

CHAIR TRANSPORT IN BATH: THE SEDAN ERA

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By the turn of the 18th century London theatregoers were sufficiently aware of portable chairs as a characteristic of Bath for Thomas D'Urfey to set the opening scene of one of his plays at 'The Kings Bath. From whence Chair-men go in and out, as carrying people to and from the Bath . . .'.¹ If the contemporary stage properties were anything like authentic (a doubtful expectation for 1701), what the scene would represent would not be the box-like sedans long familiar on the streets of London and certain other European cities but a much more primitive conveyance – the humble bath chair, not to be confused in name or appearance with the wheeled Bath chair of a later period.

Ever since Bath had catered for the sick and the lame there must have been available some occasional means of transporting those patients unable to walk from their lodgings to the warm medicinal waters of the various baths. In earlier centuries simple litters no doubt fulfilled the purpose; but at some date, perhaps in the 1630s, as the number of visitors to the city increased, specially adapted or constructed chairs carried on poles came into regular use. With them arose a new occupation of hire chairman. Henceforth even healthy bathers would often order a chair to carry them from bedchamber to bath and back again, keeping well wrapped up on the return to conserve body heat and encourage copious perspiration. Samuel Pepys with his wife and servants followed the standard procedure on the visit in 1668, being collected from their rooms one by one at an early hour and then, after soaking in the baths, 'wrap in a sheet and in a chair home and there one after another thus carried . . . home to bed sweating for an hour . . .'.² A similar account by Celia Fiennes in the 1680s describes the typical conveyance to the bath as

a low seate and with frames round and over your head, and all cover'd inside and out with red bayes a woollen-worsted cloth and a curtaine drawn before of the same which makes it close and warme; then a couple of men with staves takes and carryes you to your lodging and sets you at your bedside where you go to bed and lay and sweate sometyme as you please.³

These lightweight, fabric-covered vehicles, borne on short poles and readily manoeuvrable through doorways, up and down stairs, and into private apartments, continued to serve bathers until the 1740s when a more substantial bath chair came to be devised.

Celia Fiennes also saw on the Bath streets a quite different kind of chair, similar to those in London, 'to carry the better sort of people in visits, or if sick or infirme' – in other words the sedan proper. The exact date when sedan chairs reached the city is uncertain. Their history began in Italy where they developed to contend with narrow, hilly, urban streets impracticable for coaches. British travellers like Fynes Moryson (in 1594) and John Evelyn (in 1644–5) noted with interest the *seggioli* of Naples and Genoa, public hire chairs slung from poles and borne on the porters' shoulders.⁴ The fashion had spread to Paris by 1617 and to London in 1634/5 when Sir Sanders Duncombe, a court favourite, obtained royal patents to run a fleet of public sedans in an attempt to reduce the congestion and noise caused by the increasing numbers of coaches on the street.⁵ The need for a sedan chair service in Bath stemmed from its growing fashionableness set against the restrictions of its cramped site. As one visitor put it, the city's small compass, still largely within the medieval walls, had forced its inhabitants to 'croud up the streets to an unseemly and inconvenient narrowness'.⁶ Difficult for carts and waggons, let alone coaches, Bath's tight thoroughfares were more suited to chair traffic than to horse-drawn vehicles.

Two forms of portable chair were therefore to be found in Bath in the later 17th century: in Celia Fiennes's words again, from her later report of 1698, 'the company use all the morning the Chaires of Bayes to carry them to the Bath, soe they have the Chaire or Sedan to carry them in visits'.⁷ By that date a score or more of each type of chair may have been in service during the season.

The physician Thomas Guidott had once suggested that twelve chairmen (or did he mean twelve *chairs*, with two men to each?) might suffice for the clientèle of the baths,⁸ but that was in 1676, on the eve of a series of royal visits that boosted Bath's popularity further during the last quarter of the century. Certainly twenty porters stood by at the top of Lansdown to meet Queen Anne in 1703, in case she and her retinue preferred to make the dangerous descent into the city by sedan instead of coach,⁹ but that would not have represented the total population of chairmen by that stage. Indeed only four years later an Act of Parliament empowered the Bath Corporation to license up to 60 chairs,¹⁰ a provision that would be interpreted in future years as permitting sedan chairs to that number and bath chairs besides.

Although chairmen were not officially licensed before 1708, the Mayor and Justices must have had some jurisdiction over them, certainly those attending the baths. Later writers have claimed that the chairmen had already earned a reputation for insubordination and unruly ways, but there is at least some countervailing evidence about their helpfulness and respectability. Thomas Parker for example, described as a 'chairman at *Bath*', in testifying in 1688 to eleven of the 'cures' listed in Guidott's *Register*, mentions the case of one former paralytic, a Somerset blacksmith, who returned to Bath the year after his cure to present each of the guides and chairmen concerned in his treatment with a 'Pair of *Tobacco-Tongues*, of his own Work' in appreciation.¹¹ Another chairman, Philip Taylor, is said by John Wood to have been the first to introduce sash windows into Bath. If so he sounds like a man of some standing, and hence more likely to have been a chair manufacturer or entrepreneur than a mere porter.¹²

The abovementioned Act gave the Corporation substantial regulatory powers over the chairmen, who now had to pay an annual licence fee of three shillings (plus stamp duty) and faced a fine of 13s. 4d. per offence for operating with an unlicensed chair. Each vehicle had to carry a distinguishing mark or number on the back, while penalties were laid down for overcharging, abusive language, or refusal to carry a passenger, on proof by one or more witnesses. At the same time the Act prescribed the scale of fares: any transit *within* the walls to cost sixpence, any between the intramural area and the extramural parts of St James's or St Michael's parishes to cost one shilling, and up to sixpence to be

paid for every half hour of waiting. It was to be this charging system that caused resentment in later years, when it was argued that the real object of the Act's sponsors had been to discourage new building projects beyond the walls (where the Corporation owned only limited sites with rentable value) by imposing punitive chair fares on extramural residents and visitors. This point will be returned to.

