
The Inkwell

Transports of Delight How Jane Austen's Characters Got Around by Ed Ratcliffe

I wrote this paper to answer my own questions about the carriages in Jane Austen's novels. What was a landaulet? Why was Mrs. Elton so proud of her sister's barouche-landau? And so on. I found a lot of answers in a remarkable book by a London carriage-builder of Austen's time. His name was William Felton, and he wrote a three-volume description of carriages and carriage building called *A Treatise on Carriages*. It was described recently as "the most comprehensive and definitive work on design and construction of elegant carriages."

First let's get the terminology straight. "Carriage" was the general name for almost any horse-drawn passenger vehicle. A chariot, a chaise, or a gig was just a kind of carriage. In mentioning the vehicles owned by her characters, Austen used the general name, carriage, and a specific name such as gig with about equal frequency, and in most cases I don't know why she chose one name instead of the other. We can be sure that such a careful writer had her reasons.

The designs and names of carriages were not rigidly established. Carriages were usually built to meet the exact wishes of the buyer, so there could be considerable difference in design from vehicle to vehicle of the same type. Names were sometimes applied loosely; when the Crofts offer a ride to Anne Elliot on her walk from Winthrop to Uppercross, the narrator calls their vehicle a gig, and later in the same paragraph a one-horse chaise.

Imagine that you're living in an English village 200 years ago. You have very little money. If you leave the village, how will you travel? You will walk. Walking trips, even of 100 miles and more, were the way a large fraction of the population traveled.

What kinds of roads will you encounter? The evidence is mixed. Although each parish was required by law to maintain the roads within its boundaries, the law was rarely enforced. Until the 18th century, roads were so bad that walking was usually the fastest means of travel. But by 1800 many road surfaces were "incomparably better" than a century earlier. The tollgates of the Turnpike Trusts, most of them set up in the first half of the century, had by 1770 collected sufficient funds to improve thousands of miles of roads, greatly reducing travel times. The 256 hours of travel by carriage between Edinburgh and London, for example, had been reduced to 60 hours. A 2004

study called the change a transportation revolution.

But work remained to be done on many of the roads Austen knew. The improvements of the Turnpike Trusts had not reached them, and the pioneering highway engineers Telford and McAdam, who made major improvements in highway design, began their work around 1815, very late in her life. The existence of the narrow single-passenger post-chaise, whose sole purpose was to prevent a traveler from being thrown around violently on bad roads, speaks volumes about the quality of some English roads.

On the other hand, one writer of the period complained that some roads were so smooth that coachmen were falling asleep. Austen was able to read aloud the text of *Mansfield Park* to her brother Henry while they traveled by road from Alton to London. She, like most of her characters, generally seemed to travel easily and rapidly. In sum, the quality of English roads appears to have ranged widely in her time, from poor to quite good.



For those who could afford to ride instead of walk, the cheapest form of road transport was the **long wagon**. As shown in this picture of 1805, it was a large, slow, clumsy, primitive wagon carrying passengers as well as goods. It usually moved slower than a traveler could walk. Its wheels were 18 inches wide to avoid sinking too far into the mud, snow, and potholes. It had no springs and its passengers must have been at times quite uncomfortable, but it cost a passenger only about one-fourth as much as a stagecoach. The long wagon is not mentioned in Jane Austen's stories, and I include it here because it was a common sight on the roads of her time.

Transport of goods by road was expensive. An 1818 estimate was that it cost as much to haul a tonne of payload 30 miles by road as it did to move it across the Atlantic by ship. That is, one mile by road cost about as much as 100 miles by sea. That is why the Dashwood furniture "was all sent round by water" from Norland to Barton.



Many English people, including some of the gentry on occasion, traveled by **stagecoach**. Here's a stagecoach or two at The Swan with Two Necks, one of the largest coaching inns in London. Inns like this kept as many as 400 horses on hand, stabled underground because land in central London was expensive. This inn was quite close to Gracechurch Street, and Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner may have used horses from such an inn for the first stage of their northern journey.

A variety of Austen's characters used stagecoaches: the child Fanny Price on her way to Mansfield Park, her brother William on his visits to Mansfield Park, Robert Martin on his business trip to London, Mr. Elton on his wife-hunting trips to Bath, as well as servants and hired musicians. They might have shared a crowded cabin or a precarious perch on the roof with fellow passengers who could be noisy or rude. There's abundant evidence that stagecoach travel could be unpleasant.

Several of Jane Austen's brothers used stagecoaches. At the age of 20, Austen wrote to her sister about a proposed trip from Steventon to London: "As to the mode of our travelling to Town, I want to go in a Stage Coach, but Frank will not let me." In later life she did travel in stagecoaches occasionally, and sometimes used them to carry her trunk when she rode in a different conveyance.



