

A Japanese delegation visits Britain in 1872



Leaders of the Iwakura Mission photographed in London in 1872. Public Domain Image.

Following the forcible opening of Japan to the outside world by US gunboats in 1854 after three hundred years of almost complete closure to the outside world. Fourteen years later the Tokugawa shogunate was overthrown and the emperor restored in the Meiji Restoration of 1868. The new government embarked on a deliberate and systematic policy of ‘modernization.’ Partly with this in mind, a group of administrators (mainly former Samurai) led by the foreign minister, Prince Iwakura Tomomi visited the US, Britain and a number of other European countries on a fact-finding mission aimed in part at working out who did what best and what to copy from whom.¹ The expedition is usually referred to as the Iwakura embassy. An official report of the journey was compiled by Iwakura’s private secretary, Kume Kunitake. His account has been translated into English in both full and abridged forms.² The embassy arrived in Liverpool by steamer from the US on the 17th August 1872. Kunitake provides useful information on travel around the UK in the mid-Victorian

¹ The new Japanese government copied the British post office, though they did so following an earlier fact-finding mission on 1870 by Maejima Hisoka. Red pillar boxes, just like those of Victorian Britain, though dating from 1901, are still a common sight in Japan.

² This account derives from the abridged version: *Japan Rising: The Iwakura Embassy to the USA and Europe 1871-1873*, compiled by Kume Kunitake, edited by Chuschichi Tsuzuki and R. Jules Young with an introduction by Ian Nish (Cambridge, 2009)

period by which time the railway was firmly established as the preferred mode of travel over distances of any length.



The first fully steam-powered railway in the world, the Liverpool Manchester Railway, had opened in 1830. Henry Pyall - T.T. Bury (1831), Coloured Views on the Liverpool and Manchester Railway. Public Domain Image.

On October 9th, the embassy left their hotel in Manchester at 10.30 to take an 11 o'clock train north to Scotland. They passed the southern end of Morecambe Bay around 2.30 in the afternoon and alighted at Bishopton station in Scotland 'some time after half past eight.' They were taken to the residence of Lord Blantyre at Erskine Hall by carriage. The rail journey, which today is scheduled to take 3 hours and 44 minutes, took the Japanese delegation, something over 9.5 hours. Since the distance was around 220 miles this implies an average speed of around 23 miles an hour. This is slow by the standards of rail travel today, but was still double the top speed of the fastest coaches, around 12 m.p.h. a generation earlier. Note, however, that the final part of their journey, from the railway stations, was by horse-drawn carriage (a private coach).

On the 21st October, Iwakura and his colleagues left their hotel in Edinburgh at 10 a.m. At 11.30 a.m. they arrived at Galsahiel station, where they were met by the deacon of the manufacturers association and were taken by carriage to visit a tweed mill. The train journey was a distance of some sixty miles which implies, since it must have been after 10 by the time their train left Newcastle, an average journey speed of something over 40 m.p.h. a speed at which no previous

generation of humans had ever been able to travel before – the fastest speed that can be reached riding a horse is around 30 m.ph. and then only for short distances.



William Logsdail, St Martin in the Fields [Trafalgar Square] 1881. Image courtesy of the Tate Gallery London. Image released under [Creative Commons CC-BY-NC-ND \(3.0 Unported\)](#). As this image illustrates, long after the coming of the railway, horse drawn vehicles remained important for short trips.

The Japanese delegation left Newcastle at 10 o'clock in the morning on the 24th October 1872 arriving in Bradford an half past two in the afternoon. The journey of ninety miles was, therefore,

undertaken at an average speed of 20 miles per hour. The fact that it was raining would not have discomfited any of the passengers on the train, in contrast to the experience of outside travellers on a stage coach in earlier times. They were welcomed by the Mayor and then taken by carriage to the Victoria Hotel. Both the railways station and their route to the hotel were thronged with onlookers.