

The Horse Economy of Eighteenth-century Bath

(Talk for History of Bath Research Group, 12 Oct 2005)

It's a fair assumption that eighteenth-century Bath depended on horses and horse-drawn vehicles quite as much as we rely on motorised transport today. Indeed there are plenty of parallels between now and then. Take the modern range in private cars and compare the mix of coaches, chaises, chariots, phaetons, gigs, and other carriages that you'd find on the streets of Georgian Bath. Modern vans and lorries had their predecessors in carts and wagons, and you can easily find horse-age equivalents of country bus services, taxis, car hire firms, garages and petrol stations, car parks, transport cafés, car salerooms, driving schools, and even car washes, and that's without all the familiar problems of traffic congestion, accidents, pollution, and road building and maintenance. Horses and carriages were ingrained in 18C mentalities as mechanised locomotion is ingrained in ours.

Of course any town in the kingdom, even sea ports like Bristol and Liverpool, once depended crucially on horse transport, but Bath was particularly reliant because its economic prosperity owed so much to the constant flow of visitors. And how were these visitors, the resort's lifeblood, to come and go unless carried and pulled by horses? How could spa visitors, and indeed the residents themselves, be supplied with the myriad goods they needed, from foodstuffs to luxury commodities, without horses? How could Bath possibly have grown by 1800 into one of the dozen largest places in the country without the enormous contribution of horsepower? To understand the process fully would mean delving into the history of 18C road transport across the whole country as well as the spread of the turnpike system, and the growth of stagecoach, posting and haulage services, on the network of roads that converged on Bath. That's not my aim this evening though. Instead I want to focus on the presence of horses in Bath itself and the activity and employment that horses generated.

The fact that horses don't appear in great numbers in images of 18C Bath is probably misleading. Horses are not that easy to draw and topographical artists were in any case more intent on recording the buildings than depicting realistic street scenes. There were certainly more horses and vehicles about than artists tended to show, and there would have been more still had it not been for the success of the sedan chairmen for so long in preventing a hackney cab service developing at Bath. In the city centre itself horse-drawn vehicles would have been an especially common sight along the main north-south corridor, in other words the awkward route, with its two sharp bends, that ran from Northgate through High Street, Cheap Street, and then down Stall Street towards the bridge. This was not only the central link in the traffic route between the Lower Bristol and London roads, it also contained many of the coaching inns together with important shops that had to be supplied with goods. And it ran of course through the Marketplace itself - a space especially congested with horses and vehicles and goods on market days. It is no wonder that this through route was where the greatest efforts of decongestion were concentrated after 1750 - first by pulling down the obstructive North and South gates, then in the 1770s by improving the alternative route round Borough Walls and demolishing the old Guildhall building that partly blocked the Marketplace, and then finally in the 1790s by setting back some of the frontages of Cheap Street and Stall Street to straighten and widen those particular streets.

As Corporation records show, congestion and horse traffic were problems that the City Council and the Magistrates often had to grapple with. Just to take a few examples...In 1725 we find the Council agreeing to let householders in Cross Bath Lane put up posts to stop coaches parking there. In 1753 the J.P.s tried to prevent the blockages in St James's parish by lines of colliers' horses being fed or unloaded or simply rested in the street. In 1757 the Bath Act of Parliament included a clause that banned coal carts and wagons from passing through the centre of town at night. The Act of 1766 gave the magistrates the power to impound any horses or vehicles that were impeding rights of way.

Together with the later efforts at street widening these are just a few instances of Corporation action on traffic. But problems remained - the Bear inn for one. Standing as it did at the top of Stall Street, it blocked the passage through to Milsom Street, the most obvious line of communication between the lower and upper town. As the writer Smollett mentions in his novel *Humphry Clinker*, pedestrians and sedan chairs had to go right through the inn yard passing between a double row of horses and avoiding the carriages constantly coming in and going out. That could be risky, as could walking along Cheap Street, where a number of people were killed in traffic accidents over the years, including James Johnson, the Bishop of Worcester, in 1774. Even after it had been widened, Cheap Street remained a hazard - as even Jane Austen mentions - largely because of dangerous drivers. In fact contemporary newspapers quite often report cases

of foolhardy driving at Bath, and horrible accidents in which people were thrown from frightened horses or run over by carriage wheels, and the horses themselves terribly injured and vehicles shattered to pieces. There were nasty accidents too outside the city centre, sometimes caused by the steep hills and the inefficient braking systems, or by drivers illegally riding on the shafts. The first local Act of Parliament for Walcot parish, in 1793, actually has a section making 'furious' driving an offence.