Meanwhile Bath could boast a hire chair service of up to 60 sedans (or 'glass chairs' as they were alternatively called because of their windows) at a time when London and Westminster were permitted 300. The chairs themselves doubtless resembled metropolitan models, painted black externally and upholstered within. Windows were fitted on three sides, though the front poleman necessarily obstructed the passenger's view ahead when the chair was travelling. The poles were longer than those of bath chairs and springy enough to impart a slight bounce to the main body of the sedan,¹³ where they threaded through metal staples and from which they could be quickly removed when the chair was not in use. Passengers entered and departed at the front, stepping between the poles if they were in position, but were saved having to stoop too low because the sedan's roof, hinged at the rear, could be lifted. Once 'box'd within the Chair'¹⁴ passengers had to trust to the chairmen's competence, surefootedness, and skill in synchronising their pace and manoeuvres. Occasionally there were accidents: a chairman stumbled or ran into something, windows shattered, the whole contraption overturned. Sedanmen often showed scant respect for pedestrians even on pavements, demanding precedence and the near side of buildings, taking corners too fast, and jostling through constricted areas like the notorious narrow passage between Orange Grove and Terrace Walk. Yet a foreign visitor to London in 1725 praised the skill of its chairmen, and their Bath equivalents were probably no worse. The chairs were pleasant and convenient, he wrote, 'the bearers going so fast that you have some difficulty in keeping up with them on foot. I do not believe that in all Europe better or more dexterous bearers are to be found; all foreigners are surprised at their strength and skill.' And although pedestrians were expected to give way when a chair bore down on them, at least the men shouted warnings of 'Have care!' or 'By your leave, sir!'.¹⁵ As in the capital the Bath chairmen wore a distinctive

uniform, varying slightly over the decades and between winter and summer but comprising essentially a blue kersey coat or greatcoat, black knee-breeches, white stockings or gaiters, buckled shoes, and large cocked hat. Whether they ever copied the London chairmen in aiding their lift with shoulder straps remains in doubt, but there is no evidence of this additional support in later prints and drawings.

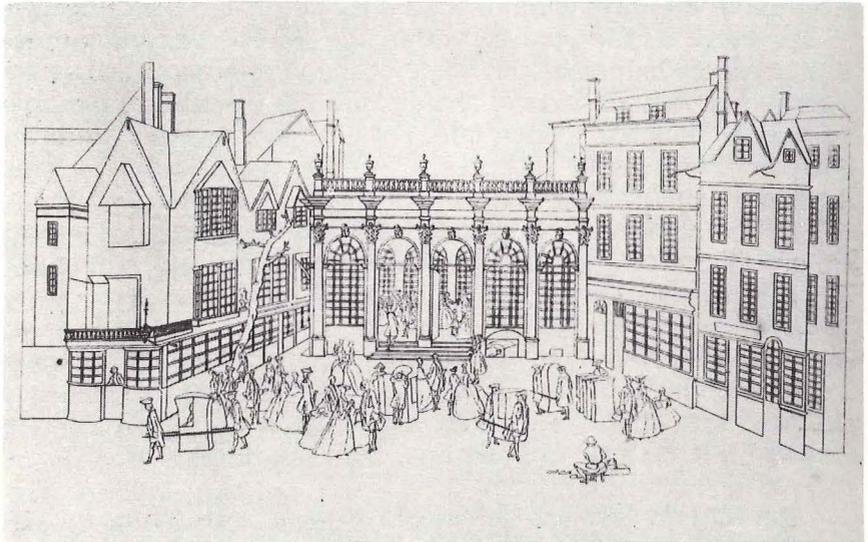
New regulations affecting chairmen came into force in 1721 and 1739, both following further improvement Acts.¹⁶ The Act of 1720 enabled the city authorities to appoint stands or ranks in different parts of Bath where chairs must wait for fares instead of being stationed randomly and obstructively. The second Act revised the tariff to take account of the city's recent expansion to the west and north, particularly the Kingsmead and Queen Square developments where it was reckoned at least sixty families of distinction had taken houses. The call for a change in the pricing system came in a pamphlet published in February 1738/9, *Case of the Inhabitants in the Suburbs of Bath and of All Strangers that Resort to that City in Relation to the Hire of Chairs Stated*. Claiming that the motive behind the original licensing of chairs was 'to restrain the Progress of Building without the Walls; and to confine Strangers . . . to lodge in the Houses within the Walls', the anonymous author proceeds to spell out some of the ill effects of the current regulations. Any passage of a chair through the walls, no matter how short, meant a shilling fare. For journeys 'to any Part of the Suburbs, Precincts or Liberties, except in the Parishes of Saint James and Saint Michael', no scale of charges had been laid down, so that the chairmen's demands were quite arbitrary – varying, for instance, from sixpence to five shillings for one ride of 600 yards. Moreover, every time the chair was pitched (i.e. set down) in the course of a ride to allow its occupant to speak to an acquaintance, even if only for a moment, entitled the chairmen to charge another sixpence. On top of all that the existing legislation required any complaint about the chairmen's conduct to be backed up by at least one witness, with the result that

the injured Stranger is obliged to bear with many Insults, Extortions, and Abuses, without a Possibility of Redress, for who can procure Proof among People they don't know? Nor is it customary for Gentlemen and Ladies, tho' of the Greatest

Distinction, always to have their own Servants with them; and at such Times, the *Chairmen* take their Advantage to extort from, and abuse those that employ them; Ladies especially, and such as by their ill Language they can terrify, into a Compliance with any of their unreasonable Demands.

The author of the pamphlet goes on to list desirable improvements in the running of the sedan service: complaints to be allowed on the oath of the aggrieved party; halts of up to 15 minutes during a sixpenny ride to be sanctioned; chairs to come from their stands strictly by turn; chairs on the move to keep well clear of walls and buildings lest they obstruct pedestrians; and above all, fares to be charged in future according to distance, at a rate of sixpence per half mile. This last provision would benefit invalids in particular, enabling them to be carried on fine days, when the chairmen were short of employment, 'into a Region free from the Smoak and Smell of the City' at reasonable cost.

The ensuing Act introduced amendments much on these lines.



A Among the sedans outside the newly extended Pump Room appears one curved-roof bath chair. Detail from a copper engraving attributed to George Spere, c. 1754. (Courtesy Victoria Art Gallery Bath)

The distinction between journeys within and without the walls was at last abolished; the revised scale was based on distance alone – sixpence for up to 500 yards, one shilling from 500 yards to one mile. Chairmen were not obliged to take passengers beyond the city liberties (which on the north extended as far as the later Cottle's Lane and Walcot church), nor further than the foot of Beechen Cliff or of Claverton and Bathwick downs. Halts of ten and twenty minutes respectively could be requested during sixpenny and shilling rides. Henceforth passengers' complaints might be received simply on oath, but chairmen's rights were also respected supposing a passenger refused to pay or damaged a chair. A final provision allowed for privately owned sedans on Bath streets on condition that they were registered at the Guildhall and never loaned or hired out.

Whether intended or not, the new fare structure again had a direct influence on the city's growth. To be carried from Queen Square to the fashionable heart of Bath around Orange Grove and Terrace Walk – where the principal coffee houses, luxury shops, circulating libraries and assembly rooms were located – cost one shilling, hardly a negligible sum for a single ride in one direction. According to John Wood, the effect was 'that it restrained the Progress of Building to the Westward, and encouraged it to the Eastward, to the very utmost of my Wishes.'¹⁷ Wood had set his sights on developing the ground towards the river, eventually to be covered by the Parades. All this area would be within a sixpenny fare.

