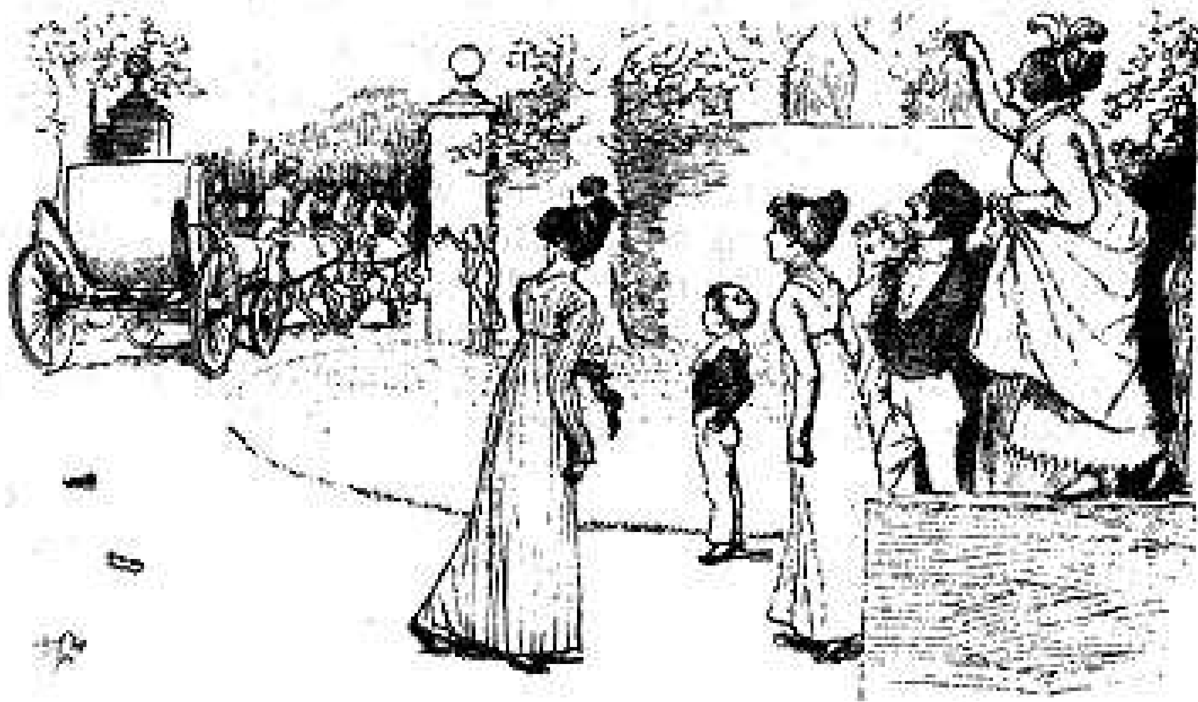


Travel During Jane Austen's Lifetime

Jane Austen was born in 1775 and died in 1817. Travel during her lifetime, the last quarter of the 18th and first quarter of the 19th century, was arduous, dangerous and expensive even for the upper classes. Most citizens of Great Britain would never travel far from their home villages. For distances of up to several miles, English men and women went from place to place by foot. Persons of all classes did a lot of "hoofing it" to get around, even when horse-driven vehicles were available to them. The task of setting up a horse-drawn vehicle for use required planning, time and considerable effort, making walking a popular alternative.

Whether, by foot, carriage or horseback, women of the upper classes traveled accompanied by a servant, family member or some close friend of the same sex.

The primary alternative to self-locomotion was the horse. Even after the advent of railroads, persons were transported to and from railroad stations by horses or in vehicles pulled by them. It should be noted that railroads did not come into use until after Jane's death.

Besides walking, travel for persons of the society reflected in Jane's stories was either by boat, horseback, private carriage, or by stage or mail coach.

The mail coach service started (officially) in 1784 with a run between Bristol, London and Bath. The service and the coaches used were designed to carry mail, but soon became a popular method of fast travel for persons on longer journeys throughout England, Scotland and Wales.