Beginning in 1784 **Royal Mail stagecoaches**, shown here in 1805, made a revolutionary improvement in English mail service. Before that time the mails had been carried by “a very low or worthless boy, mounted on a miserable hack . . . too often suspected of being in collusion with the robber.” Post boys were robbed so frequently that a contemporary account described the mail as “very unsafe, and to avoid loss, people generally cut Bank Bills in two, and send the parts by a different post. The Postmasters General advertised directions to the public how to divide a bill, in such a manner as to prevent its being of any use to a robber.”

Royal Mail coaches set standards of speed and safety by which all other travel was judged. The blunderbuss and four pistols of the guard and driver gave excellent protection from highwaymen, and the coaches could outrun many pursuers. In Austen’s time dozens of Mail coaches set out from central London promptly at eight p.m. every night, carrying mail to 320 destinations across the country. The guard on each coach was provided with a watch that had just been checked and locked, and at the end of the trip he was required to provide a written explanation of any delay that occurred. Although as many as seven passengers were allowed on a coach, the primary concern of the guard and driver was the safety and speed of the mail. Mail coaches were not required to stop and pay at a toll gate, and circumstances sometimes allowed a Mail coach to hurry through a town at its top speed of 10 miles an hour, picking up and dropping off mailbags without even slowing down. Schedules allowed only five or six minutes for changing horses at a posting station, and some ostlers actually learned how to change out a four-horse team on a Mail coach in sixty seconds. On the four hundred mile trip from London to Edinburgh the Mail coaches often arrived within five minutes of their scheduled time. Do we do as well today?

The Mail coaches operated in all weathers, in winters worse than ours, and I’ve read harrowing stories of guards overcoming terrible obstacles of wind, snow, and sub-zero temperatures to get the mail through—by horseback if the coach broke down, by foot if the horse broke down. I’ve read stories of other guards who did not survive.

Edmund Bertram’s arrival at Portsmouth “by the mail” from London before eight a.m. points up a disadvantage of the Mail service for some passengers: on trips of moderate length such as this, travel was mostly at night and not always comfortable. The poet Samuel Coleridge complained that on a Mail coach trip in 1807 he could manage no more than uneasy, fitful dozing, and as a result felt “coach-fevered, coach-crazed, and

coach-stunned." And for all the admiration the Mail service drew, it was not above caricature.



Mail coaches began to lose passengers in the 1830s, when the absence of highway robbers allowed commercial stage coaches—just as safe, less hurried, and in daylight—to flourish. The last stagecoaches disappeared when railroads covered the land in the early twentieth century. The last stagecoach line in California was a Wells Fargo run from Yreka into Oregon in 1918.

Austen mentions highway robbers only once, to say that they did not trouble Catherine Morland on her journey to Bath. Austen probably avoided such characters in her novels because she had satirized melodrama in her juvenile stories. Highwaymen, a major concern in earlier times, declined through the second half of the 18th century and diminished to insignificance toward the end of Austen's life. Most important in their decline were the toll roads, which encouraged a considerable increase of traffic, making secret operations more difficult, and the presence of toll-gate keepers, making undetected escape much harder after a crime. After 1815 highway robbers are rarely mentioned, and the last mounted highway robber was recorded in 1831.

A step up from the stagecoach in some respects was the common practice of **riding a horse** for trips of moderate length. When the impoverished Edward Ferrars arrived at Barton Cottage on horseback to propose to Elinor Dashwood, he must have been riding a rented horse—no man living on £100 a year would have attempted to own a horse. He probably traveled by stagecoach from Oxford to Exeter and rented a horse for the last four miles to Barton Cottage. A horse was Henry Tilney's usual means of travel for the "almost twenty miles" between Northanger Abbey and his Woodston parsonage. That distance seems to have been just about as far as a rider could go without resting his horse.

Austen tells us that Mr. Elton rode 16 miles from Highbury into London to take Harriet Smith's picture to be framed. Robert Chapman says we shouldn't take that 16-mile distance seriously, even though Austen mentions it five times. He says she set up a geographic impossibility here: no place can be 16 miles from the West End of London, nine miles from Richmond, and seven miles from Box Hill. He was right. I measured road distances on a copy of an 1808 map and found that we need to add five or ten

miles to each of those three distances to make Austen's statement true. Even then, the three routes would converge in an area where in 1808 there was not even a village. Chapman says Austen was probably trying to prevent the reader from identifying Highbury with any real town.

