

A tour through England and Scotland by post-chaise and stage-coach in 1796



Changing Horses to a Post-Chaise outside the 'George' Posting-house, Charles Cooper Henderson. Painted c.1830-1840. Courtesy of the Tate Gallery. Image released under Creative Commons CC-BY-NC-ND (3.0 Unported).

Charles Hatchett (1765-1847), an accomplished scientist, credited with the discovery of the element niobium, kept a day-to-day account of a four-month journey he made in 1796 through England and southern Scotland. He travelled primarily by post-chaise (a private hire coach when the customer could go where/s/he wanted when s/he wanted, the eighteenth century equivalent of an executive limo) and partly by scheduled stage-coach services which ran on timetables between coaching inns. Both post-chaises and stage coaches would change horses (see picture) every ten miles or so at coaching inns. As a result they were able to travel faster, and further in a day than a coach or a horse-rider not changing horses regularly.

Like many contemporary travelers who tried to avoid the great difficulties arising from the wet and muddy conditions of the roads any earlier in the year, Hatchett set out from London in late April. He first made his way to Devon and then travelled to the Midlands, before proceeding to northeastern England and southern Scotland.

A scientist with an enquiring mind, Hatchett's primary aim during his trip was to visit, to survey and to observe various industries. Accordingly, his travel account is not short of pen sketches of machinery in

operation in different industries. Apart from that, being interested in minerals, he also gave detailed descriptions, and sometimes sketches, of the types and qualities of soils and minerals in places he visited.

A detailed recording of his travel experience was not Hatchett's intention, but for the first two months of his trip, he recorded the departure and arrival times of his journey, the length of the journey and the costs incurred on a daily basis. Thanks to these incidental details, we can obtain some revealing insights into various aspects of travelling by road in the late eighteenth century.

Not surprisingly, travelling by post-chaise on roads was slow. Regardless of where he was in the country and of the quality of the roads, Hatchett's account shows clearly that the speed of travelling by post-chaise rarely exceeded six miles per hour. Given this slow speed, one could not travel far in a day. For example, on the 27th of June, Hatchett set out from Berwick-Upon-Tweed to Edinburgh. He left Berwick at 9 am in the morning, first passing by Dunbar (28 miles from Berwick), then passing by Haddington (10 miles from Dunbar) before finally arriving in Edinburgh at 8 pm. This was 11 hours of travelling in total for a journey of about 60 miles. Today, one can drive from Berwick to Edinburgh via the A1 in just over an hour while the train journey between Berwick and Edinburgh takes just 40 minutes. Over the past two hundred years, the speed of travelling by road has increased more than tenfold. Not only has the speed of travelling increase dramatically, the freedom of how and when one can choose to travel has also been enhanced greatly.

Travelling was also expensive, particularly if one wanted to travel a great distance over a substantial period. In the old (imperial) pre-metric currency in use until decimalization in 1971 there were 20 shillings in a pound and 12 pence is a shilling. Hatchett's account shows clearly that the average cost of travelling in a post-chaise per mile was just over 1 shilling. For example, on his journey from Derby to Matlock (17 miles) on the 4th June, he paid 18 shilling 5 pence in total. That was 1 shilling, 1 pence per mile. Strikingly similar figures can be found in his other journeys throughout the country. Earlier, on the 8th of May, Hatchett made three journeys from Tavistock to Callington (9 miles), from Callington to Liskeard (9 miles), and from Liskeard to St. Austell (21 miles). For these 39 miles, he paid 2 pounds, 4 shillings, and 6 pence in total for the post-chaise (That was about 1 shilling and 2 pence per mile). To put these expenses into perspective, an agricultural labourer could rarely make more than 12 shillings per week by the end of the eighteenth century. Hatchett's expense on post-chaise on the 8th May alone equated to several weeks' wages of an unskilled men. Hatchett's total expense on post-chaisses throughout the four months' journey may have well been greater than several years' wages of an unskilled labourer. The cost of travelling was not just limited to the expense of the post-chaise. For long distance travel, lodging, drinks and food etc. all incurred great expense. For example, during Hatchett's three days' stay in Birmingham between the 29th May and the 31st May, he paid 1 pound, 12 shillings and 9 pence for lodging, food and drink. During his two-day stay in Bakewell, he paid 1 pound and 3 shillings for lodging, food and drink. During his two days' stay in Bath, he paid 3 pounds and 6 pence.

Apart from the low speed and great cost and the inability to travel door-to-door, travelling by stage-chaise could be decidedly uncomfortable. Hatchett's annoyance was apparent in his account from the 3rd May:

'At one in the morning set out in the Exeter Coach or Spanish Mail for Exeter. Rainy morning ... In the coach was a young Gunner going to Plymouth pretty much in liquor[i.e. drunk] , a Mrs. Dawson wife of Sir E Pelew's gunner going to join her husband at Plymouth, a young women going also to Plymouth, and two

children of Mrs. Dawson, one 9 and the other 6 years old. The coach was therefore much crowded so that I was exceedingly crippled; and on account of the heat, pressure and stench from the sailor of gin and tobacco, Savaresi seemed to think that he was got into a place like the Blake Hole at Calcutta. As it rained the females wanted to have the 'glasses' (i.e. windows) up, but were stoutly opposed by Mr. S. who carried at length his point, being greatly agitated. He swore in Italian, German, French and broken English. The children were sometimes upon our knees and at other times kicked my shins'.

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