

A German visitor in 1782. Travels on foot and by stage-coach.

The accounts of foreign travellers are particularly useful because they often describe and comment on things which native writers take for granted that their readers will know, or simply do not see as being of any interest. Additionally they often make explicit comparisons with conditions in their native country. One such useful account was written in 1782 by a 26-year-old visitor from Germany, Karl Philip Moritz. His account began as letters home to an acquaintance which were subsequently published in German (1783) and later in English (1795)¹

Moritz arrived in England by boat from Hamburg. As the ship approached the English coast he saw 'the tops of two masts of ships just peeping above the surface of the deep' and commented 'What an awful warning to the adventurous men! We now sail close by those very sands (*the Goodwin*) where so many unfortunate persons have found their graves.'²

Walking from Cockstock to Leicester



Country Scene, with Travellers, attributed to John Inigo Richards, 1731-1810. Image, courtesy of the Tate Gallery, London. Image released under [Creative Commons CC-BY-NC-ND \(3.0 Unported\)](#)

¹ Moritz, p. vii-viii.

² Moritz, *Travels*, p. 13. The Goodwin sands, off Deal in Kent were notoriously dangerous. Over 2,000 ships are known to have been wrecked there.

Moritz chose to walk for much of his journey around England in order to see the country better. Towards the end of his trip, having spent a restless and unpleasant night in a rather unpleasant inn at Cockstock in Leicestershire he walked to Leicester via Loughborough. Although the distance from Loughborough to Leicester, by his reckoning, was only ten miles, he noted that the road was very sandy and very unpleasant walking. This indicates that the road, like most roads, apart from turnpikes and paved urban roads, was unsurfaced and the surface could be far from ideal even in mid-summer.

From Leicester to Northampton

On what was probably the 12th of July 1782, Moritz arrived at Leicester on foot 'towards evening', having walked something over fifteen miles that day, and decided to take the stage-coach back to London that evening. Unfortunately, all the inside seats had been sold, so he decided to travel to Northampton on the outside, a decision he soon regretted, noting that he would remember the ride to Northampton, 'as long as I live.' He gives the following account of his journey from Leicester to Northampton, which today can be done by car, in around an hour:



Charles Cooper-Henderson, Mail coach in a snowstorm, painted 1835-40. Image courtesy of the Tate Gallery London. Image released under [Creative Commons CC-BY-NC-ND \(3.0 Unported\)](#)

The coach drove from the yard through a part of the house [in other words through a passageway of the kind which characterised coaching inns and which survive in large numbers on High Streets up and down the country today]. The inside passengers got in, in the yard; but we on the outside were obliged to clamber up in the public street, because we should have no room for our heads to pass under the gateway.

My companions on the top of the coach, were a farmer, a young man very decently dressed and a black-a-moor [i.e. a black person. Moritz does not comment on whether he had ever encountered any black people before].

The getting up alone was at the risk of one's life; and when I was up, I was obliged to sit just at the corner of the coach with nothing to hold on to, but a sort of little handle fastened on the side. I sat nearest the wheel; and the moment that we set off, I fancied that I saw certain death await me. All I could do, was to take faster hold of the handle, and to be more careful to preserve my balance.

The machine now rolled along with prodigious rapidity [it is worth noting that the coach is unlikely to have been doing much over ten miles per hour and one gets the impression that in Germany Moritz had never previously travelled at such speed], over the stones through the town [which suggests the streets of Leicester had been paved by this date] and every moment we seemed to fly into the air; so that it was almost a miracle that, that we still stuck to the coach and did not fall. We seemed to be thus on the wing, and to fly, as often as we passed through a village, or went down a hill.

At last the being continually in fear of my life became, unsupportable, and as we were going up a hill, and consequently proceeding rather slower than usual, I crept from the top of the coach and got snug in the basket [a luggage rack attached to the rear of the coach]

"O, Sir, you will be shaken to death!" said the black; but I flattered myself, he exaggerated the unpleasantness of my post.

As long as went up hill, it was easy and pleasant. And, having had little or no sleep the night before, I was almost asleep among the trunks and the packages; but how was the case altered when we came to go down the hill; then all the trunks and parcels began, as it were, to dance around me, and every thing in the basket seemed to be alive; and I every moment received from them such violent blows, that I thought my last hour had come. I now found that what the black had told me, was no exaggeration; but all my complaints were useless. I was obliged to suffer this torture nearly an hour, till we came to another hill again, when quite shaken to pieces and sadly bruised, I crept again to the top of the coach, and took possession of my former seat. "Ah did not I tell you, that you would be shaken to death?" said the black, as I was getting back up; but I made him no reply. Indeed I was so ashamed; and I now write this as a warning to all strangers to stage-coaches who may happen to take a place on the outside of an English post-coach; and still more a place in the basket. [As the pictures above of a journey in winter and below of a journey in a thunderstorm, both a generation later, make clear, stage-coach journeys could be a good deal more uncomfortable than this.

About midnight we arrived at Harborough, where I could rest myself a moment before we were again called to set off, full-drive, through a number of villages, so that a few hours before day-break we had arrived at Harborough, which is however thirty three miles from Northampton. [Note that this coach is travelling through the night. This required very good road surfaces and had not generally been possible before the later eighteenth century]

From Harborough to Leicester [Northampton] I had a most dreadful journey, it rained incessantly; and as before we had been covered in dust, we now were soaked in rain [the dust of which Moritz complained arose from many turnpike roads being surfaced by local available gravel of indifferent quality which powdered under the impact of traffic throwing up great clouds of dust]. My neighbour the young man who sat next to me in the middle that my inconveniences might be complete, every now and then fell asleep; and as he perpetually bolted and rolled against me, with the whole weight of his body, more than once he near pushing me entirely off my seat.

We at last reached Northampton, where I immediately went to bed, and have slept almost till noon. Tomorrow morning I intend to continue my journey to London in some other stage-coach.



The mail coach in a thunder storm on Newmarket Heath, Suffolk, 1827. Public Domain Image

On the 14th July, having arrived back in London, Moritz gave an uncharacteristically grumpy account of his journey from Northampton back to London:

The journey from Northampton to London I can hardly call a journey; but rather a perpetual motion, or removal from one place to another in a box. During your conveyance you may, perhaps, if you are in luck, converse with two or three people shut up along with you.

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