



Roads and Transport

Travel in Devon

Devon is distinguished for having more roads than any county apart from Yorkshire. Until well into the eighteenth century when the Turnpike Trusts were formed, these roads were notorious for their appalling state. Writer after writer details the dangers and horrors of their rutted and muddy conditions. Because of the naturally hilly lie of the land in Devon, roads were also often dangerously steep. The poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge expresses the feelings of the exasperated traveller in his poem, *Devonshire roads*, written in 1791:

*The indignant Bard composed this furious ode,
As tired he dragg'd his way thro' Plimtree road!
Crusted with filth and stuck in mire
Dull sounds the Bard's bemudded lyre;
Nathless Revenge and Ire the Poet goad
To pour his imprecations on the road.
Curst road! Whose execrable way
Was darkly shadow'd out in Milton's lay,
When the sad fiends thro' Hell's sulphureous roads
Took the first survey of their new abodes;
Or when the fall'n Archangel fierce
Dar'd through the realms of Night to pierce,
What time the Bloodhound lur'd by Human scent
Thro' all Confusion's quagmires floundering went.
Nor cheering pipe, nor Bird's shrill note
Around thy dreary paths shall float;
Their boding songs shall scritch-owl pour
To fright the guilty shepherds sore,
Led by the wandering fires astray
Thro' the dank horrors of thy way!
While they their mud-lost sandals hunt
May all the curses, which they grunt
In raging moan like goaded hog,
alight upon thee, damn'd Bog!*

Individuals usually walked, or travelled on horseback if they could afford it. Goods were moved by packhorse. It wasn't until the mid-seventeenth century that wheeled traffic began gradually to be introduced, and even then restrictions had to be introduced on weight and the number of animals drawing vehicles to protect the roads further. Various writers attest how slow the country people were to take to this new-fangled form of transport. Often this was forced on them because wheeled transport on rough roads remained impossible.

Matters improved in the nineteenth century. The Exeter Turnpike Trust was formed in 1753, covering all the main roads around Exeter. The Tiverton and Barnstaple Trusts followed in 1757 and 1760 respectively. Old routes were improved, and new roads were built which avoided some of the very steepest hills. Some of the new plans provoked considerable argument. Exactly such a case is demonstrated in the text accompanying the print entitled the *Long Bridge over the River Pym*.



SC0737, Long Bridge on the Plym, G P Header, 1835

The coming of the railway to Exeter in 1844 offered the travelling public further transport options. Successive Acts of Parliament - the Highways Act of 1835, the Highway Amendment Act of 1864 and the Local Government Act of 1888 - regularised the system for maintaining roads. By the 1880s the principal roads in Devon were generally said to be excellent, although the side-roads remained of lesser quality. High banks and steep hills continued to make journeys on these roads hazardous and uncomfortable.

The prints in the Somers Cocks collection record many methods of transport and travelling. Packhorses, wagons, carts, carriages and stagecoaches can all be glimpsed, often as minor details. Thanks to the skill of the engravers, these tiny details, when enlarged, often reveal a most accurate picture of travelling life.

1. The Formation of the Devon Lane, Everitt, Rev. William

- *Devonshire Scenery: Its Inspiration in the Prose and Song of Various Authors*. Exeter: William Pollard, 1884. p. 20
- *Devon Lanes and their Associations*
Rev. M. G. Watkins, M. A.
From vol. ix. of the *Cornhill Magazine*

A glance at the physical features of the country show how these picturesque lanes were formed. The aboriginal trackway over hill and dale rudely marked out by stones laid at intervals, just as the Devon coastguardsmen still guide themselves over the cliffs at night by lines of stones so deposited, sank gradually into the soil. Mud from the path was flung on either side. Violent rains cut deep furrows in the road; during winter the path became a water-course where it was not a bog, [...] while every season washes the road away, every time the farmer mends his fence, the banks above gain height. Thus each year deepens the lane. Frost often brings down one of these banks, which are topped by hedges, in some cases thirty feet above the traveller's head; and this "rougemont," as they call it in Devon, must be replaced before the lane is passable, so that their depth seldom diminishes, and perpetually increases.



Image 1 SC0934, Exeter from the Oakhampton Road, F C Lewis, 1827

The steep road out of Exeter to Oakhampton illustrates well the banked and picturesque Devon lane.