Some insight into the operation of sedans during the middle decades of the 18th century is to be had from the manuscript register of licensed chairmen preserved in the Bath Record Office. Chairs were listed annually in numerical order, the numbers matching those painted prominently in white on each vehicle. It can only be presumed that chairs were owned by their licensees; certainly individual chairmen tended to retain the same chairs from year to year. Certain pairs stayed together for long periods. Samuel and John Bond were holding chair number 1 when the extant register opens in 1745 and were still licensing it in 1756 when it ends. Others chopped and changed. Richard Hircombe with chair 2 and Richard Lester with chair 4 both went through six different partners in the same period, while chair 5 was successively under licence to several quite separate pairings.



B Sedan chair and bath chair crossing the Circus. Detail from an etching by J.R. Cozens, 1773. (Courtesy Victoria Art Gallery Bath)

The register is also revealing about offences and penalties. Swearing, assault, fighting, refusal to carry a fare, and general bad behaviour, all appear in the record. Swearing, the commonest misdemeanour, incurred fines ranging from one to ten shillings, but more serious offences brought suspension or discharge. Twice Richard and Edward Gifford were threatened with loss of licence if they persisted in fighting, and in 1756 four pairs were suspended because their chairs were deemed to be in an unacceptable physical condition. What the register further makes plain is that sedans were hireable by the week if required. Various well-known residents and visitors were among those availing themselves of this facility in the 1740s and 1750s – William Pitt, William Stanhope, Richard Nash, and Dr William Oliver among them.

Under the licensing procedure chairmen were permitted to ply with a bath chair as well as a sedan,¹⁸ and doubtless many of them switched from one vehicle to the other in mid-morning after the early portage of people to and from the baths. About this period the appearance of the bath chair drastically altered. The old custom of collecting bathers from their bedside and delivering

them back there afterwards still prevailed as John Macky had described it around 1720: 'The chairmen, whatever storey you sleep on, come to one's bedside, strip you, give you their dress, wrap you in blankets, carry you off . . . and then after bathing you are carried home'.¹⁹ And the chairs were little changed (except for the colour of the cloth) since the days of Celia Fiennes. A visitor of 1725 speaks of them as 'very ordinary, covered with blue . . . open before but have Curtains to hide the persons wrap'd up in a Blanket'.²⁰ But there were drawbacks from the bather's point of view. At the baths themselves traffic congestion often delayed the appointed chair, and when it did arrive it was a dubious enough contraption to have to travel back to one's lodgings in, at least in Smollett's eyes. Having been kept waiting in the cold slips for their chairmen, bathers were hauled off home with their pores still open

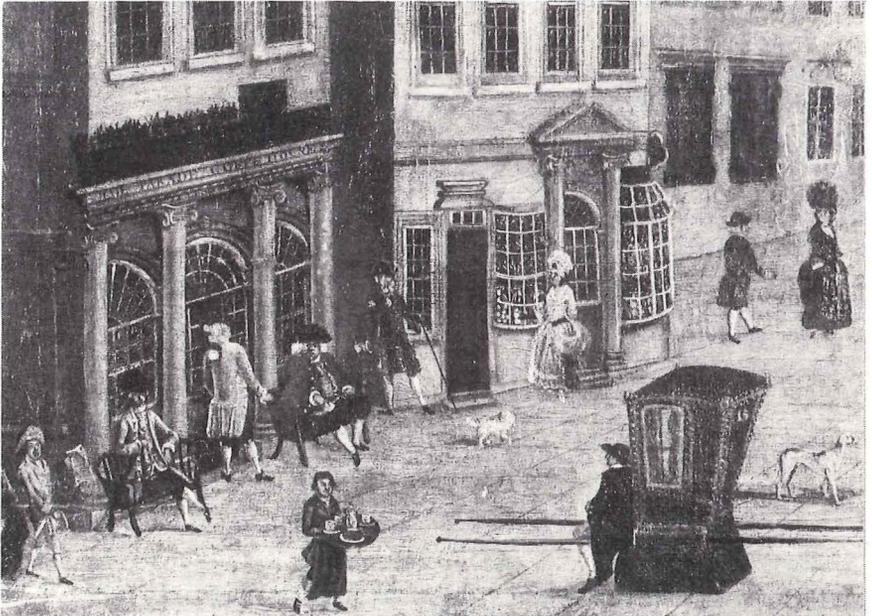
in paultry chairs, made of slight cross bars of wood, fastened together with girth web, covered with bays, and, for the most part destitute of lining: these machines, by standing in the streets till called for, are often rendered so damp by the weather, that bathers cannot use them without imminent hazard of their lives.²¹

A partial solution came from Archibald Cleland, would-be reformer of the city's bathing establishments and in 1742-3 assistant surgeon at the Hospital. Perhaps about 1740 he designed a more substantial and waterproof vehicle, what Smollett, a decade or more later, called 'a close warm chair, for conveying the patients to and from the Bath, which hath since been imitated by the governors of the hospital, as well as by many of the chairmen who ply the streets . . .'.²²

The reference here to the Hospital governors ties in neatly with two entries in the institution's minute books. In November 1749 it was ordered that 'a close bathing chair be forthwith made according to the directions of Mr Palmer by Mr Jelly the house carpenter'. The following January two more chairs on the same model were asked for. There is a strong likelihood that the portable chair still to be seen in the old Hospital building on North Borough Walls is one of these three chairs, or possibly the survivor of a later unrecorded commission. It resembles a sedan in general form, except that it is somewhat smaller and bellies out

low down at the front ending in a projecting footrest. The whole front removes, as does the gently domed roof, so that handicapped patients could easily be helped in and out. Instead of side windows the frames are filled with stiff linen, painted black on the outside like the rest of the vehicle. The rear is bowed like one of the modish new shop windows of the time. Very similar chairs can occasionally be discerned in later prints of Bath, so Smollett's statement that the ordinary chairmen adopted the design for themselves can be accepted, though not all these chairs had low curved projections at the front. Additional proof comes from an eyewitness account of about 1761:

For going to the waters there are specially made sedan chairs, which are quite small and low, bowed at below so as to give room, and with very short poles, for the purpose of carrying people straight out of their beds, in their bathing costume, right into their baths.²³



C A chairman with his dog(s) rests on a chair pole outside the Terrace Walk coffee house near Grand Parade. Detail from an anonymous oil painting, c. 1788.

When Christopher Anstey refers to a 'little black box just the size of a coffin',²⁴ it is probably this new-style bath chair he had in mind.

Much more prominent on the Bath scene, however, was the traditional sedan, on duty throughout the day and well into the night. After dark a travelling sedan had to carry a lighted lamp or be accompanied by a link boy holding a flambeau: just as well, for chairs had the right to the pavement provided they did not 'stop, jostle, or rub against any Person walking singly close to . . . Houses or Walls'.²⁵ Ordinary pedestrians had good cause to walk warily when fast-moving chairs were in the offing, with nightfall simply adding to the dangers. Chairs parked at their regular stands, which normally occupied part of the pavements, constituted a hazard at any time, especially if their long carrying poles had not been removed. In the semi-documentary pages of *Humphry Clinker* Smollett again condemned the Bath practice of leaving sedans and bath chairs out in the rain.