Opportunities for travel by water around England were spotty at best. The so-called "Canal Age" in England coincides with Jane Austen's life, but because English canals were largely conceived, built, owned and run by private persons or corporations with specific narrow commercial interests, they did not develop as a rational network that tied the various regions of the country together. The canals of Britain functioned primarily to carry commercial goods and raw materials.

For Jane and for the characters in her novels, the horse and the horse drawn carriage or coach were the preferred mode of transport.

English roads were improving throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, but they were still far from being dependable or even safe. The famous Highwayman, Dick Turpin, was dead 36 years when Jane was born and the last mounted robbery in England took place in 1831. People in Jane's day recognized that the romantic age of highwaymen was past. By Jane's time, highway robbery was in the hands of the slightly less dangerous toll takers and disreputable innkeepers.

Generally, English roads were in such deplorable condition that, in wet weather, travel by carriage was considered a particularly strenuous and dangerous pursuit. Even when dry, travel on the bumpy, rutted roads harbored the ever-present danger of ejection from the carriage. There were no seat belts and hanging on for dear life was the prudent thing to do.

The macadam system of pavement, which brought great improvement to roads worldwide, was introduced during her lifetime, but was not in general application until after Jane's death.

Women almost never rode in stage or post-coaches. Riding in these vehicles had all the aforementioned discomforts of carriage travel amplified by the longer stretches of time in

them. Passengers were often required to leave the carriage and carry their own luggage to lighten the load so that mired coaches could be freed by the horses pulling them. Another important factor that kept ladies from utilizing public coaches was the fact that coaching required close contact with other passengers, almost certainly those of the opposite sex. Sometimes, well-to-do persons hired horses to use with their private coaches. These rented teams could be exchanged for fresh, rested horses along the route of travel. Private coach travel was of course, much less strenuous than the public model, but when ladies were involved, advance arrangements had to be made for accommodations along the way. All and all, planning long-distance travel was a complicated and expensive undertaking.

The upper class of English society in Jane's lifetime was subjected to profound changes. Industrialists, and professionals - lawyers, doctors and scientists, had opportunities to accumulate large sums of money and the British pound replaced real property as a measure of wealth. The new moneyed class used their wealth to purchase tracts of land and old-money country estates. They found entrance into the social order that had been the sole province of the nobility and a few county families – the local gentry.

In order to establish and legitimize their new-found social status, these arrivistes often hired servants and purchased a carriage with horse and livery. Next, land and or an estate house was purchased to establish a base for the hunt for a mate from an ancient family who would hopefully add a distinguished heritage (and sometimes wealth) to the family tree.

The horse, carriage and accoutrements were not an insignificant contribution to the quest for social status. Horses were expensive to buy, and even more expensive to maintain. The same may be said for carriages, for the workers who cared for them and the coachmen who drove them. In fact, next to a large home, the vehicle and its accompaniments were the prime examples of conspicuous consumption used for a leg up on the social ladder.

In Jane's day, ladies seldom drove carriages. Females who rode horses, were expected to ride side-saddle rather than astride the animal.

When riding in a carriage, a gentleman would be seated facing backward to the motion of the vehicle. Unless he were a close family member (father, son, husband or brother) he would not sit next to a female passenger. The gentleman would always leave the carriage first so that he would be in position to "hand the lady down".

The collections of the Carriage House at the Long island Museum of American Art, History and Carriages contain (mainly) American carriages and related objects. Much of our collection represents 19th century American vehicles, most of them of the quality used by the American upper class.

Fortunately for **Janeites**, virtually all of the carriages mentioned in Jane Austen's works, and indeed her life, had a reincarnation in the 19th century carriage era in the United States. The interest in coaching as a sport began this side of the pond after the Civil War. A new American Aristocracy composed of industrialists, the robber barons and others who made their fortunes out of the war or during the manufacturing boom that followed, became enamored of all things British, and particularly the trappings and accoutrements of English gentry.

There was no better way to advertise one's wealth than to be seen in an elegant carriage, particularly when it was so expensive as to be out of the reach of the hoi polloi (in the first three-quarters of the 19th century almost all carriages were). A flourishing market for elegant vehicles that emulated English and French styles developed in the United States. Coaching as a sport was established in the United states around 1875 by Col. Delancey Kane, great grandson of John Jacob Astor and Col. William Jay. Kane was and is known as "the father of coaching in America."