2. The Poor Condition of Roads and Lanes

- *The Book of the Axe*

Pulman, G. R

London: Longman, Green, Reader, and Dyer, 1875. p. 76

[...]the roads everywhere seem year after year to have got worse and worse. They were not only at times impassable, but presented every facility for highway robbery and murder, which at last developed almost into one of the fine arts and contributed immensely to the moral teaching and ghastly ornamentation of the roadside gibbets.

A roadside gibbet such as Pulman mentions can be seen in print (SC1910).



Image 2(a) SC1910, Stoke Church Yard Gibbet etc., W Rean, 1800

The poor road conditions are well demonstrated in the print of the road above Lynmouth - rutted, muddy and hilly.

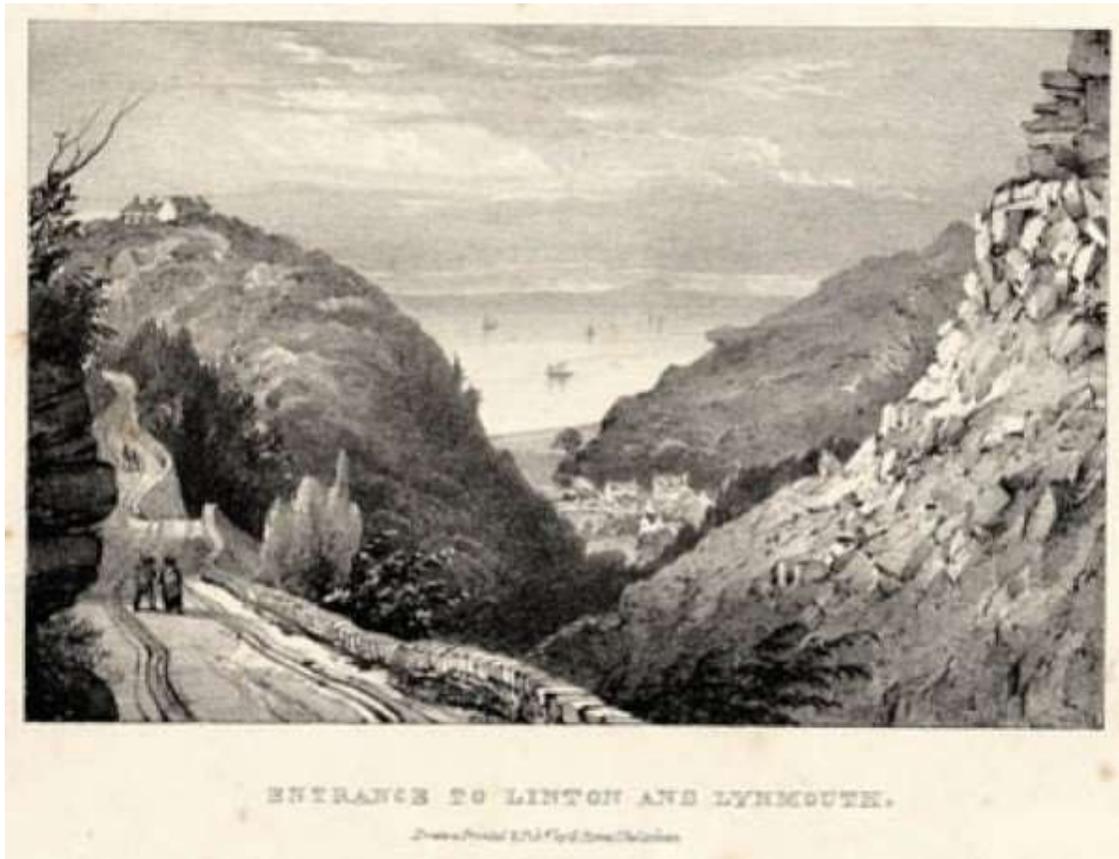


Image 2(b) SC1494, Entrance to Linton and Lynmouth, George Rowe, 1835

3. Packhorses Laden with Crooks

- *Early Tours in Devon and Cornwall*
Pearse Chope, R
Exeter: James G. Commin, 1918 pp. 283-4
- *Rural Economy of the West of England*
William Marshall
1796

The furniture of pack horses varies with the load to be carried. Hay, corn, straw, faggots, and other comparatively light articles of burden, are loaded between "crooks"; formed of willow poles, about the thickness of scythe handles; and seven or eight feet long; bent as ox-bows; but with one end much longer than the other. These are joined in pairs, with slight cross bars, eighteen inches to two feet long; and each horse is furnished with two pairs of these crooks; slung together, so as that the shorter and stronger ends shall lie easy and firmly against the pack saddle; the longer and lighter ends rising, perhaps, fifteen or more inches, above the horse's back, and standing four or five feet from each other. Within, and between, these crooks, the load is piled, and bound fast together, with that simplicity and dispatch, which long practice seldom fails of striking out.