All the horseback travelers I've mentioned were men. Women generally rode for pleasure and exercise. Jane Bennet rode a horse for travel only once, briefly, and she clearly preferred a carriage.



Another rung up the economic ladder brings us to the **chaise**, a four-wheeled closed carriage intended for traveling. Most chaises were two-passenger two-horse vehicles. Sometimes a side seat was added that could fold out to hold another passenger. Susan Price sat on the fold-out seat, facing forward with her smiles hidden by her bonnet, when she left Portsmouth with Fanny Price and Edmund Bertram. In a four-passenger chaise all the seats faced forward, as in an automobile.

The vehicle shown here is a plain post-chaise, one of the most frequently seen vehicles on English roads of the time. Even on such a commonplace vehicle, carriage builders took care to install steps that folded up inside the body, invisible when the door was closed.

The poor state of many English roads caused carriage builders to give considerable attention to passenger comfort. This chaise uses a suspension system common in Austen's time. Rising almost vertically from locations just above the four wheels are four long, slightly curved steel "cee" springs (only two are visible in this side view), ending shortly above the black boxes at front and rear of the vehicle. From the upper ends of these four springs, leather straps run diagonally downward to four attachment points at the lower corners of the body. These springs and straps support the body and help cushion the passengers from the shocks of an uneven road surface. In addition, a leather strap runs diagonally upward from the top of each cee spring to a corner of the body just above the beltline. These four straps prevent the body from swinging wildly and tipping over.

Notice an oddity about this vehicle: it had no seat for a driver. Instead the chaise was controlled by a post-boy (he could be a man), or postilion, who rode on the near or left

horse. Four-horse chaises often used postilions on both lead horses in addition to the near wheel horse. When General Tilney and his party set off from Bath for Northanger Abbey we read about the "postilions handsomely liveried, rising so regularly in their stirrups." William Felton called the use of postilions absurd. He said they overburdened the horse and had been the ruin of many a good horse. A postilion, he insisted, should be replaced by a driver on a seat on the body of the vehicle. I have found nothing to indicate why postilions were common on chaises and rare on other vehicles, or indeed why they were used at all. We do know they survived for centuries. The *Oxford English Dictionary* shows that they appeared about 1600 and continued until at least 1879.

The English posting system began about 1500 as a royal message service. By Austen's time it had evolved into a network of posting stations, post-horses, and post-chaises spread all over England. Posting stations and posting inns were located from six to fifteen miles apart, depending on terrain and road conditions. A traveler who owned a carriage and horses would usually travel to the nearest posting station with them, and then send his horses and sometimes his carriage home with servants. He would travel the rest of the way with rented post-horses and either his own carriage or a series of rented post-chaises or similar vehicles. Fanny Price and Edmund Bertram set off from Mansfield Park for Portsmouth "and by the time the first stage was ended, and they were to quit Sir Thomas's carriage, she was able to take leave of the old coachman . . ."

Approaching home at the end of her trip the traveler could be conveyed in a post-chaise right to her front door, like Catherine Morland returning to Fullerton, or her own carriage and horses could meet her at the nearest posting station. We see Jane and Elizabeth Bennet returning from London to Longbourn this way, when they "draw near the appointed inn where Mr. Bennet's carriage was to meet them."



AN OLD POSTING INN

Here's how Catherine Morland used the posting system for her unhappy trip from Northanger Abbey to her home in Fullerton. Before General Tilney arrived at the Abbey on Saturday night, he must have left an order at the nearest posting station for a chaise and pair to arrive at the Abbey at seven o'clock the next morning. The chaise took Catherine to the first posting station on her route, where, if the station was more than a few miles from the abbey, fresh horses were supplied and she was quickly on her way again. Horses were changed at every station, but "in order to keep track of the vehicles, passengers, to their loudly expressed indignation, had to change to a new one at every other stage." Because she did not stop for food or rest in the 11 hours of her 70-mile trip, she averaged about six miles an hour, twice a walking speed.

Although rather primitive to our eyes, posting offered a flexibility we don't have in any public transport system today. Every ten miles or so, any traveler could, without penalty and without notice, at a moment's whim, interrupt his trip for as long as he pleased, then resume it quickly and easily at any posting station at any later time. No waiting for the next plane or train—he could order a chaise and horses and be on his way in a very few minutes. Each stage of his trip, from one posting station to the next, was an independent trip.

No traveler used his own horses for a long trip unless it was absolutely necessary. The trip would have been far too slow. Even a moderate trip, such as the Tilney journey from Bath to Northanger Abbey, had to be interrupted after just fifteen miles to give the chaise horses a two-hour rest. We know that another trip in the same vehicle, from Northanger Abbey to Woodston, a distance of "nearly twenty miles," was done without stopping to rest the horses, because its average speed over the whole distance was seven miles an hour. The absence of baggage surely helped, and the General may have had fewer servants aboard so far from the public display of Bath.