Horse traffic increased noise levels in Bath - clip-clopping hooves, neighing and whinneying of horses, the shouts of drivers and postillions, creaking carriages, jingling harnesses, the heavy rumble of wheels over stone road surfaces, especially felt by people in living and working in basement areas. Noise disturbance seems to have led to roads near St James's and St Michael's churches being cordoned off during Sunday church services, and the racket was bothersome enough for residents in the Circus to complain about being awoken early in the morning by the sound of horses being exercised outside their windows. And besides noise pollution there was the mess that horse traffic caused, not only horse droppings but all the dust created by hooves and iron-shod carriage wheels constantly pulverising the limestone setts that the main streets were surfaced with.

But the street scene was certainly *enlivened* by horses and vehicles. Writing in 1766 John Penrose was wonderstruck by the beautiful riding horses and coach horses he saw at Bath. We should bear in mind the real quality of British horses by the mid-18C after at least two centuries of selective breeding, including significant improvement by Arabian bloodstock. A French visitor in 1784 thought we had the best specimens in every class from racers, hunters, and various sorts of road and draught animals down to common cart horses. The Bath newspapers of the time frequently advertise horses for sale, horses wanted, and horses strayed or stolen, and this gives a vivid impression of the variety to be found here - mares, geldings, stallions, ponies, colts and fillies, old family horses, blacks and greys, chestnuts and bays, roans and sorrels... hunters capable of carrying 16- or even 18-stone riders, 10 mph trotters, small surfooted mounts to suit children and timorous ladies, teams of matching black coach-horses, bony geldings that jump well, nags, farm-horses, post-chaise horses, stud stallions, and so on and on. People knew their animals well and could give close descriptions, as you can see from this notice of a stolen horse in 1752 - a dark brown mare, 14 years old, 14½ hands high, with a white stripe down the face, a cut mane with the thick crest falling to one side, a flisk tail with silver hairs mixed in, the near hind foot white, the mark of a blow on the nearside buttock, a horse very full of flesh but a little near-winded..

In that description we find the expression 'the mark of a blow on the... buttock' and this raises the question of how well or badly horses were treated. Of course they were subject to accidents and unintended injuries and suffered from diseases and occasional epidemics, but what about deliberate ill-treatment? Certainly one comes across cases of horses been ridden or driven too fast or for too long, and generally forced to labour beyond their limits. You may remember Richard Warner's account in 1801 of the animals - asses more than horses - that were used to deliver loads of coal around Bath: small, thin creatures, dropping with fatigue, forced on by blows, and kept overnight in crowded yards on Holloway still wearing their wooden saddles. But by this date a more compassionate attitude to animals is noticeable, also especially among the middle classes, and in 1799, for instance, several sermons were preached from Bath pulpits in a series attacking animal cruelty. On the whole I have the impression that most people looked after their horses pretty well, not just for practical reasons but because they grew attached to them, liked, trusted and admired them. Take the sentiments expressed by Jonathan Dash, who kept one of the Bath riding schools and who remarked on one occasion how 'his Study, his Delight, and his Livelihood have depended upon the training of that noble Animal'. The word 'noble' applied to horses crops up on other occasions, and you'll recall that in *Gulliver's Travels* it's the horses or Houyhnhnms that are seen as the elegant, rational creatures, altogether superior to the bestial human beings or Yahoos. The cult of fine horses is also evident in the patronage given to horse painting, with proud owners commissioning specialist artists like George Stubbs to immortalise their noble steeds in paint.

