

Mr William Schellinks, a dutch visitor who kept a journal recording his visit to England in 1661 provides insights into travel in England at this date.



Sea travel was perilous and frequently very uncomfortable. Peter Monamy, Ships in distress in a storm, painted c.1720-30. Image courtesy of the Tate Gallery, London. Image released under [Creative Commons CC-BY-NC-ND \(3.0 Unported\)](#)

He boarded a 'packet' soon after half past one in the afternoon on the 16th July 1661 in the river at Hellovoetsluijs in the Dutch Republic. There was some delay while other passengers joined the boat and the mail was taken on board. The wind was blowing from the north and west and the boat initially drifted with the ebb tide out to sea. Around 11pm the wind died and the weather remained calm till one or two in the afternoon. Precise details are not given but it is clear the boat travelled no great distance in the first 24 hours of its voyage. The wind then turned to blow north and east and the ship got up a good speed. After a close encounter with some French pirates who gave up on the plan to board the ship, they approached the English coast at Aldburgh and then sailed south, hugging the coast past Orford Ness. The ship was carrying smuggled goods and a man in small boat who had been waiting for the packet since 4 a.m. in the morning warned the crew that a customs boat was looking for them. They soon encountered the customs' ship but outran them. By 11pm in the evening their boat had sailed up river to Harwich and moored in the 'roads' from when a row boat took them ashore. The total journey time was about 34 hours, though in better weather it could clearly have been done in as little as ten hours and the journey was not without some unwanted excitement.

Schellinks spent the night at the Golden Angel and spent the first part of the morning looking around the town before taking the stage coach to Gravesend at 11 o'clock on the morning of the 18th. Jenks was not impressed by the 'four miserable nags' who were pulling the coach. The speed was clearly

very slow because the coach master, Mr Francis Dagger, travelled on 'shanks's pony (i.e. walking) in front of the coach, while his servant sat on the front of the coach whipping the horses along. Despite the slow speed the coach overturned, which probably says something about the nature of the road surface. No-one appears to have been hurt in the accident, but one Schellink's travelling companions, a Mr Thiery, sprained his ankle, possibly getting back into the coach and was unable to stand or walk for 7-8 weeks afterwards. The coach rumbled on through Ramsey and other villages to the market town of Manningtree and on through Ardleigh arriving in Colchester, at 3 o'clock in the afternoon. This was a distance of about twenty miles in four hours, so an average speed of around five miles an hour. Mr Dagger must have been a fast walker or perhaps Schellink's did not record the arrival or departure time accurately. As we will see later, it is likely that Schellink's did indeed mis-record one or other time and that the journey was not made at so fast speed as five miles per hour.

The following day, the 19th July, Schellinks and his companions took the coach at 4 o'clock in the morning. The coach's early start was no doubt to take advantage of the long summer days. Coaches could not travel at night in this period because the state of the road surfaces made this far too hazardous. The coach passed through the villages of Lexden and Stanway, through the market town of Feering and then through Springfield before stopping at the relatively large town of Chelmsford where they had a midday meal at the Golden Lion. This journey of about 25 miles which might take 35 minutes in a car today, took Schellinks and his companions around 8 hours, suggesting a speed of around three miles an hour, significantly slower than the inferred speed of the previous day's journey.

The party left Chelmsford at one o'clock passing through Shenfield, Stock and Billericay a market village which impressed Shellinks with its 'fine houses and shops'. It was market day and Shellinks noted that most of the shoppers were women on horseback unaccompanied by their menfolk. The coach soon broke down due to the bad state of the road but was quickly repaired. When they came to a relatively steep hill it was necessary for all the passengers, except the unfortunate Mr Thiery, to get out and walk up the hill. This suggests the road had not been built with wheeled traffic in mind and was not adequately graded for horse drawn vehicles. In the eighteenth century, turnpike roads would often take a new route to avoid the steep inclines, unsuitable for wheeled traffic, on the older roads. The view from the top of the hill was so attractive to Mr Schellinks that he continued walking on foot as far as the village of Langdon Hills (he wrote Laidenhill) so he could enjoy the scenery to the full. Again this suggests the coach was travelling very slowly. After refreshments at Langdon Hills the coach descended to the Thames towards the village of West Tilbury on the Thames. Schellinks reports that he saw large numbers of both Dutch and English ships further up river. They reached the Elizabethan fort opposite Gravesend at 8pm in the evening some seven hours after they had left Chelmsford, a distance of perhaps twenty miles. This again suggests an average speed of about three mile and hour, though we do know how long it took to repair the coach.