At present, the chairs stand soaking in the open street, from morning to night, till they become so many boxes of wet leather . . . a shocking inconvenience that extends over the whole city . . . even the close chairs, contrived for the sick, by standing in the open air, have their frize linings impregnated, like so many sponges, with the moisture of the atmosphere . . .²⁶

Smollett may have exaggerated, for it was hardly in the chairmen's own interests to allow their equipment to be damaged by rain, and chairs could sometimes be kept sheltered under cover at convenient inns and taverns nearby. (Some private houses also had accommodation for the chairs of visitors, as at no. 24 Queen Square where two mid-18th-century sedan houses survive in restored condition.) Nevertheless it remains true that chairs were often rained on, since wet weather vastly increased the demand for transport. Countless 18th-century strollers caught by a shower might have echoed the Cornish clergyman, John Penrose, that he had been 'forced to have a chair to put me home . . . because of the Rain. Six pence more added to my Chair-Hire Account.'²⁷ It is no wonder that chairmen needed double-milled waterproof greatcoats (tucking them up behind against splashing) or that, according to Lord Chesterfield, rheumatism was an



D Chairs in Alfred Street outside the Upper Assembly Rooms; note the pole drawn back and the roof lifted as a client emerges. Detail from an aquatint by Thomas Malton jun., 1779. (Courtesy Victoria Art Gallery Bath)

occupational hazard.²⁸ Celebrated for their strength and endurance – and sometimes accepting wagers to prove it²⁹ – chairmen depended critically on maintaining their health and avoiding serious accidents. When one of the chairmen ferrying Penrose's daughter Dolly tumbled down and 'received some hurt', he was unable to complete the journey and must have lost his fee to his replacement bearer.³⁰ And the serious consequences of a broken leg is apparent from the Earl of Huntingdon's action in starting a subscription for a chairman so injured.³¹

Nor was physical damage to chairs a small consideration if it put them out of service or deterred passengers. Hence the concern of Bath's licensed chairmen in the 1780s and 1790s at a spate of vandalism against sedans despite the penalties for wilful damage as stipulated in the various Acts of Parliament. Sedan no. 91 belonging to John Pike and Samuel Tyly was attacked on several occasions, the interior lining torn out and the cushion and cushion cloth stolen. In 1793 seven chairs stationed in Bartlett

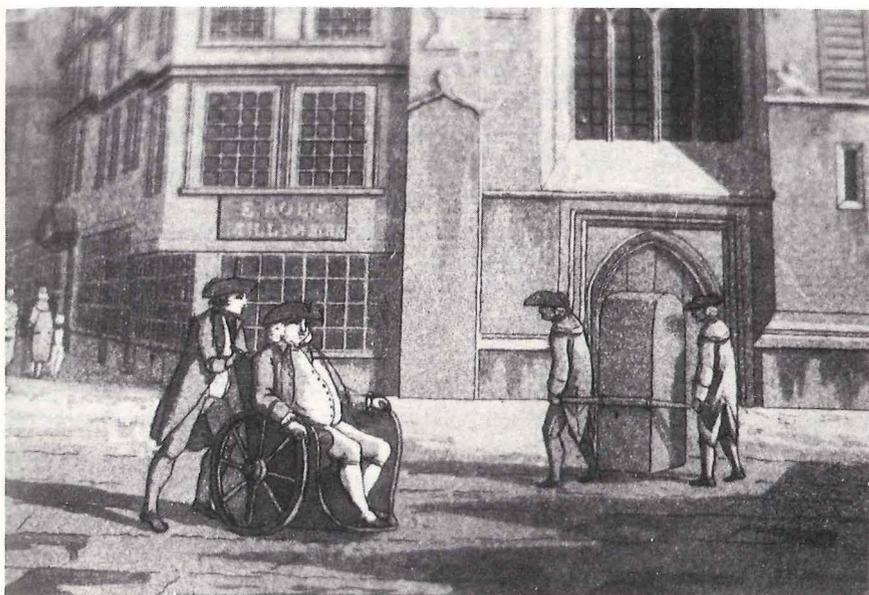
Street near the Upper Assembly Rooms were cut and defaced, so arousing the whole body of chairmen in Bath that they clubbed together to offer a £20 reward for information leading to a conviction. Some years later they demonstrated their solidarity again after another case of multiple vandalism, this time the reward being put up jointly by chairmen and the city treasurer.³² Although they lacked the showy luxuriousness of certain private chairs (to the designs of Chippendale among others), Bath's hire sedans seem to have been well enough crafted and appointed. The redesigned bath chairs ordered for the Hospital in 1749–50 were, as noted earlier, constructed by Thomas Jelly the builder (or by one of his family), presumably according to the pattern supplied by the master-glazier Thomas Palmer. Glaziers would necessarily have been employed in the manufacture of the big-windowed sedans and might sometimes have made complete chairs. Otherwise the principal local sedan firms appear to have been cabinet-makers rather than coachbuilders: craftsmen such as John Bryan, who advertised the manufacture and repair of sedans in 1760, and John Walter around 1770, provider of furniture to the new Assembly Rooms.³³ Little can be said about prices, though the Earl of Bristol paid £14 10s. for a private sedan in 1735 and another £5 for having it reupholstered in black mourning fabric sometime later – a reminder that the upholstery trade also had a role in the creation of a chair.³⁴ Surviving evidence from prints and drawings suggests that the utilitarian public chair underwent a certain stylistic evolution in the course of the 18th century, with the original rather foursquare shape gradually achieving a more elegant line. Details of windows, frames, and fittings would certainly have varied over the years, and in any case the designs of different manufacturers and the coexistence of older and newer models must inevitably have led to some diversity among the chairs plying the streets at any one time. Fashions in dress too may have played a part, for although the wide-hooped skirts of the mid-century were flexible enough to have been bent into the confining space of a sedan, their voluminousness may still have influenced the design and dimensions of chairs. Far less easy to accommodate in a low-ceilinged vehicle were those towering feathered heads of the 1770s, extravaganzas of the hairdressers' art, which inspired 'The Bath Chairmen's Petition', a set of wry quatrains beginning:

We've always endeavour'd to make you sit easy,
 And modell'd our chairs to your fancy and taste;
 But now we despair any longer to please ye,
 Since your heads are grown double the length
 of your waist.³⁵

The fashion also prompted the issue of a caricature print showing the enormous headdress of a contemporary belle protruding absurdly through the open roof of her sedan.

