

Getting Around in Victorian England

In “The Adventure of The Three Garridebs,” the term “buckboards” tips Sherlock Holmes off that an advertisement purportedly from an English firm was actually written by an American. While the forms of transportation were quite varied in Victorian England, “buckboards,” at least by that term, were not common.

The options for transporting goods and people changed greatly from the beginning to the end of the 19th century. As road surfaces improved in the early 1800s, long-distance travel depended primarily on coaches. These large, enclosed vehicles carried paying passengers along set routes. Pulled by two horses, the weight was great enough to require them to change horses about every ten miles (usually an inn was attached to these designated stops) and the ride was long, uncomfortable and expensive. The wealthy, however, would have gone by private coach and change horses at similar stops along the route as well.

Coaches were replaced by railways beginning in the 1840s. Besides being much less expensive, the ride was more comfortable and faster. Gentry would ride first class, their servants and tradespeople in second, and the rest in third. Over time, the sometimes roofless third class was upgraded, and second class coaches were eliminated. (1)

Even with the expansion of the rail system, the horse remained the mainstay of nineteenth century travel. Whether pulling omnibuses (twelve-passenger public coaches) in the cities or carriages in the country, they kept the nation on the move. At the same time, they were expensive. Only about 100,000 of the 18 million living in England in 1848 had their own horses. In the country, different horses would have been kept for work, carriages, or hunting, and ponies and donkeys might pull a smaller, lighter wagon, such as a dog or donkey cart, for shorter visits or hunting. In the city, most would have stabled their animals at a livery because of the care required. The majority of city dwellers, however, would have opted for renting a horse from such stables—even if they had their own carriage. (2)

The type of carriage owned was a simple social class marker. Closed carriages held the highest status, and with a coat of arms on the side, commanded the right of way on the road. Those pulled by four horses were more prestigious than two, and one horse indicated someone from the lower middle class. (3)

For those without horses or carriages and living in the city, the handsome cab was the go-to vehicle for private travel. Because the driver rode behind the passengers, an unmarried woman riding in one with a non-relative of the opposite sex could easily ruin her reputation. The privacy afforded the occupants permitted an unseen kiss or two. (4)

The subtleties of the choice of transportation described in Victorian writings might be lost on the modern reader, but for the nineteenth century English person, and especially for the trained observer such as Sherlock Holmes, they provided a great deal of information about its occupants. Thus, even before a person knocked on the door of 221B, their mode of arrival said much about who would soon be ascending the stairs.

(1) Sally Mitchell, *Daily Life in Victorian England* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996), 72-73.

(2) Daniel Pool, *What Jane Austen Ate and Charles Dickens Knew* (New York: Simon and Schuster, Inc., 1993), 142-143.

(3) Daniel Pool, *What Jane Austen Ate and Charles Dickens Knew* (New York: Simon and Schuster, Inc., 1993), 146.

(4) Steven Doyle and David Crowder, *Sherlock Holmes for Dummies* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Publishing, 2010), 79.