They crossed the river in a small rowing boat with two oarsman. There was no bridge across the Thames below London bridge at this date, so there was no other way to cross the river. They stayed at the White Swan though Schellinks complained of the 'bloodthirsty' English fleas and slept on a bench in preference to the perceived perils of a bed. Despite that, he described Gravesend as a fine market town with a 'decent street' coming up from the rivers, some shops and large numbers of inns for travellers and spent a further night there. Since Mr Thiery had to go to Dover and because he was not keen to travel further by road with his injured leg, on the 21st July, they hired a small boat, a lighterhorseman, manned by four men and a boy. They boarded the boat, which was equipped with a blue sunshade at 6 am in the morning and set off down river aided by the wind. Beyond

Sheerness, the boat went six miles out to sea where they had lunch before coming close in shore at Swale Cliff at three or four pm. Because it was difficult to row against the tide, three of the men got out of the boat and towed it from the beach for 2-3 miles towards Reculver. Schellinks got out and walked inland for a way rejoining the boat at Reculver where the party had some refreshments.

At this point it becomes clear the boat had a sail as at 8.30 they sailed out to sea to catch the ebb tide to get round Margate Bay prior to sailing to Deal. But around half past ten a storm blew up with high winds, thunder and torrential rain. The little boat went 'wildly up and down.' The terrified boatmen wanted to land the boat but were too afraid of hitting submerged rocks or sandbanks in the dark as they approached the shore. The passengers' fears were heightened when the boatmen indicated they did no longer knew where they were and the difficulty of understanding the men's English only made matters worse. The weather deteriorated further but around midnight continuous lightening revealed a nearby shipping boat at anchor. They approached the boat and despite anxieties about being smashed against the larger boat managed to tie their boat fast to the bigger boat. They did not board the larger boat, presumably because it was too risky and spent a miserable few hours lying on straw under the sun roof, which was no doubt inadequate protection against the ongoing rain. They were all soaked to the skin but had to wait for an improvement in conditions. However, a fisherman on the larger boat had been able to tell them that they were just off Margate and they could see fires on the beach (from the burning of seaweed, possibly for the manufacture of soap).



A century and a half after Schellinks' journey putting to sea in a small boat was no less hazardous. Ramsgate, Kent, 1824, after J.M. Turner. Image courtesy of the Tate Gallery, London. Image released under [Creative Commons CC-BY-NC-ND \(3.0 Unported\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/)



Sheerness and Isle of Sheppey. Unfinished, engraved by J.Fisher. After JMW Turner 1755-1810.

When day came, they shed set course for the shore on the incoming tide and arrived in Margate at six in the morning on 22nd July and headed for the King's Head to dry out, get some food and have some Portuguese wine. They heard later that it took the boatmen two days to get back to Gravesend. They were unable to find a coach and had to make do with hiring a farm waggon pulled by four 'miserable' horses. They set off at eleven the next morning and went via Manston before descending to the beach and driving along the beach into Sandwich. No doubt they chose this route because the beach was a better and flatter surface than any available road, much as stage coaches would sometimes drive along Lancaster sands in the following century (see picture). They arrived in Sandwich at 2pm, a distance of 9-10 miles, again suggesting an average speed of three miles per hour, where Schellinks and his party enjoyed their lunch and the 'excellent' beer at the Dolphin Inn. They left Sandwich at 4pm in a waggon drawn by four mules with their 'captain' walking in front. They arrived in Dover at 9.30 in the evening, so it took some five and a half hours to cover a distance of about 13 miles which is around 2.5 miles per hour. Possibly the hilly terrain slowed them down from the three miles an hour which appears to have been the norm on their other road journeys. The general consistency of that figure does suggest that Schellinks may indeed have made an error in noting either the departure or arrival time when they travelled from Harwich to Colchester.

The party checked in to the Hotel a L'Escu and Schellinks seemed pleased with a large comfortable room with a sea view. It will be clear by now that transport was slow, circuitous, dangerous and expensive in this era. Modern roads may be more dangerous than we would like, but the dangers of modern travel pale into insignificance compared with the risks 350 years ago. Later in the journals

Schellinks recounts meeting various individuals with broken arms arising from accidents in stage coaches.

Coach Crossing Lancaster Sands. Artist unknown Date painted: c.1820



This account derives from *The journal of William Schellink's travel in England 1661-1663*, Translated from the Dutch by Maurice Exwood and H.L. Lehman, Camden 5th Series, Volume I (1993).

Leigh Shaw-Taylor 26.11.2016

Note: I'm not sure if I will be able to get permission to reproduce the picture (Lancaster City Council) so may need to cut that and the reference to it.