A more significant portent of the future, the first chairs on wheels were beginning to appear in the city. Unlike the old-established *vinaigrette* in Paris, wheeled chairs in Georgian Bath were seen as purely invalid vehicles, appropriate enough to conduct the aged Beau Nash to the rooms in,³⁶ but hardly a means of transportation otherwise. The commonest type to be met with by the later eighteenth century was perhaps the Merlin chair, brainchild of the extraordinary Belgian inventor and mechanic, J.J. Merlin, one of whose supposedly health-giving swings long served as an attraction at Bath's Sydney Gardens.³⁷ As Fanny Burney discovered during her stay in 1791, even the half-paralysed Lady Duncannon was able to propel her Merlin chair unaided across the room. If it was the standard model, self-propulsion was achieved by turning wheels attached to larger driving wheels of what looked in other respects something like an armchair. Machines like this stimulated local enterprise. William Ramsden of South Parade advertised a wheelable chair with an adjustable foot-rest and an apparatus for carrying invalids up and down stairs in an upright position; this latter piece of equipment could alternatively be fitted to an ordinary chair 'or to the bathing chairs used in this city, which will be a very considerable improvement to them'.³⁹ By the 1790s the cabinet-maker John Dawson of Abbey Street had committed himself to the manufacture of wheelchairs and portable chairs. These he had for both sale and hire.⁴⁰ It may have been one of his that was auctioned from Lyncombe Spa House in 1799: 'a gouty wheel chair to run in the streets'.⁴¹

As Bath expanded in fits and starts of speculative building, and as the resident and visiting population increased, the number of sedans grew in sympathy, from around 60 in 1745 and 80 in 1755 to a permitted limit of 250 in the byelaws of 1793-4. This entailed



E An early wheel chair and a short-poled bath chair (design without the bowed-out front) in Abbey Churchyard. Detail from an aquatint by Thomas Malton jun., 1788. (Courtesy Victoria Art Gallery Bath)

more and more regulation, whether to prescribe the exact positioning of pavement chair stands or to control the nightly traffic jams at the assembly rooms or outside the theatre. Guidebooks for visitors diligently listed the measured distances of common rides 'to prevent any imposition from or disputes with the chairmen'⁴² – from Pump Room to Trim Street, from the Guildhall to the upper end of Belmont, from the New Assembly Rooms to the Hospital or the centre house of the Royal Crescent, and so forth.

The local improvement Act of 1793 and the byelaws stemming from it gave a necessary opportunity to update and clarify the administration of the sedan service (as well as providing for the licensing of hackney coaches for the first time). Licensed chairs were required to be of a sturdy build, 5'3" tall and 2'2" wide within, decently lined, equipped with a lantern at night (the Act also permitted lighted torches), and painted black on the outside

with the registration number in white on the front, rear, and top part. While awaiting hire between 6 a.m. and midnight, chairs had to occupy one of 22 listed stands up to the limit specified for each, 'and if any licensed chairmen shall go with their chair to a stand, which shall be full of the number of chairs appointed to that stand, such chairmen are to go with their licensed chair to some other legal stand, which shall not then be full . . .'. To give some examples, 4 chairs were allowed on South Parade, 8 in the Abbey Churchyard (of which no more than 4 outside the Pump Room), 6 by the Cross Bath, 6 in both Queen Square and the Circus, 4 in St James's Square, 2 in Camden and 6 in Lansdown Crescents respectively, and 8 in Laura Place with Great Pulteney Street. No restriction was put on attendance at assemblies as long as chairs were called up in order and maintained reasonable decorum.

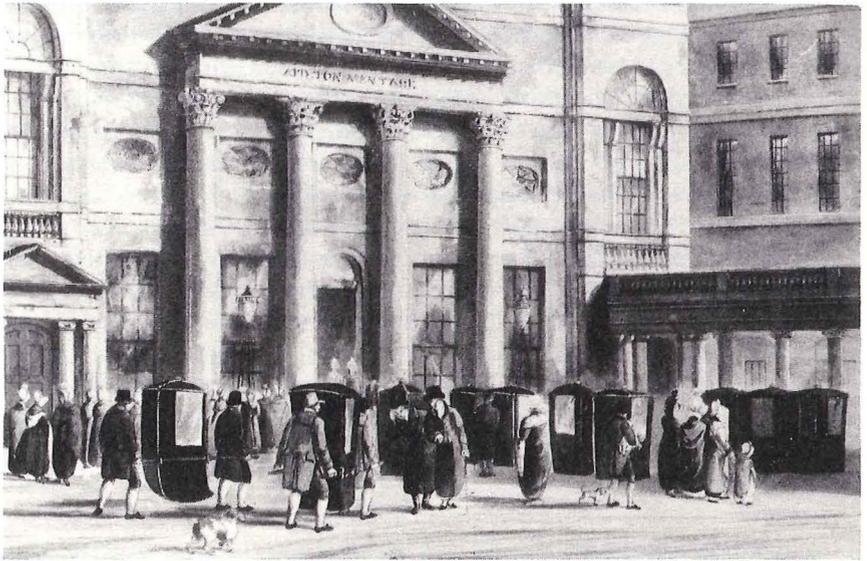
All this the chairmen could accept as simply codifying present practice. What they objected to was the Corporation's neglect to take account of the recent spread of the city up the steep slopes of Lansdown, and hence the increased effort of carrying a human burden long distances uphill. Their dramatic gesture of protest was reported nationally in the *Gentleman's Magazine*. On licensing day they mutinied, marched en masse to the Guildhall which they surrounded, insulted the Mayor, broke up the chairs of backsliding colleagues, and refused pointblank to carry passengers. Negotiations quickly followed, the Corporation set up an ad hoc committee to consider the grievances, and the matter was settled by granting the chairmen a fare of sixpence for each 300 yards of hilly ground traversed instead of for each 500 yards, the rate for more level terrain.⁴³

The authorities had a special reason for fearing the chairmen's disaffection at this period. In the wake of the French Revolution's recent excesses and the growth of radical societies in London and the provinces, a mood of hysteria about possible working-class insurrection was sweeping the country. Nationally, chairmen had a mixed reputation; Sir John Fielding, half-brother to the novelist, had once lumped them in with 'Porters, Labourers and drunken Mechanics' as constituents of the urban 'mob'. In Bath they would sometimes get drunk, act outrageously, insult their passengers, and fight among themselves, but this seems to have been exceptional behaviour, a sudden letting off steam. They had after

all an arduous yet frequently tedious job, involving long hours on call which they often passed in nearby taverns or with their dogs.⁴⁴ In a century of minimal policing of the streets the Corporation was therefore glad to acknowledge the general reliability of the chairmen by giving them some role in peacekeeping. After the fright of the Gordon Riots in 1780, for instance, when the new Catholic chapel in Bath was set on fire, chairmen were among those enrolled for special paid duties of patrolling the streets at night.⁴⁵ Only eleven months before their mutinous strike action of 1793 the chairmen had indeed won much approval by signing the resolutions of the Bath Loyal Association against 'the wild Doctrine of EQUALITY'.⁴⁶ 'We are conscious', the 326 signatories stated in their declaration, 'that our Livelihood and the Happiness of ourselves and Families depend entirely upon the prosperity and peace of the Kingdom in general and of this City in particular.' They would lay down their lives in the defence of King and Constitution.⁴⁷ And, as it turned out, once their little difference about steep hills had been settled with the Mayor, this 'so well-regulated and well-disposed a body of men'⁴⁸ proved more than willing to assist in quelling the food riots of the 1790s. Yet their mixed reputation seems well-founded. In January 1798 they were themselves the cause of disturbances, and their exactions and insulting behaviour were reported to be a common complaint.⁴⁹ This is not easy to square with Richard Warner's view of Bath policing:

