ahaura 16 Shillings, an increase of 6 shillings. They were taking

¹⁷ Grey River Argus 9 May 1876

¹⁸ Grey River Argus 17 November 1876

¹⁹ Grey River Argus 16 March 1878

²⁰ Grey River Argus 23 October 1878

²¹ Grey River Argus 29 March 1879

²² Grey River Argus 24 April 1879

advantage of their monopoly position. They also made the passengers responsible for the payment of any bridge tolls. Later in 1881, after the contract had been won by another service provider prices were still the same with the fare being the same as in earlier years namely, 1 Pound each way.

Another possible reason for the dearth of news was that Hamilton and Sam Gilmer were spending a lot more time in Reefton rather than Greymouth. This would have kept them away from the editor of the Grey River Argus and substantially reduced the supply of news stories to him.

The days of active involvement in the mail coach business ended at the close of 1880. The contract for 1881 was awarded to Mitchell and Campbell for a four horse coach service to and from Reefton three times a week for 349 Pounds per annum.²³ Gilmer Brothers were a bidder for this contract but with the changing nature of their activities in the late 1870's it would not surprise if they did place a bid that was on the high side.

Despite losing the bid they refused an offer of 700 Pounds "*for their plant*"²⁴ which no doubt represented their coaches and horses. Accepting this offer would have removed them from competing with the new operator. The cost of newly equipping the operator was said to be about 300 Pounds but Gilmer Brothers were seeking 1000 Pounds which they saw as reasonable to hand over monopoly profits.

It appears that this issue was fairly quickly resolved and Gilmer Brothers maintained a strong link between their hotels and the coach service by very quickly creating a relationship with Mitchell and Campbell with the Greymouth Hotel being a Booking Office for the service and with the mail coach leaving from the hotel. They knew that if they were associated with the coach service then passengers would stay at their hotels.

Gilmer Brothers had already bought two hotels in Wellington by this time and it was clear that this was where they saw the future.

²³ Grey River Argus 5 November 1880

²⁴ Grey River Argus 16 November 1880