



Watercolour drawing of Jane Austen by her sister Cassandra,
dated 1804.

JANE AUSTEN IN CONTEXT

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Janet Todd



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4. Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, ed. R. H. Campbell and A. S. Skinner, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), I, iv, 1 (p. 37); I, xi, 7 (p. 265). Subsequent references are included in the text.
5. Lawrence Stone and Jean C. Fawtier Stone, *An Open Elite? England, 1540–1880* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), table 6.2.
6. F. M. L. Thompson, *Gentrification and the Enterprise Culture, Britain 1780–1980* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 27–8.
7. Quoted in Granville Sharp, *The Just Limitations of Slavery* (1776), appendix 8, pp. 67–9.
8. J. R. Ward, 'The Profitability of Sugar Planting in the British West Indies, 1650–1834,' *Economic History Review*, 2nd ser., 31 (1978), 197–213.
9. Thomas Clarkson, *History of the Rise, Progress and Accomplishment of the Abolition of the African Slave Trade by the British Parliament* (1808), pp. 19–24.

Transport

PAT ROGERS

Any appraisal of transport in Austen's day must begin with the recognition that the prime way of covering the ground for most people was still to go on foot. Men and women, young and old, urban inhabitants and country dwellers – all were accustomed to walking more regularly than we do today. Some eccentrics covered huge amounts of ground, as a sport or simply as a means of winning bets. Perhaps the best-known example of a long-distance pedestrian is John 'Walking' Stewart (1749–1822), who hoofed his way around Europe and North America. Recreational walking increased at the end of the eighteenth century, with the growth of organised tourism. However, ordinary folk made what seem by our standards extensive trips on foot in the course of their daily business. All these kinds meet in William and Dorothy Wordsworth. The couple thought nothing of trotting from Grasmere to Keswick (or back) over a hilly pass for a short visit to Coleridge, who made the return trip just as often. Dorothy routinely took long walks with Mary Hutchinson, who later married her brother; and at the age of forty-six, a year after Jane Austen's death, she undertook her first ascent of England's highest mountain, Scafell Pike, together with a friend named Miss Barker and a guide. It is the same with William, who met John Stewart: his work is suffused with what might be called the culture of walking, as well as the mere physical activity. Aptly Robin Jarvis devotes a chapter in his study of *Romantic Writing and Pedestrian Travel* to 'William Wordsworth: Pedestrian Poet'.¹

It hardly needs saying that fine ladies and smart gentlemen were less inclined to exercise their limbs in pursuit of health or recreation – they had horses and carriages for that. Nevertheless, even well-bred young women were permitted to take a turn to approved destinations, for social or communal purposes. This can be seen in the 'lapse' of Elizabeth Bennet, when she ploughs

through the muddy fields and puddles to succour her ailing sister at Netherfield Park. It is her mother who objects on the grounds that Elizabeth 'will not be fit to be seen' when she arrives at the mansion; while her prosy sister Mary offers the weary platitude that 'exertion should always be in proportion to what is required'. The narrator tells us, 'That she should have walked three miles so early in the day, in such dirty weather, and by herself, was almost incredible to Mrs Hurst and Miss Bingley', the stiff-necked *châtelaines* of Netherfield (*P&P*, 1:7). Obviously, the readiness with which these alternative forms of discouragement are trotted out shows how unreal they are, as a facile response of the snobbish, the lazy and the timid. In much the same way, Isabella Knightley is quite prepared to make her short way home from the Westons' house, and tries to allay her father's fears by saying, 'I could change my shoes, you know, the moment I got home; and it is not the sort of thing that gives me cold' (*E*, 1:15). Only a congenital fusspot like Mr Woodhouse would believe that a genteel young woman was incapable of walking the equivalent of three blocks without damaging her health or her morals. Likewise, Catherine Morland happily embarks along with her friends on a morning jaunt up Beechen cliff, and still has time for a shopping trip before lunch (*NA*, 1:14).