It is in a great degree secured, indeed, by a judicious arrangement with respect to the chairmen, who are 340 in number. Each of them is made a constable, by which means he is not only bound to preserve the peace himself, but to see that others also commit no breaches of it. An act of parliament for the express regulation of this powerful body of men, and several ordinances and restrictions of the magistracy, prevent, at the same time, extortion on the part of the chairmen, and support them in their just claims on those who employ them.⁵⁰

A generation later the Commissioners on Municipal Corporations were informed that the Bath chairmen 'are sometimes sworn in as special constables, but are not found very effective' – which perhaps puts the matter in a nutshell.⁵¹



F Sedan chair rank outside the rebuilt Pump Room. Detail of an aquatint by David Cox from *Six Views of the City of Bath*, 1820. (Courtesy Victoria Art Gallery Bath)

But Bath and its sedans felt safe enough in the early 19th century for Jane Austen's characters to walk and ride the streets with equanimity; in imagination Catherine Morland even danced in her chair as she returned from the ball.⁵² In another novel of the time the beautiful but poverty-stricken heroine, having found her hoped-for refuge in Rivers Street shut up, stands hopelessly in the frozen snow, babe in arms, as a sedan approaches: 'Chair, my Lady'. It is the chairmen's usual beat, even in the snow. 'We will carry you very safely, my Lady', but the moneyless heroine has to say no.⁵³ According to the author of some limping but informative lines printed in 1822, this polite exchange with the chairmen would be more characteristic of summer than winter behaviour:

Civil and sober ev'ry chairman stands,
 Ready to any thing to turn his hands
 In Summer; but when Winter is brought round,

Bustling and saucy, swagg'ring they are found.
 Is it not wrong that they're *obliged* to stay
 In public-houses or the street all day?⁵⁴

The point about the seasons being of course that from autumn round to late spring Bath was thronged with visitors, creating a high demand for chairs, while out-of-season summer visitors were fewer and normally preferred to walk. The chair business had always been markedly seasonal, with the result that chairmen sometimes turned to alternative occupations in the unprofitable summer months. As the sedan trade declined in the 1830s, many of them took to the fields from June onwards to help with haymaking and harvest.⁵⁵

In spite of the comment in 1809 that 'Bath is so increased in Size that most People have Coaches who formerly only went in Chairs',⁵⁶ there was no very obvious lessening of demand in the first quarter of the century while Bath remained a popular resort.



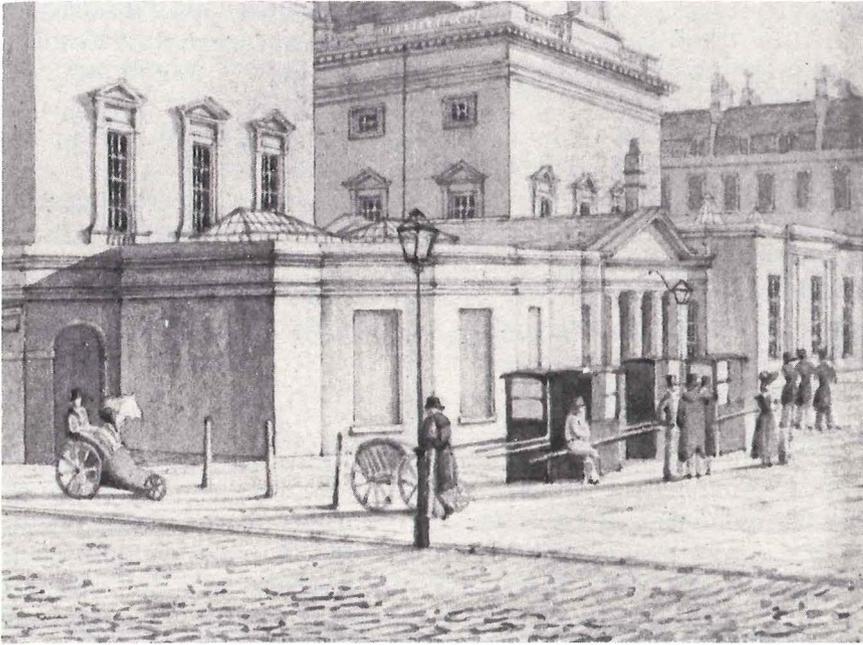
G Two chairs parked at the Lansdown Crescent stand; one pole has been removed for easy access. Detail of an aquatint by David Cox from *Six Views of the City of Bath*, 1820. (Courtesy Victoria Art Gallery Bath)

Over two hundred sedans still registered annually. They remained the official form of chair transport even if, increasingly, they shared their stands with numbers of unlicensed wheelchairs. On the move the sedan-men continued to dominate the footways, ambling along at a brisk pace and expecting precedence from every pedestrian they encountered.

They were generally within hearing; and the cry of 'Chair! chair!' would sometimes bring half a dozen couples of them racing from different quarters in competition for a customer, when there would often follow a riotous quarrel for the fare between those first arriving.⁵⁷

Verbal testimony such as this usefully corrects the impression of a sedate, quietly-moving form of conveyance that one receives from contemporary drawings and prints. Pictorial evidence might deceive in other ways too. Responding amusedly to Phiz's illustration for the Royal Crescent sedan episode in *Pickwick Papers*, Dickens observed that a 'fat chairman so short as our friend here, never drew breath in Bath'.⁵⁸ Yet is Dickens' own witness reliable? In the novel the short chairman warms his hands at a link-boy's torch, and it is the red glare of that torch that Mr Winkle first notices on opening the house door. But were torches still used to light the way of sedans as late as 1828 when the Pickwickians must have been in Bath? Had Dickens seen them during his overnight stop at the White Hart in 1835, only months before he conjured up his Bath scenes? One thing *is* certain. Mrs Dowler, being carried into the Crescent at three o'clock in the morning, would then have been paying the chairmen double fare, a long-established rule for transport after midnight.⁵⁹