Willoughby's trip from Barton to London, after his disastrous parting from Marianne Dashwood, showed what happened when a traveler did use his own horses for a long trip. He traveled "so tediously" he said, because "I was travelling with my own horses."

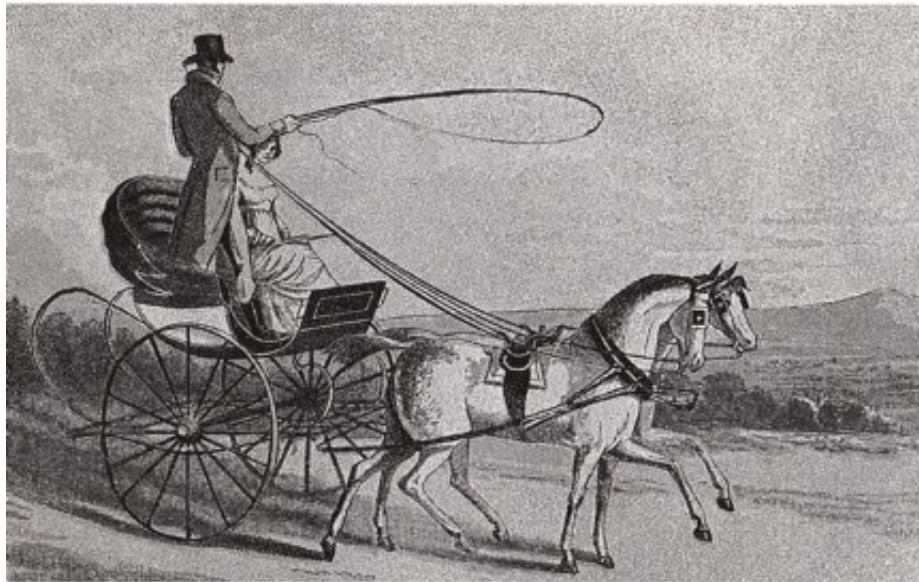
Later, when he heard that Marianne was dying at Cleveland, Willoughby rushed 120 miles from London to Cleveland, probably by using four horses instead of two. Although he heard about Marianne's desperate condition one evening and was anxious to be on his way at once, he did not set out for Cleveland until the next morning. It was a wise delay. Traveling at night almost alone in unfamiliar territory exposed the traveler to the possible hazards of highway robbers and the probable discomforts and dangers of bad roads.

Even in familiar territory, evening social activities in the country were confined to the moonlit half of the month. Carriage lights consisted only of a pair of candles or small oil lamps, which simply indicated the presence of a vehicle and shed little light on the road. Here's what William Felton had to say about carriage lights: "Oil has proved objectionable by the smoke it creates, and being also filthy to use about a carriage: candle is what is always used, and is certainly best, being clean and easily applied." He then informs the public (with just a little commercial tilt in his voice) that he has "procured a candle made of a superior composition, with a burner, which gives a light

more clear than any yet ever used for lamps," sold "only at his Office."

Mr. and Mrs. Suckling owned a chaise in addition to their heavy barouche-landau. It was surely in the lightweight chaise that Mr. Suckling took his friend "twice in one week to London and back again with four horses." It may not have been the feat Mrs. Elton implied. The 500 miles could have been accomplished in six 12-hour days at only seven miles an hour. A wearisome grind, but a feat of endurance, not speed. At the other extreme the four horses could have provided four dramatic 125-mile dashes, but in that case I would fully expect Mrs. Elton to mention those dashes. She didn't.

Chaises were owned or used by major characters in every novel. Most appear to be two-horse vehicles, but we are entitled to suspect that Sir Walter Elliot's purchase of a chaise-and-four was what he was "imperiously called on to do." The compliant Mr. Bingley likely bought his chaise-and-four at the insistence of his snobbish sisters.