It is part of this same picture that amusements laid on to entice the gentry and nobility assumed a capacity, at least in the young and healthy among them, to use their legs. Spas like Bath and Tunbridge Wells featured as a prime attraction places where visitors might perambulate. Near the centre of the town were strategically located 'Walks', suitable for the kind of *passeggiata* known as promenading. Further afield lay designated spots with vistas and points of interest such as rock formations. In the case of Bath, for example, these permitted the activity of rambling, which combined 'outdoor exercise with easy exploration of [the resort's] highly picturesque, walker-friendly countryside'.² While she was living in Bath, Jane Austen's letters often mention such places, ranging from the hilly suburbs to the locks on the canal which was cut along the Avon valley. Even when she was stuck in town, with little obvious entertainment at hand, she wrote to Cassandra, 'We do nothing but walk about' (*L*, 8–11 April 1805).

For most British people, travel by water was seldom a regular option, unless they ventured overseas. This was true even in

London, where the Thames watermen had played an important role for centuries in ferrying residents across the town. Their role started to decline as new bridges were opened and roads replaced the river as the major arteries of traffic, although bargees and lightermen continued to exercise a key function in shipping goods to and from the docks. Moreover, boating had scarcely evolved as a recreational activity in this period. However, most heavy goods were still moved around the country by water, as improvement schemes made rivers more navigable, especially in areas where industry accelerated most rapidly in the later part of the eighteenth century. The building of the Bridgewater Canal outside Manchester in 1761 set off a frenzy of construction over the next seventy-five years, until the coming of the railways, peaking when Austen was in her twenties. She would certainly have known the Basingstoke Canal, built between 1788 and 1794, and at Bath she could witness something of the creation of the Kennet and Avon Canal in the years 1794 to 1810. Meanwhile, the coasting trade remained important, as goods were transported from port to port round the nation – thousands of tons of coal for London still arrived every year by boat from Newcastle. A symbolic fact here concerns James Cook, one of the heroes of the nation at the time of Austen's birth. He learned the seaman's trade on board a coal transport ship, plying domestic waters, and then ventured further afield in the Baltic trade. It was this experience which provided the basis for Cook's great Pacific journeys in the 1770s: moreover, the ship on which he sailed in his first voyage was itself nothing else than a converted Whitby collier of about 350 tons. The port Jane Austen knew best was Portsmouth, a deep-sea harbour primarily important as a base for the navy and for ship-building. There were large cities like Glasgow, Bristol and Liverpool whose wealth grew from international shipping, much connected directly or indirectly to the slave trade. But most of the smaller ports dotted around the coast of Britain were engaged either in fishery or in domestic trading.

There is no mystery about the continuing significance of water transport in the burgeoning economy of the Industrial Revolution. Quite simply, it was cheaper by a factor of three to twelve than land carriage, whether the goods went by sea, river, canal or a combination of these methods. In addition, it was much quicker generally. Even as the quality of highways gradually improved, horses still

got stuck in the mud at regular intervals. A number were needed to drag the cumbersome wagons, and indeed one horse pulling a canal barge could do the work of several on the road. Nor were horses low-maintenance items: they needed to be tended by grooms and shod by blacksmiths, and powerful draught-horses ate a great amount. 'From four to eight acres were required to produce the hay that was necessary for every horse.'³ Yet this most durable of animals continued to prove its worth, as its use on the canal system shows. For our ancestors, the horse served in the office of car, lorry, tractor, traction engine, moped, racing bike, pet and friend.⁴ It was employed by couriers, mailmen and highway robbers. As well as hauling barges, it bore hearses, ambulances, fire-engines, state coaches; and it carried its owner's hopes on the race course and in the hunting field.

We take little notice of the horses in Austen's novels, but they are there, unobtrusive and essential, as they were in everyone's lives. A lame carriage-horse delays the trip to Box Hill (*E*, 3:6), one of a number of strategic deferrals which build up expectations in this book, while Fanny Price laments the loss of 'her valued friend the old grey poney' (*MP*, 1:4). Willoughby offers Marianne Dashwood the inappropriate gift of a horse, which she rashly accepts without thinking of the expenses incurred for a groom and stabling, and it takes delicate diplomacy on the part of Elinor to get her sister to refuse the present (*SS&S*, 1:12). Today such a subdued reference may easily pass us by, but contemporary readers would have picked up subtle clues from it, since their own lives revolved around horseback travel.