Dickens' descriptions refer in fact to the final phase in the history of portable chairs in Bath. The decision of the local magistrates in 1829 to approve a hackney carriage service in and around the city was bad news for the chairmen. Since the Bath Act of 1793 (which theoretically sanctioned coaches for public hire), the situation had been transformed by the development of the light, four-wheeled, one-horse vehicle known as a 'fly'. After the introduction of a fly service at Brighton in 1816 the fashion had spread; so that in issuing regulations and fare rates, and prescribing where waiting flies should stand, the Bath authorities were only going with the trend.⁶⁰ But for the chairmen it seemed



H A later design of wheel chair together with waiting sedans at the north-west corner of the Upper Assembly Rooms. Detail of a sepia drawing by Ann or Robert Woodroffe, 1828. (Courtesy Victoria Art Gallery Bath)

to spell disaster. Despairingly they petitioned their customers, explaining that two-thirds of their number were married with large families, that they had houses to maintain, that they contributed to the rates and were liable to serve as special constables, and that they depended on continued patronage.⁶¹

Yet it may have been less the competition from fifty licensed fly carriages that sent the use of chairs into a spiral of decline, to virtual extinction soon after 1850, than the disappearance of their most characteristic customers. A publication of 1841 with the sombre title *The Decline and Fall of Bath*⁶² charted the loss of visitors and all the business they once brought. At the height of the season many of the best lodgings were now empty; public entertainments were being deserted; luxury trades and services had dwindled; 'whole streets, formerly occupied by the noble and

wealthy, are now being inhabited by mechanics and the humbler orders of tradespeople!'. Moreover, the task of carrying invalids had long since been usurped by wheelchairs, which had attained their classic character in the Bath chair proper, manufactured in the city by firms like Austin Dawson and James Heath. Although some two hundred portable chairs remained under licence until around 1840, they were for the most part grossly underemployed. By 1851 the explanation in the City of Bath Act that references to hackney carriages covered sedans as well was largely redundant, so few were then regularly plying for hire. From the late 1850s local guidebooks mention only wheeled chairs, of which at their height there were reported to be up to 162 available. Any thoughts of reviving the sedan business in the future would be merely exercises in nostalgia.

Bath's history of carried chairs is far from unique. As a style of public transport the sedan had been a European phenomenon, already common before 1740 in the cities of Italy, Germany, France, and other countries.⁶³ Large fleets of hireable chairs were on request in London, Edinburgh and Dublin, while on a smaller scale the amenity could sooner or later be found at Exeter and Bristol, York and Chester, Newcastle and Glasgow, the spas and watering places of Leamington and Brighton, Weymouth and Cheltenham . . . almost any centre in fact where the gentry assembled in sufficient numbers.⁶⁴

Employing two to carry one, portable chairs could never be cheap to hire and hence their principal customers were the well-to-do, the status-conscious, and the chronic sick. These Bath attracted in abundance. It was in fact wholly due to this annual visitation of short-term residents that the city was able to offer a chair transport service the equal of any European capital, and to do so over such an unusually long span as two hundred years. Once the fashionable company deserted the place, leaving only the invalids and the elderly retired, the carried chair became obsolete and the wheeled variety took over for the next century or so.

Notes

- 1 Thomas D'Urfey, *The Bath, or the Western Lass* (London, 1701) p. 1.

- 2 Samuel Pepys, *The Diary*, ed. R. Latham and W. Matthews (London, 1970–83) vol. 9 p. 233, entry for 13 June 1668.
- 3 Celia Fiennes, *The Journeys*, ed. C. Morris (London, 1947) p. 20.
- 4 Fynes Moryson, *An Itinerary Containing his Ten Yeeres Travell* (Glasgow, 1907–08) vol. 1 pp. 239 and 360; John Evelyn, *The Diary*, ed. E.S. De Beer (Oxford, 1955) vol. 1 p. 112, vol. 2 p. 353.
- 5 According to R. Straus, *Carriages and Coaches* (London, 1912) p. 91, Duncombe had 40–50 sedans ‘making for use’ before the end of 1643, but Evelyn remarks that ‘few persons of Reputation would make use of them a good while after, it being held a conveyance for voluptuous persons & Women of pleasure to their leu’d Rendivozes incognito’ – John Evelyn, *op. cit.*, vol. 1 pp. 11–12.
- 6 William Stukeley, *Itinerarium Curiosum*. 2nd ed. (London, 1776, but first pub. 1724) p. 146.
- 7 Celia Fiennes, *op. cit.*, p. 236.
- 8 Thomas Guidott, *A Discourse of Bath* (London, 1676) preface.
- 9 Emanuel Green, ‘The visits to Bath of two queens’, *Bath Nat. Hist. & Antiqu. Field Club Proc.* vol. 7 (1893) p. 231.
- 10 6 Anne c. 42.
- 11 Thomas Guidott, *A Collection of Treatises Relating to the City and Waters of Bath*. 2nd ed. (London, 1725) pp. 365–9.
- 12 John Wood, *An Essay towards a Description of Bath* (1765, repr. Bath, 1969) p. 220.
- 13 The chair would spring up and down several inches, at least on 19th-century poles – *Bath Chronicle* 31 Dec 1885.
- 14 John Gay, *Trivia*, ed. W.H. Williams (London, 1922, repr. text of 1716) p. 29. Cf. Gay’s lines on p. 38 about the assuming chairman.
- 15 César de Saussure, *A Foreign View of England in the Reigns of George I & George II*, ed. Mme Van Muyden (London, 1902) pp. 167–9.
- 16 7 Geo I c. 19 and 12 Geo II c. 20.
- 17 John Wood, *op. cit.*, p. 248.
- 18 One licensing form of c. 1757 has survived: see Broadsides and Posters no. 190 in Bath Reference Library. It carries the city arms at the top and states the regulations and penalties governing the use of ‘glass’ and bath chairs.
- 19 John Macky, *A Journey through England* (London, 1722 or earlier) pp. 129–30. The Duke of Chandos was concerned about Wood’s flying staircase at the first St John’s Hospital lodging house he built precisely because it was inconvenient for ‘carrying up a sick body in a cedan with ease’ – C.H. Collins Baker and M.I. Baker, *The Life . . . of James Brydges, First Duke of Chandos* (Oxford, 1949) p. 305.
- 20 ‘Diary of a Tour by Three Students from Cambridge, 1725’ (Bath Reference Library, MS. B 914.238) pp. 118–19. The writer noted the ordinariness of bath chairs contrasted with the ‘many fine Chairs for the Ladies’ (i.e. sedans).
- 21 Tobias Smollett, *An Essay on the External Use of Water*. 3rd ed. (London, 1770, but first pub. 1752) p. 35.
- 22 *Ibid.* pp. 32–3, 37. Cleland’s career is outlined in Roger Rolls, ‘Archibald Cleland, c. 1700–71’, *British Medical Journal* 14 April 1984 pp. 1132–4.

