



The Heritage Family History

School Records Project

Information Sheet 1: Transport in Victorian Times

Today we rely upon our cars to get us around. At the beginning of Victoria's reign things were very different. There were no cars and people were used to walking long distances. All children would have walked to school even if it was long way away. Richer people could afford a horse and cart while the main form of public transport was the stage coach. These were horse driven coaches that followed long distance routes, breaking the journey up into stages in order to give both passengers and horses a break. Stage coaches were expensive and very uncomfortable. The poorer people could pay for a cheaper ticket which meant they had to sit on the outside of the coach. They got very wet if it rained! If you were poor then, in most cases you had to walk.

Local farmers would send their goods for sale at the local market using a horse and cart. The local market might have been ten miles away, sometimes more. There has always been a flourishing trade between the United Kingdom and other countries however, goods being brought into and out of the country by sea.

- Compare a modern day map of your area with a map from the nineteenth century, looking to see the difference in the number and size of the roads today with those from the Victorian period.
- Do the roads in the older map lead from town to town? If so these were probably roads that would have connected towns with markets. Before the advent of the railways good communications between market towns were very important for farmers as they relied on the local markets for selling their goods.

Canals and Railways

In the late eighteenth century there was a great demand for British goods both at home and around the world. Therefore there was a growing need to be able to move large quantities of goods around the country quickly. One of the most efficient means of transport was water and therefore a network of canals had been built in the eighteenth century. By Victorian times however this was increasing seen as a rather slow means of transport.

At the beginning of the 19th century two men, Richard Trevithick and George Stephenson made important advances in developing what had become known as the steam engine: an engine powered by steam. George Stephenson's discoveries led to the swift development of railways. By 1848 there were some 5000 miles of railway line in the UK and the railways were used not only to transport goods such as coal, but also to transport passengers.

Railway travel was very fast compared to the canals and also to horse drawn vehicles. By the 1870s the railways made long distance travel affordable for nearly everyone and in larger cities such as London and Birmingham it had even made it possible for someone to live 30 miles or more from his place of work. These were the first commuters and the ease of travel meant that much new housing was being built on the outskirts of the largest cities. These became known as suburbs. Trams were introduced in 1870 and in 1890 the first "Tube" railway was built in London running from the south of the city into the centre. This was to relieve the congestion in the city caused by too many trams and horse drawn vehicles.

Meanwhile the new railways made trips to the seaside very popular and saw the growth of towns such as Blackpool, Brighton, Margate and Lowestoft as popular holiday resorts and places to get some sea air, which was considered to be good for your health.

- Look at a modern day map for your area. Is there a railway or canal near you? When was it built and is it still in use? Perhaps it has been restored for leisure use.
- Try and look at a nineteenth century map and compare. Are there any old railway lines which no longer exist?

The Bicycle

By the 1870s many bicycles were being built by local blacksmiths. They were relatively cheap to buy so lots of people could afford one and, for the first time, had their own private means of travelling around.

Cars

By the end of Queen Victoria's reign cars were to be seen driving the streets of the United Kingdom. A small car actually cost less to buy and to run than a horse and carriage! In towns and cities new houses for better off people were no longer built with stables because so many other forms of transport were now available as an alternative to the horse, although it would be a long time before houses came to be routinely built with garages!

- Use a search engine and search on "history of the motor car" or "invention of the automobile" to find out more about how cars developed.
- What new jobs do you think the development of the motor car led to?