According to his obituary in the NY Times, April 15, 1915, the popular legend was that "One Spring in the early seventies Colonel Kane and Colonel Jay were strolling down Fourth Avenue when they passed a carriage maker's establishment, and noticed an old-fashioned driving coach outside. They bought it immediately Colonel Jay procured a thor-oughbred horse and Colonel Kane supplied the other from his family stock. A cab horse and another completed the quartet with which the two started the first private coach and four seen in Fifth Avenue."

Col. Jay had earlier become interested in the sport through a friend and coaching enthusiast, the English Duke of Beaufort.

If racing is the sport of kings, then coaching quickly became the sport of the American "princes" of industry and inherited wealth.

Driving these massive vehicles, four-in-hand was a manly pursuit that required skill, strength and endurance – and (necessarily) a lot of money. Coaches were incredibly expensive; many driven by carriage club members were custom-built to the specifications of vehicles that had been out of fashion for a half a century or more. The Brewster Park drag was a lighter, more elegant version of the Road Coach. A park drag is also known as a 'Private Coach' as it was always owned by private individuals for their own personal driving. This vehicle was always driven by a team of four well matched carriage horses.

Not all sport coachmen drove the "big rigs."

Horse-drawn vehicles came in varied configurations – light that could be pulled by one small horse or pony, and large, heavy assemblages that required teams of large equines. Carriages were driven for sport by persons of all sizes and sex. This Museum has a collection that contains equivalents of many of the styles that Jane Austen and the characters in her novels would recognize and use. Many of the American carriage manufacturers represented at this museum were considered to be among the elite of the industry.

Austen's novels take place outside of the hustle, bustle and certainly the squalor of London. Austen's characters reside (mostly] in the South of England in Gloucester, Somerset, Kent, Hampshire Shires and Hertford.

Vehicles like the Hansom Cab, and Growlers ubiquitous on London streets would have been out of place in her (slightly) provincial locals.

The major differences between the newer American versions of the carriages familiar to Jane and the British versions are in the suspension (undercarriage) and a lightness of design that characterized American vehicles.

A word about carriage nomenclature – there are really no standards – a carriage of a certain style may have three or more appellations, even in the same country at the same time. Carriages, and particularly fancy carriages are defined by fashion, rather than technology.

A **landau** is a four-wheeled light carriage. A landau may be drawn by a pair or four-in-hand. Even though it is equipped with a high drivers seat which is separated from the passenger compartment, it was sometimes postilion - driven. The landau is fitted with soft folding tops at the front and back of the passenger compartment. When both front and back are unfurled, they meet in the center, fully enclosing the passenger compartment. When folded, they afford the passengers a full view of the landscape. The landau is similar to the Museum's vis-à-vis in that the pair of passenger seats face each other. The vis-à-vis in our collection is similar in design to a small landau known as a **landaulet** which is the coupé of a landau. It contains a folding top only at the rear of the passenger compartment. The museum's version is similar in size to the full-sized landau.
America the vis-à-vis was called a sociable.