- 23 F. Kielmansegge, *Diary of a Journey to England in the Years 1761–1762* (London, 1902) p. 121.
- 24 Christopher Anstey, *The New Bath Guide* (1820, repr. Bath 1978, but first pub. 1766) p. 14.
- 25 Licensing form c. 1757, op. cit. note 18 above.
- 26 Tobias Smollett, *Humphry Clinker*, Bramble to Lewis, 23 April.
- 27 John Penrose, *Letters from Bath, 1766–1767*, ed. B. Mitchell and H. Penrose (Bath, 1983) p. 83.
- 28 Chesterfield, 4th Earl of, *The Letters*, ed. B. Dobrée (London, 1932) Vol. 6, letter no. 2391, 28 Nov 1765.
- 29 Thus a pair of chairmen carried a 14½ stone man for a bet the 3½ miles from Orange Grove to Bathford Bridge without stopping – *Bath Journal* 23 Nov 1761. A similar 19th-century feat took a loaded chair non-stop to Box, while another chair is said to have conveyed a female invalid, in stages, from Bath to London – *Bath Weekly Chronicle, Notes & Queries* 5 May 1945 (Bath Reference Library).
- 30 John Penrose, op. cit., p. 195.
- 31 *Bath Journal* 25 May 1761.
- 32 *Bath Chronicle* 25 April and 5 Dec 1793 and 16 May 1799. An earlier incident was reported in *ibid.* 8 Feb 1781. Bath chairmen may have had their own benefit societies as the Westminster men did – *Case and Petition of the Licensed Hackney Chair-men . . . within . . . Westminster* (London, 1712).
- 33 Holburne Museum, Bath, *Furniture Made in Bath* (exhibition catalogue, 1985) pp. 4 and 6.
- 34 Hervey (John), 1st Earl of Bristol, *The Diary*, ed. S.H.A. Hervey (Wells, 1894) pp. 117–18.
- 35 *Bath Chronicle* 8 Feb 1776.
- 36 This was in October 1760: see Mary Delany, *The Autobiography and Correspondence of Mary Granville, Mrs Delany*, ed. Lady Llanover. 1st series (London, 1861) vol. 3 p. 607.
- 37 For Merlin see the exhibition catalogue by Anne French, *John Joseph Merlin, the Ingenious Mechanick* (London, Iveagh Bequest, Kenwood, 1985).
- 38 Fanny Burney, *The Journals and Letters*, ed. J. Hemlow (Oxford, 1972) Vol. 1 pp. 43 and 46.
- 39 *Bath Journal* 12 April 1779. Ramsden had gout sufferers in mind.
- 40 *Bath Chronicle* 29 June 1797 and 22 March 1798.
- 41 *Bath Herald* 29 June 1799.
- 42 *The New Bath Guide* (1790) pp. 50–2. Another safeguard for passengers was the list of chairmen, with their addresses and chair numbers, posted up in the Pump Room together with the regulations on chairs – see ‘Visit to Bath by an Irish clergyman, 1772’ (MS. copy by C.W. Shickle in Bath Reference Library).
- 43 The chief documentation for this whole episode is: 33 Geo III c. 89; Bath Corporation Minute Books (Bath Record Office) meetings of 1 Aug, 10 Sept, 1 Nov, 10 Dec 1793 and 12 Feb and 9 April 1794; *Extracts of the Acts . . . and Bye-Laws Relative to Licensed Chairs and Chairmen within . . . Bath and . . . around* (Bath, 1794); *Gentleman’s Magazine* 26 Nov 1793; *Bath Chronicle* 24 Nov

1793. Fares were now chargeable by short time intervals as an alternative to measured distance.
- 44 *Bath Chronicle* 29 April 1790 – ‘Scarce a chairman but has his spaniel and terrier, and some of them three or four of each kind lying about his stand.’ Another way to break the monotony of waiting was the ‘mock funeral’ ritual meted out to chairmen late on morning duty at their stand because of a hangover; they were carried on a litter in a bizarre street procession, as described in William Hone, *The Table Book* (London, 1878) pp. 21–2.
- 45 C.W. Shickle, ‘Transcripts of Bath Corporation Minute Books’ (Bath Reference Library) meeting of 27 June 1780. Policing duties were likewise given to chairmen in London, Edinburgh, and perhaps elsewhere.
- 46 *Bath Chronicle* 20 Dec 1792.
- 47 Bath Loyal Association, Minute book and list of signatures 1792 (Bath Record Office).
- 48 *Bath Herald* 8 Aug 1795.
- 49 *Bath Chronicle* 11 Jan 1798. It may be relevant that many Bath chairmen were said to be Irish (as in London) or Welsh.
- 50 Richard Warner, *An Historical and Descriptive Account of Bath and its Environs* (Bath, 1802) p. 93.
- 51 Commissioners on Municipal Corporations in England and Wales, *Report on the City of Bath* (1835) p. 1118.
- 52 *Northanger Abbey* chapter 10.
- 53 Bayfield (Mrs E.G), *Black Rock House* (London, 1810) vol. 3, pp. 66–7.
- 54 *A Summer in Bath* (Sherborne, 1822) p. 62. The following lines describe the zigzag course of some chairs on rainy nights.
- 55 Rowland Mainwaring, *Annals of Bath from . . . 1800* (Bath, 1838) pp. 318–19.
- 56 *The Jerningham Letters, 1780–1843*, ed. Egerton Castle (London, 1896) Vol. 1 pp. 332–3, Lady Jerningham to her daughter 19 Jan 1809.
- 57 ‘Hired street conveyances, old and new’, *The Leisure Hour* (Sept 1864) pp. 600–03.
- 58 Charles Dickens, *The Letters*, vol. 1, 1820–39, ed. M. House and G. Storey (Oxford, 1965) p. 242.
- 59 Perhaps first proposed by the surgeon Cleland in the late 1740s when recommending that two sedans be on all-night duty for the use of visitors and medical practitioners – Thomas Smollett, *Essay*, op. cit., pp. 42–4.
- 60 *Bath Chronicle* 14 Jan 1830. The first hackney fly stand was at Fountain Buildings.
- 61 Rowland Mainwaring, op. cit., pp. 318–19.
- 62 Anonymously published in Bath, 1841, with subtitle, *The Private Correspondence of Capt. Smallarms and T. Broadlands, Esq.*, pp. 6–9. The tenor of this pamphlet was that religious bigotry had been a major factor in driving people from the city.
- 63 Carl Christian Schramm, *Abhandlung der Porte-Chaises oder Trage-Sänfften* (Nürnberg, 1737) passim.
- 64 For general accounts of sedans in Britain see R. Straus, *Carriages and Coaches* (London, 1912) chapter 4; H.W. Hart, ‘The sedan chair as a means of public conveyance’, *Jnl. Transport History* Vol. 5 (1961–2) pp. 205–18.

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