This is one of the features of life in earlier times which made the improvement in the condition of roads such a significant index of social progress. The Industrial Revolution could not have occurred as it did without better carriage of goods, but the take-off depended also on quicker and easier conveyance of people. British roads had not yet equalled the level they achieved under Roman occupation: indeed, they made no startling advance from the Middle Ages until around 1700. It was only two generations before Austen's birth that a rush of turnpike acts in the second and third decades of the new century heralded a gradual opening up of major routes across the nation. Early measures covered the stretch of the London road between Bath and Box (1707) and then Box to Chippenham

(1726). Nearer Austen's childhood home, the journey from London to Portsmouth was made more accessible to travellers by turnpikes instituted in 1710, from Petersfield to Portsmouth, and in 1749 from Kingston to Portsmouth. Naturally, the spread proceeded at an irregular pace in different parts of the kingdom.⁵ As early as 1726, a Swiss visitor could make high claims for the improvements which had already taken place:

The journey on the high roads of England, and more especially near London, is most enjoyable and interesting. These roads are magnificent, being wide, smooth and well kept. Contractors have care of them, and cover them, when necessary with that fine gravel so common in this country. The roads are rounded in the shape of an ass's back, so that the centre is higher than the sides, and the rain flows off into the ditches with which the roads are bordered on either side. It is not the custom here, as it is in France, for the poor peasants to be forced to make and keep up the high roads at their own expense and care. In this country everyone who make use of the roads is obliged to contribute to the expense of keeping them up. At even distances there are barriers on the roads called 'Turnpikes', where you have to pay one penny per horse . . . If you journey on foot you pay nothing.⁶

In fact, most road maintenance was still a parochial responsibility, discharged mainly by local users, until the turnpike system transferred duties to paid officials financed by tolls. Moreover, the traveller's picture is distinctly rosy, reflecting the scale of change in favoured areas only: even when Jane Austen grew up, there were many places where travel remained dirty and difficult, especially in winter. One of her earliest letters to Cassandra shows that, right at the heart of the 'improved' road system, it still took two days in 1796 to get from Steventon to London, with an overnight stop at Staines and an early start on the following morning (*L*, 23 August 1796). Two years later, Jane tells her sister of the back roads which could quickly degenerate into muddy tracks: 'There has been a great deal of rain here for this last fortnight, much more than in Kent; & indeed we found the roads all the way from Staines most disgracefully dirty. - Steventon lane has its full share of it, & I do not know when I shall be able to get to Deane.' A recent journey home had been delayed with a halt at Basingstoke, on top of which 'we were obliged to stop at Hartley [Wintney] to have our wheels grazed'

(*L*, 27–28 October 1798). Travel plans had always to be framed with care, making due allowance for unexpected obstacles. Waiting for the arrival of relatives could be an anxious affair: 'It was considerably past 4 when they arrived yesterday; the roads were so very bad! – as it was, they had 4 Horses from Cranford Bridge. Fanny was miserably cold at first' (*L*, 5–8 March 1814).

Yet things were getting steadily better. An important contribution came from a succession of legislative measures which restricted narrow wheels on carts, the main agency by which the surface of roads became rutted and impassable. Thus an act of 1753 ordained that wagon wheels on turnpike roads should be at least nine inches in breadth, on pain of a five pound fine or forfeiture of a horse. Weighing machines placed at tollgates imposed a kind of excess baggage charge, which also served to deter any unthinking use of the highway for heavy goods. (Of course local carriage moved to the side-roads, which made rural byways around towns like Basingstoke even more of a challenge to navigate.) As for road construction, this gradually benefited from developments both in surveying and in engineering. The first true highway engineer of modern time is usually identified as John Metcalf (1717–1810), a Yorkshire horse-dealer and carriage operator. Even though he had been blind since early childhood, he mastered the skills both of making roads and building bridges. He was particularly successful in meeting the problems of boggy ground by setting up an effective system of drainage and laying down a firm foundation for the roadway. He was followed by Thomas Telford (1757–1834), a distinguished Scottish engineer, some of whose bridges stand to this day; and by John Loudon McAdam, another Lowland Scot who was driven from an early home in New York by the Revolutionary War. Subsequently he began to patent his new methods of getting a durable surface, by using crushed stone bound together with gravel, placed on a base of large stones. By this date he had become surveyor to the Bristol Turnpike Trust and had as part of his responsibility some of the routes that Jane Austen knew best.