Good horses could serve their owner for many years but caring for them was quite expensive, as indeed was the initial purchase. You could pay upwards of 10 to 15 guineas for a decent saddle horse, more for a coach horse, and easily 50 guineas for a hunter or race - the equivalent of over £3000 today. And that was only the start. An estimate made around 1780 for the cost of running a family coach came to almost £160 pounds a year, perhaps £10,000 in today's terms. This included the outlay on hay, oats and straw for three horses, stabling, shoeing, farriers' bills, carriage duty, a suggested sum for depreciation, and the wages of a coachman. All these costs would have increased during the inflationary years ahead. In the thirty years up to 1793 the price of oats, hay and straw more than doubled for instance, and from 1784 onwards increasingly heavy government taxes were laid on both horses and carriages. Yet if a horse was an

expensive item it was also a great asset and one that needed looking after. Veterinary science was improving all the time, with good practice spread by publications, horse hospitals, and even by lecture series such as those held at Bath in 1797 and 1800 on the horse's foot, including the principles of shoeing horses, a controversial subject at the time. Horse owners spent a lot of money sometimes on expensive patent medicines for horses, from cholic balls and fever powders to ointments and cordials, and they also paid for the services of expert farriers. Many common treatments - such as bleeding, blistering and purging - resembled those for human patients - and farriers or horse doctors were the equivalent of physicians, surgeons and apothecaries rolled into one. In the earlier 18C it seems there were generally two or three farriers working in Bath at any one time, and by the end of the century the local directory for 1800 lists seven. Sometimes these farriers combined veterinary work with blacksmithing - horse-shoeing being the obvious link. Farriers may have played some role in local horse breeding, but what little we know of that is confined to the availability of stud services using pedigree stallions. These are first documented in 1741 when a stallion was available to cover suitable mares at the *Hare & Hounds* near the turnpike. From then on we find fairly regular advertisements for named stallions which often performed for weeks or months at a stretch at particular venues, including some of the main Bath inns - the *Bear*, the *Three Tuns*, the *Golden Lion*, and the *Full Moon*. Also at Dash's Riding School where in the 1780s and '90s the racehorses Hephestion and Munster inseminated mares at 1 to 2 guineas a time.

More everyday horse requirements included washing and watering, pasturing and stabling. There were probably horse troughs at various locations in Bath, but the favourite place for watering lay at the foot of Avon Street where a ramp and steps led into the river. It was a dangerous spot though, with a melancholy record over the years for horses and grooms drowning in the strong current. Accidents also occurred at a second watering place behind the *Packhorse* inn at the bottom of Walcot Street. There were periodic attempts to make both areas safe by fencing but the accidents went on. There was as well a project for a warm-water horse bath. Such a bath had once existed behind the King's and Queen's bath, but this must have disappeared long before 1784 when the surgeon and councilman John Symons proposed making a horse bath in Stall Street. Nine years later, in 1793, it finally won Council approval though I don't have concrete proof that it was actually built during the changes to Stall Street at that period.

As for pasturing and stabling, it's clear that horses were kept all over Bath and its outskirts - in fields, paddocks, yards, barns, and all kinds of stabling. Except in winter, outdoor pastures, which could often be rented at so much a week or month, were good for horses. Their chief drawback was that animals might stray or be stolen, and the newspapers quite often print notices offering rewards for the return of horses lost from Barton Fields, Kingsmead, the Town Common, and many other field sites in and around Bath. Horses occasionally disappeared from stables too, but stables were safer and usually more conveniently located. Accommodation for horses is an important topic yet it's rarely had its due in accounts of Bath's physical development. Essentially we can speak of two types of stabling - either for *private* use or for *commercial*. The bulk of private stabling consisted of buildings and sheds, sometimes with coach houses attached, that stood close to residential properties for the occupier's own use. They are often mentioned in leases. When there was no room to build a stable, horse owners could always rent one nearby on long term. In the building developments outside the congested city centre there was usually ample room however. In Queen Square, for example, the elder John Wood's house on the south side had stabling for six horses together with enough ground for a coach house; a later occupant did in fact erect a coach-house there. In the same way, the centre house on the north side of the Circus had a 10-stall stable and servants' accommodation above it, together with a double coach house. I get the impression that in the earlier phase of Georgian building new houses rarely came with stables included and that they were gradually added piecemeal by their owners. Later developments may have provided associated private mews-type stables and coach-houses from the start. It's a topic I haven't really gone into, though, and you may want to discuss it later.