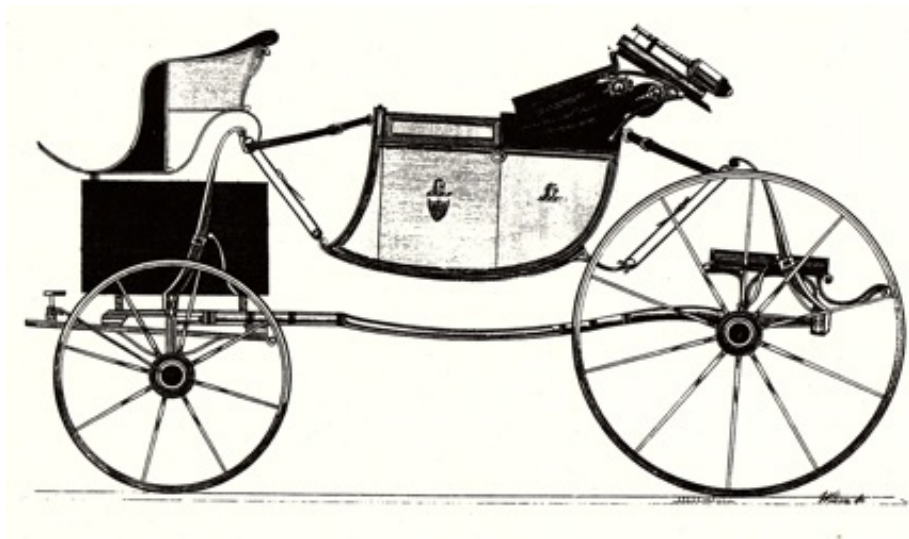
The **curricle** was a kind of early sports car, a small lightweight carriage, sometimes with only two wheels, generally drawn by two horses for speed. Some curricles were open; others had a top that could be lowered. Notice how high the passengers sit in this example, to allow the body lots of vertical travel. The elevation and top-heaviness of the load meant the vehicle could overturn easily. This is the Prince of Wales driving a curricle and an adoring young lady to Brighton. I'm sure Willoughby looked just as dashing when he drove Marianne Dashwood around the neighborhood of Barton.

All the curricle owners were young men: Mr. Darcy, Mr. William Elliot, Charles Musgrove, Tom Musgrove, Mr. Rushworth, Henry Tilney, and John Willoughby.

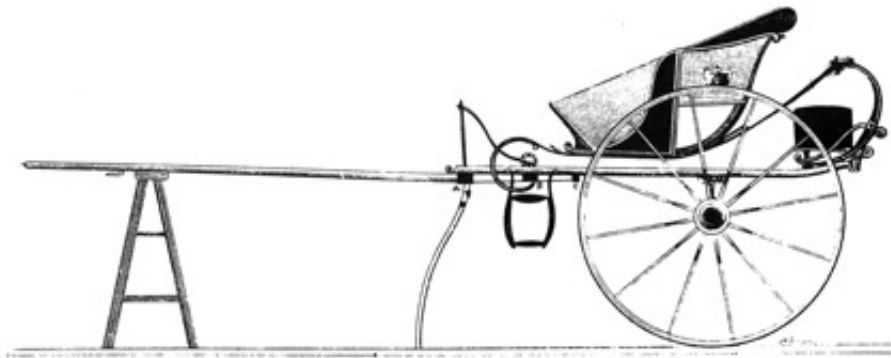


Phaetons were small, light pleasure vehicles. This illustration from a fashion magazine of 1794, captioned "Two young ladies in calico taking an airing in a phaeton," is by the celebrated Humphrey Repton. A phaeton had either no top at all or one that could be thrown back in good weather. The name was applied loosely to several kinds of carriages: a Stanhope, a mail, a park phaeton, a dogcart, and several others. Considering how high and precariously the passengers sit in this example, Mrs. Gardiner chose wisely when she suggested that she and Elizabeth Bennet use a "low phaeton" for riding around the park at Pemberley.

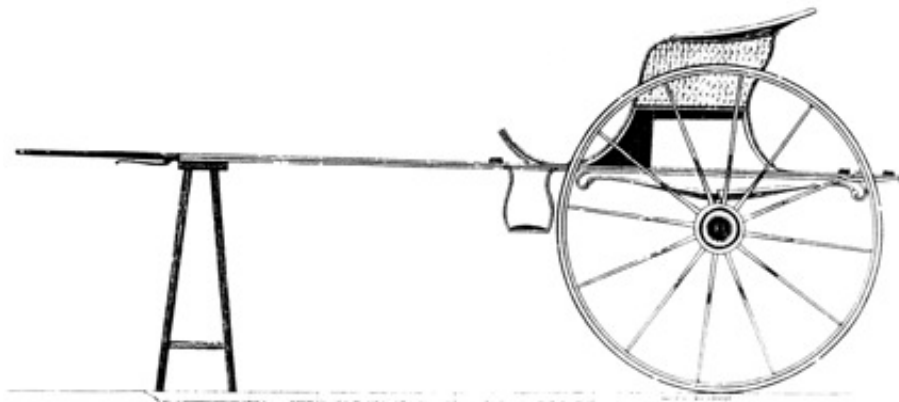
Only Miss de Bourgh owned a phaeton.