Figure 2 Landau with tops closed

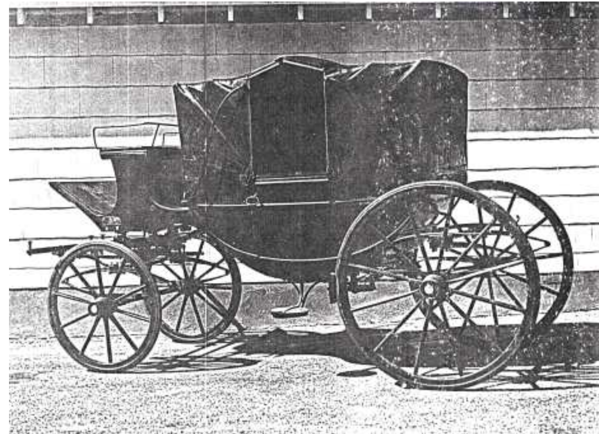
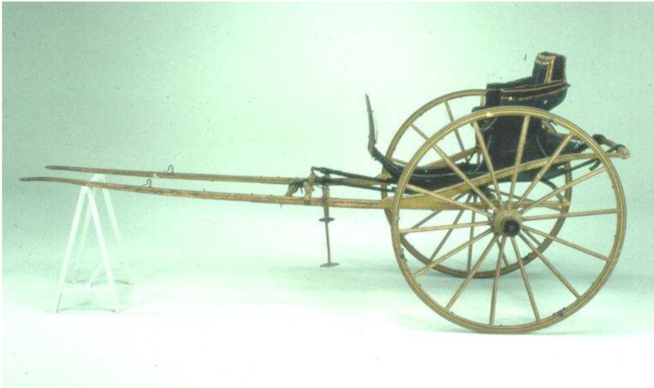


Figure 1 Landau with tops opened



A **chaise** is usually (in America) a 2-wheel vehicle pulled by a single horse. It may seat 1 or 2 persons. It is also known as a chair, and in America, shay – a corruption of the French *chaise*. European incarnations of this vehicle often had four wheels and an enclosed passenger compartment.

Figure 3 One-horse shay (Chaise)

A **postchaise** is an example of the latter incarnation of the chaise that would be used with rented horses and possibly a hired driver or as the name suggests as an early transporter of mail, especially in Britain and France.

Figure 4 Postchaise driven by a postilion

Figure 5 Coach The Brewster Park Drag

Coach refers to any large enclosed four-wheeled carriage. It was usually pulled by at least four horses. Most coaches have two rows of seats, but when used as a public conveyance may contain three rows. There may be more seats on the roof of the passenger compartment when that space was not reserved for luggage. The Brewster Park drag looks very much like a typical private coach as seen in Jane's day – absent the imperial, the storage/dining table between the seats on the roof.

Coaches were sometimes owned and used by very wealthy persons for long-distance travel. They were more often used for public transportation.

Figure 6 English (public) Road Coach

The term **Stage-coach** applies to any coach used as a public conveyance in a system that relied on depots or places along a route of travel where tired horses were replaced by fresh teams in order to expand the distance that could be traveled within a specific time frame. In Britain stage-coaches were also referred to as **post-coaches**.

A **Phaeton** is a four-wheeled carriage with or without a callech (folding) top, Phaetons usually have one, but may have two seats facing forward. Phaetons, generally are driven by the owner, rather than by a coachman

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Figure 7 Buckboard Phaeton

The **barouche** is a medium sized vehicle, not as large as a coach. Typically there are two rows of seats oriented so that the passengers face each other. Most barouches are equipped with folding tops that may be opened or closed depending on the weather.

Figure 8 Barouche -278

Curricles and **gigs** are light two-wheeled carriages. They usually seat one or two people, one being the driver.

The primary distinction between the two aforementioned vehicles is that the curricle is drawn by two horses and the gig by one.

In Jane's century this was the equivalent of a sports car, and was mostly driven by rich young men.

Figure 9 Curricle

The **Hackney-coach** is the equivalent of a modern day taxicab. It came in a wide variety of shapes and sizes and in Jane's day they were often recycled old carriages and coaches of the rich.

A **Cabriolet** is a doorless, hooded, one-horse carriage. Often a young gentleman's vehicle. Cabriolets were sometimes let out for hire. The modern word cab is probably derived from the name of this vehicle

Figure 10 Cabriolet

Livery refers to the costumes worn by servants who manned and operated rich person's vehicles. These uniforms would reflect the colors (and sometime the styles) from a noble employer's coat of arms.

Figure 12 18th Century Coachman's coat - back

Figure 11 18th Century Coachman's coat - font

Depending on the size of the vehicle and the economic standing it would require from one to four servants as accompaniment to a ride.
- John Sciacchitano 3/2009

Jane Austen's Novels

Sense and Sensibility (1811)
Pride and Prejudice (1813)
Mansfield Park (1814)
Emma (1816)
Northanger Abbey (1818)
Persuasion (1818)
Sanditon (uncompleted)