Innovation in road-building permitted technological innovation to go on with respect to the conveyances which plied the highways. Passenger vehicles of the era, like their modern equivalents, differed in construction, function, size, speed and appearance. Terms used

for these vary over time in their exact significance, but the general pattern can be described. The nearest to a family saloon was the chaise, a four-wheeled carriage, for the most part low-slung and lightly made: it could be drawn by two or four horses, one of them ridden by the driver. A chariot was a more substantial affair, commonly with four horses. The coach had an extra bank of seats and could carry as many as six people; commercial stage-coaches had additional seating on the roof. Another capacious vehicle was the barouche, fitted with a hood which could be lowered: normally two couples were seated inside, facing one another. The landau, generally smaller, also featured a retractable hood. The phaeton was a low, open carriage with a streamlined look. All these normally had four wheels. Other conveyances with two wheels included the gig, much favoured by dashing young men as the sports car of its period: it was drawn by a single horse and normally carried two people side by side. Its successor was the cabriolet. Another light carriage was the curricle, drawn by two horses abreast. Smallest of all was the dog-cart, often used by persons driving alone on short trips. Less common vehicles included the vis-à-vis, a narrow coach seating just two people face to face. Coming into favour in this time span was the four-in-hand, driven by one person on the box at the front.

A prime incentive to improvement came with the push to speed up the postal services. In 1784 John Palmer (1742–1818), who owned theatres in Bath and Bristol, made a proposal to the government for the use of stage-coaches to carry mail. This led to a test run for his coach service. The trial vehicle completed an overnight trip from Bristol to London, a distance of 116 miles, in less than sixteen hours, and within a year faster, more efficient and better guarded coaches were carrying mail on the roads to Norwich, Liverpool, Leeds, Dover and Exeter. Before long the service was extended to some of the 'cross-post' routes as well as the main arterial highways. A spin-off was a considerable shortening of time for general travel. Up to this period the London–Bristol service had taken three days in the winter and two in the summer. There had been only one coach a week to Birmingham, another journey which occupied a minimum of two days. In Austen's lifetime the speed of coach travel continued to rise, and the work of men like Telford allowed much quicker passage even on arduous routes such as the Welsh section of

the Holyhead road. But the flying mail coach enjoyed only a brief spell as the conveyance of choice. In Austen's lifetime the track for the Stockton and Darlington railway was already laid down, and just after she died an act was passed to permit construction and maintenance of a 'railway or tramroad'. By 1825 steam trains had begun their inexorable and (until the 1960s) unstoppable rise to pre-eminence.

Coaches of various descriptions, private or public, figure in all Austen novels. The most striking episode involves a foolish young blade, John Thorpe, one of the most horse-obsessed characters in literature. He is constantly boasting about the speed of his favourite mount: 'I defy any man in England to make my horse go less than ten miles an hour in harness.' He takes every opportunity to show off to his pretty companion, Catherine: 'Thorpe's ideas then all reverted to the merits of his own equipage, and she was called on to admire the spirit and freedom with which his horse moved along, and the ease which his paces, as well as the excellence of the springs, gave the motion of the carriage.' Like all zealots, Thorpe is impossible to shut up: 'His knowledge and her ignorance of the subject, his rapidity of expression, and her diffidence of herself put that out of her power; she could strike out nothing new in commendation, but she readily echoed whatever he chose to assert, and it was finally settled between them without any difficulty, that his equipage was altogether the most complete of its kind in England, his carriage the neatest, his horse the best goer, and himself the best coachman' (*NA*, 1:7, 9). For those who travelled the roads of England, there must have been a down-side to this story of almost unimpaired progress, and Jane Austen can be trusted to show us what it was like to meet up with the great travel bore.

NOTES

1. Robin Jarvis, *Romantic Writing and Pedestrian Travel* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997), pp. 89–125.
2. Trevor Fawcett, *Bath Entertain'd: Amusements, Recreations and Gambling at the Eighteenth-Century Spa* (Bath: Ruton, 1998), p. 70.
3. W. T. Jackman, *The Development of Transportation of Modern England*, new edition (London: Frank Cass & Co, 1966), p. 405.

4. See Joan Thirsk, *Horses in Early Modern England: for Service, for Pleasure, and Power* (Reading: Reading University Press, 1978).
5. See William Albert, *The Turnpike Road System in England, 1663–1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), a detailed survey of the evolution of road building in this period.
6. César de Saussure, *A Foreign View of England in the Reigns of George I and George II*, trans. Madame Van Mudén (1902), pp. 146–7.