The other category of stables - those for mainly commercial use - covers livery stables, all the stabling at inns and taverns, and the various stables used in connection with the haulage industry, horse engines, agriculture, and leisure activities. Of these let's first consider livery stables.

These were particularly aimed at visitors who needed to park their horses during their stay, and in addition, if they'd brought a private coach to Bath, to garage that as well in a secure coach-house. As a rule livery stables offered horse stalls, supplies of water, fodder and straw, and the services of a groom. Since they were all competing for custom, though, stables often emphasised any other benefits they offered, such as their security, their airiness and dryness, the quality of the oats and hay, and their moderate prices - though they were not that cheap at between 6d and 10d per horse per night. Location was also a factor and stables varied in their clientele. The long-established stables in Avon Street Mews probably dealt mainly with

commercial traffic and could even accommodate laden wagons. By contrast the various livery stables occupying the area north of the Circus and Brock Street were geared rather to visitors lodging on Lansdown.

Among other major providers of stabling were the inns. As early as 1686 a Jacobean survey found stabling enough for 451 horses at the different Bath inns and that figure significantly increased over the years. By the later 18C the *Lamb*, *Pelican*, and *White Lion* alone could house 300 horses between them, and the *Three Tuns Lodging* another 150, without counting all the other establishments. So one can estimate that altogether Bath's hostelries could have stabled well over a thousand animals.

To all this visitor-oriented stabling we must add the stabling for regular working horses - for horses that turned horse engines in malting mills and operated the crane at Combe Down stone mines; horses that pulled coal carts and hay wains and brewers' drays; horses employed in the goods-wagon trade to London, Bristol and many other places; teams of horses that drew the scheduled stage-coaches and mail-coaches on the web of highways and turnpikes converging on Bath; horses employed in the posting services that grew up after 1740; and horses variously engaged in the spa's diversions - diversions such as taking airings on horseback or on carriage drives, exercising at the riding schools, racing during the periodic Bath raceweeks on Claverton and Lansdown, even hunting, even equestrian circuses, and not forgetting either one other popular pastime - attending horse and carriage sales, which were held quite often. Some of these things I've covered in my little book *Bath Entertain'd*, though at the time I did leave out hunting. This was for lack of information. Indeed I'm still little the wiser about the Bath hunt except that it was in existence at least in the 1760s/1770s, a time when many famous local hunts across the country were founded. I know for example that during Bath race week in October 1765 William Blathwayt started a buck deer one morning to be hunted across Lansdown, and that in 1770 both a buck and a doe seem to have been freed before the 'Town Hounds' for pursuit on Odd Down. But that's about all, and any more information would be welcome.