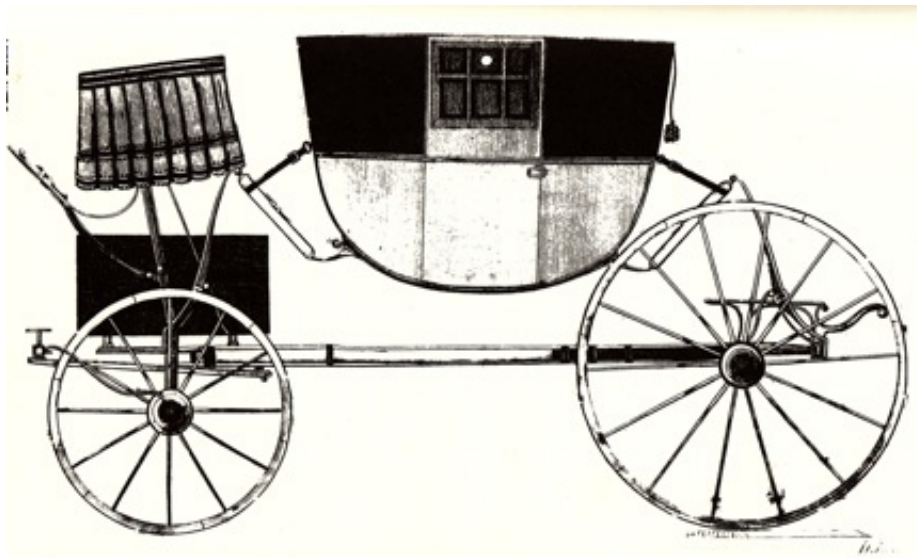
Anne Wentworth owned an even smaller vehicle, “a very pretty **landaulet**.” It was a tiny two-passenger version of a landau (see below). Cee springs and their straps are highly visible here, and even the driver’s seat has its own little springs. Question: do you think Anne wanted to have a footman standing on that rear platform?



A **gig** was a small unpretentious two-passenger carriage. The dreadful John Thorpe, Admiral Croft and his wife, Mr. Collins, Sir Edward Denham, and Jane Austen’s brother Henry owned gigs.

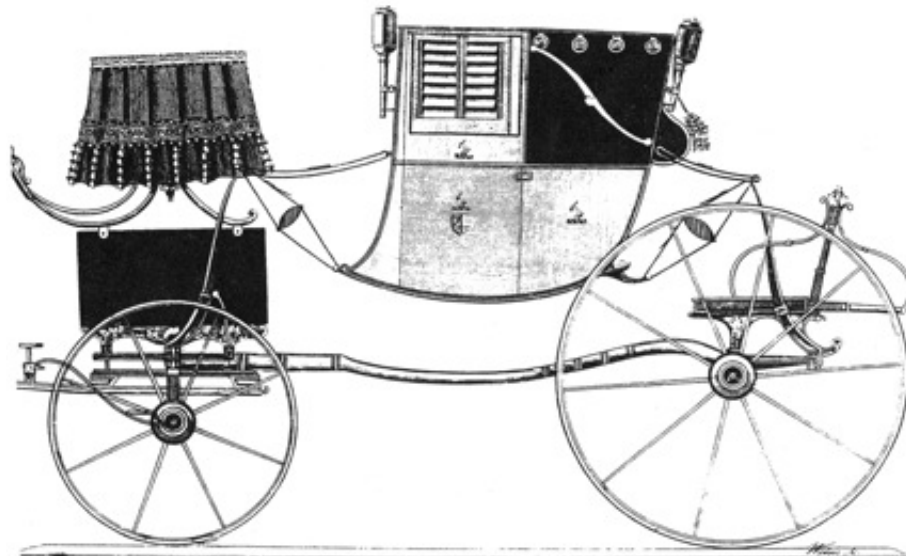


An even lighter and smaller vehicle was called a chair or **whiskey** because it could whisk around other carriages and pass them quickly. The small springs indicate that it, like the gig, was intended for smooth ground. It was often used in large parks and gardens in fair weather. A whiskey appears only in *The Watsons*, where the Watson family owned it, probably for reasons of economy.



Large families—the Bennets, the Musgroves, and the Edwardses—owned **coaches**,

large vehicles holding four to six passengers and sometimes more. William Felton makes it clear that this was a no-nonsense kind of vehicle: “Where only one carriage is kept, and the use of it is almost constantly required, a plain substantial coach is to be recommended, in preference to a slight ornamented one; as by being exposed to all weathers and rough roads, it is less liable to require extensive repairs.”

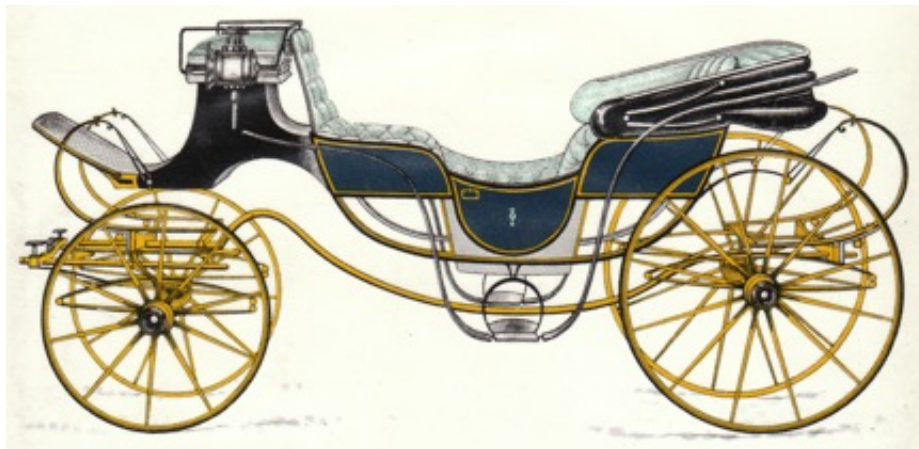


A **chariot** was lighter than a coach and as Felton points out, more stylish: “Chariots are generally finished handsomer than coaches, and form a material part in grand processions. The elegance of them lies principally in the carved and gilt ornaments, with rich and fanciful paintings to the body, and the insides lined with velvet and bordered with silk trimmings and tassels.”

Chariots, pulled by four horses, provided the fastest and most luxurious travel of the time. Larger chariots could carry four people on two seats facing forward, as in an automobile. Notice the black swordcase attached horizontally across the rear of the body just above the beltline. These cases appeared in the 16th century and became symbols of gentlemen owners. Swordcases were still being attached to some carriages built in the 1850s, long after gentlemen had ceased to carry swords, but these were merely wooden blocks painted black.

Jane Austen tells us that Mrs. Jennings owned a chariot as well as a chaise: (a) When Mrs. Jennings invited the Dashwood sisters to travel with her from Barton Park to London: "We three shall be able to go very well in my chaise . . ." (b) When Elinor was meditating on Willoughby's last letter to Marianne, she heard "a carriage drive up to the door, she went to the window . . . , she was all astonishment to perceive Mrs. Jennings's chariot . . ." (c) When "Mrs. Jennings was summoned to her chaise . . ." for her journey from Cleveland to London. Chapman points out that her ownership of two similar vehicles is surprising in such a down-to-earth person who lived alone, and says it may have been forgetfulness on Austen's part.

The dowager Mrs. Rushworth and Mr. and Mrs. John Dashwood also owned chariots.

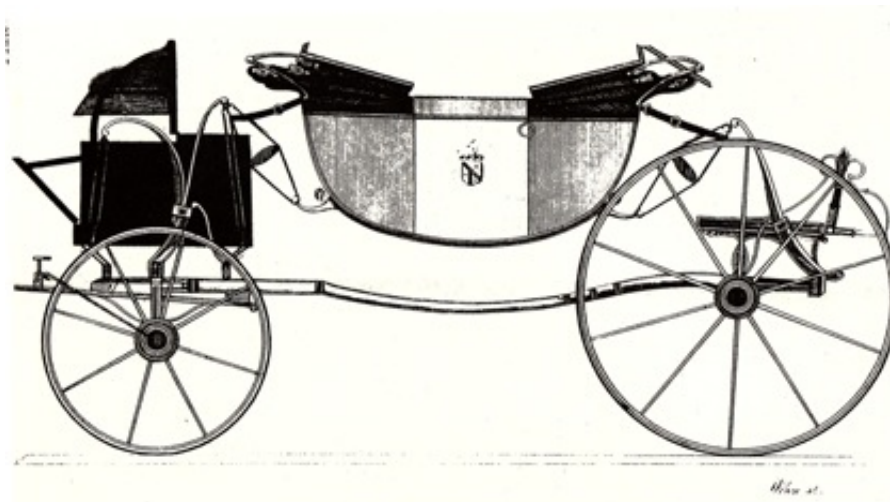


Now let us rise in the world and consider a **barouche**. It was an aristocratic vehicle, as shown by quotations in the *Oxford English Dictionary*. The quotations refer to barouches used by a duchess, by titled ladies, and by dowagers. No wonder Mrs. Elton took such relish in mentioning her sister's barouche-landau. This was a vehicle for parading; passengers in a barouche with its top down were highly visible.