I've learned much more about the posting and hiring trade. This grew up around the middle of the century and was run particularly by local coachmasters, a fairly new occupation. Basically they hired out horses, carriages and drivers on demand. To some extent it had always been possible to hire an ad hoc coach-plus-driver - as one quartet of Bath visitors, Dudley Ryder and his friends, had done in 1716 on an overnight trip to Bristol. Coachmasters still hired out coaches in this way, as well as providing saddle horses by the day for rides to local beauty spots or bracing gallops on the downs. What was new was the posting element, with prearranged staging points along the highways where tired horses could be changed for fresh ones, so that fast speeds could be maintained. Unlike stage coaches, which ran to a fixed timetable on set routes and normally carrying a mixed bunch of passengers, post-chaises and post-coaches would go at times to suit the people who hired them, would diverge as required from the main roads to reach out-of-the-way places, and were quite private, picking up no other passengers. A convenient and flexible mode of transport then, giving relatively quick access both to local destinations and to distant parts of the country. By the late 1740s one Bath operator had coaches, chaises, landaus and chariots for hire to anywhere in England, while later coachmasters covered the whole kingdom - usually offering their customers either a light post-chaise for two passengers or a roomier post-coach for four. In each case the driver rode postillion-fashion on the nearside horse. Not surprisingly, these posting services were very much dearer than travelling by stage-coach. A typical rate in the 1760s/1770s was ninepence a mile, or alternatively a set price to a given destination, e.g. half-a-guinea Bath to Bristol and twelve shillings to Warminster. Because of inflation, the charges were steeper still by 1793 when a price war broke out among the Bath operators. By the end of the century the tariff for a post-chaise and pair had risen to 1s.2d. a mile or 7s.6d. for an airing, and for a post-coach and four to 2s.3d. a mile and 9s. for an airing. Hiring a single horse for an outing on Lansdown then cost 3s. a time, though the artist Farington had to pay 4s. in 1800 to hire a good mount from Dash's riding school - about £12 in today's money. By the way this is a reminder that the horse hire business wasn't just in the hands of coachmasters. It's worth mentioning that various Bath inns also rented out post-chaises and coaches, just as some acted as pick-up points and destinations for the scheduled stage-coaches. Some stablekeepers also participated in what must have been a potentially lucrative business, though it was far from risk-free.

I've been trying this evening to show the wide-ranging nature of the horse economy, as one might call it, in Georgian Bath. One way and another it certainly created considerable employment. Think of all the stablekeepers, coachmasters and goods carriers; the drivers, guards and postillions; the backyard staff of grooms and stablehands; the horse-breakers and riding instructors; the farriers and shoemiths; the horse dealers. Think of the ancillary trades that I haven't even mentioned, including the important coachbuilding

industry that developed at Bath from the 1750s, especially on the west side of the city around Kingmead and Monmouth Street. With the coachbuilders went the wheelwrights, the saddle- and harness-makers, the collarmakers, and the coach-painters. Gradually the circle of those involved extends to tailors making riding coats, toymakers selling whips and spurs, farmers who provided fodder and bedding straw, builders of stables and riding schools, scavengers collecting horse dung, and ultimately it takes in the entire army of innkeepers, lodgings-house keepers, cooks, servants, spa attendants, shopkeepers, entertainment providers, and everyone who ministered to and benefited from all the visitors to Bath who travelled with the aid of horsepower - not just the longer-stay visitors but people in transit to other places or living locally and coming into Bath on horseback or in their carriage maybe just for the day - because Bath wouldn't even have been much of a regional centre without the possibility of horse transport. In fact almost wherever you look you seem to find horses - see, there's a Bath physician riding out to a country patient, a couple of prisoners being taken in a cart to Shepton Mallett workhouse, the Bath Militia cavalry on manoeuvres, a *Bath Chronicle* newsman on his rounds, a pair of nag-tailed geldings on sale in the yard of the *Saracen's Head*. See again, there's Richard Nash's team of six matching blacks, and there's William Pitt's grey horse Tickler coming in second at the £50 stakes at the Claverton Races in 1758; here's Betsy Sheridan envying her friend Miss White perched on her handsome white, and Gainsborough packing a picture for carriage up to London on one of Wiltshire's wagons. A few vignettes among thousands.

And to end with, a recommendation of riding by one of Bath's most eminent doctors, George Cheyne:

'Riding is certainly the most *manly*, the most *healthy*, and the least *laborious* and *expensive* of *Spirits* of any [exercise]; shaking the whole *Machine*, promoting an universal *Perspiration* and *Secretion* of all the *Fluids*... and thereby, *twitching* the nervous *Fibres*, to brace and contract them, as... *new Scenes* amuse the IMind.'

All the same I trust that I haven't caused too much shaking of machines, perspiration or twitching of fibres this evening by this little canter through the horsey world of eighteenth-century Bath.

Trevor Fawcett, 2005 4131 words