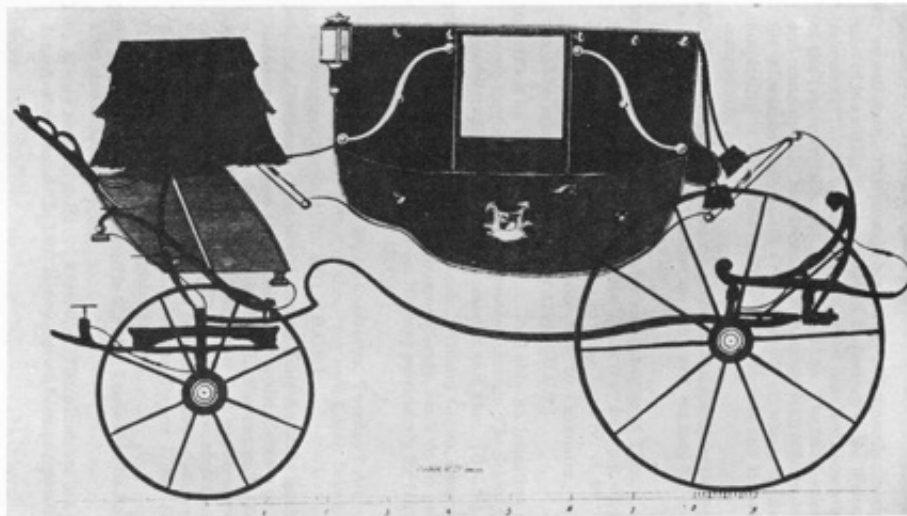
The barouche was a heavy four-horse vehicle in spite of its light appearance. Without the bracing provided by a rigid roof structure the body had to be stiffened by "heavy iron plates" underneath to make the body sufficiently stiff. The long curved horizontal member connecting the front and rear axles was called, confusingly enough, a carriage. The curves in this example, which acted as a spring, made it a crane-neck carriage.

Lady Dalrymple, Mr. and Mrs. Palmer, and Henry Crawford owned barouches.

Jane Austen herself rode in a barouche, alone, during a visit to her brother Henry in London. In a letter to Cassandra of May 24, 1813 she wrote, "The driving about, the carriage being open, was very pleasant. I liked my solitary elegance very much, and was ready to laugh all the time, at my being where I was. I could not but feel that I had naturally small right to be parading about London in a barouche." She didn't say who owned it or what occasioned her ride.



A **landau** was similar to a barouche—differences are described below. The landau does not appear in Austen's stories and is shown here for comparison with the barouche. Landaus are being manufactured in India today in all their 19th century glory, and an English company currently rents a restored 19th century landau for weddings and similar events.



A BAROUCHE-LANDAU BY GODIOL
From *Le Beau Monde*, 1806

Now we approach, with proper awe, the **barouche-landau**. It was invented in 1804 and was in use until late in the century. It may have been the ultimate passenger vehicle of the period. It seems to have been rare. The 20-volume *Oxford English Dictionary* does not define the term. A 1977 book listing the names of 325 different types of horse-drawn vehicles does not include the term. When I began this paper I had no idea how a barouche-landau looked. Then one day, browsing in Chapman's 1954 edition of *Minor Works*, I found this illustration from an 1806 magazine. A recent Internet search provided only one other picture of a barouche-landau, and that example was from late in the century.

In spite of its exalted status, the barouche-landau is just a carriage that combines the best features of a barouche and a landau. (1) Like the landau it has a two-way folding top that can cover the front as well as the rear seat; (2) like the barouche it has a crane-neck carriage, providing a more comfortable ride; (3) like a barouche it has no rear platform that would have allowed a servant to overhear the conversation of

passengers when the top was lowered; (4) instead of the single driver's seat of a barouche, there is a barouche box, providing storage space and seats for two people (remember how Julia Bertram enjoyed that second seat on the barouche box); and (5) it has a swordcase, possessed neither by the barouche nor the landau. Because it has no rigid roof structure it must be, like the barouche and landau, heavier than it looks.

The author wishes to thank Sandy Lerner for her kind assistance.

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Before retiring, Ed Ratcliffe was a physicist at the Lawrence Livermore Laboratory, doing computer simulations of physical processes. He became interested in Jane Austen in 1980 when he saw the BBC-TV production of *Pride and Prejudice*. *He joined JASNA and JASNA NorCal in 1981.*