Cordwood, large stones, and other heavy articles are carried between "short crooks"; made of four natural bends or knees; both ends being nearly of the same length; and, in use, the points stand nearly level with the ridge of the pack saddle.



Image 3(a) SC0413, Comb Martin, William Miller, 1825

Packhorses carrying goods in "crooks". Another print of packhorses waiting for their load can be seen in (SC0333).



Image 3(b) SC0333, Holystreet Mill, William Spreat, 1844

4. Packhorses Laden with Panniers

Dung, sand, materials of buildings, roads, &, &. are carried in "pots; or strong coarse panniers; slung together, like the crooks; and as panniers are usually slung; the dung, especially if long and light, being ridged up, over the saddle. The bottom of each pot is a falling door, on a strong and simple construction. The place of delivery being reached, the trap is unlatched, and the load released. Lime is universally carried in narrow bags; two or three of them being thrown across a pack saddle; which is of wood, and of the ordinary construction.



Image 4 SC0373, Clovelly Bay, William Miller, 1848

5. Transport for the Wealthy

- *The Book of the Axe*
Pulman, G. R.
London: Longman, Green, Reader, and Dyer, 1875. p. 78

Horseback was almost the universal mode of travelling by those who could afford the luxury, and ladies, seated in their pillions, rode behind their liege lords or their servants, and mounted and alighted by means of the upping-stocks which are still to be seen at the old farm-houses, in country villages, and near churches and other places of public resort.

William Stukeley travelled round England on horseback, pausing to sketch views that interested to him.



Image 5 SC2428, Moridunum Aug 20 1723, William Stukeley, 1724

6. Carts and Wagons

- *General View of the Agriculture of the County of Devon*
Vancouver, Charles
London: Richard Phillips, 1808. p. 125

[...] it is only in the less broken parts of the country that one and two-horse carts are found to supply the labour, and to carry in common from 8 to 12 cwt.

A few waggons were noticed on the particular farms of some agricultural gentlemen; in the neighbourhood of Axminster, they are however in very general use. There are a number of two-horse carts, carrying from 15 to 18 cwt. each, in very general use, wherever they can with convenience be substituted for the long or short crooks or dung-pots.

One-horse carts, or butts, are also generally made use of; they are made to tip like tumbrils, and will hold about five seams, or from 10 to 12 bushels each. Being placed on low wheels, they are rendered very convenient for loading large stones, or any heavy article. The three-wheel butts, with barrow handles, drawn by one horse, and holding, level-full, from five to six bushels, are also much used, and found very suitable for removing stones or any heavy load to a short distance.

Horse and cart loading up on the beach.



Image 6(a) SC3291, Torquay from Livermead, J Salter, 1850

Two horses are struggling to pull this load up the hill.



Image 6(b) SC1625, Lynton Church from Lynmouth, Thomas Hewitt Williams, 1802

7. The Wealthy on Wheels

- *The History of Coaches*

Thrupp, G. A

London: Kerby & Edean; New York: The "Hub" Publishing Company, 1877. pp. 72-73

The Landaus [...] were like coaches in shape but made so as to open in the centre of the roof, the framework of which fell back at an angle of 45 degrees only, to allow the admission of air and the sight of the country more freely than in a coach; but for nearly fifty years there was no improvement in the method of opening and closing the roof, technically termed the "hood" of the Landau.

Landaullets were chariots made to open. The hoods of both Landaus and Landaullets, and other carriages, were then made of greasy harness leather, disagreeable to touch or smell, and continually needing oil and blacking rubbed into them to keep them supple and black. [...]

Besides these vehicles there were phaetons, barouches, sociables, curricles, gigs and whiskies. Of these phaetons there were several sorts but all for self-driving by the owners.

The very rich and important travelling round Plymouth.

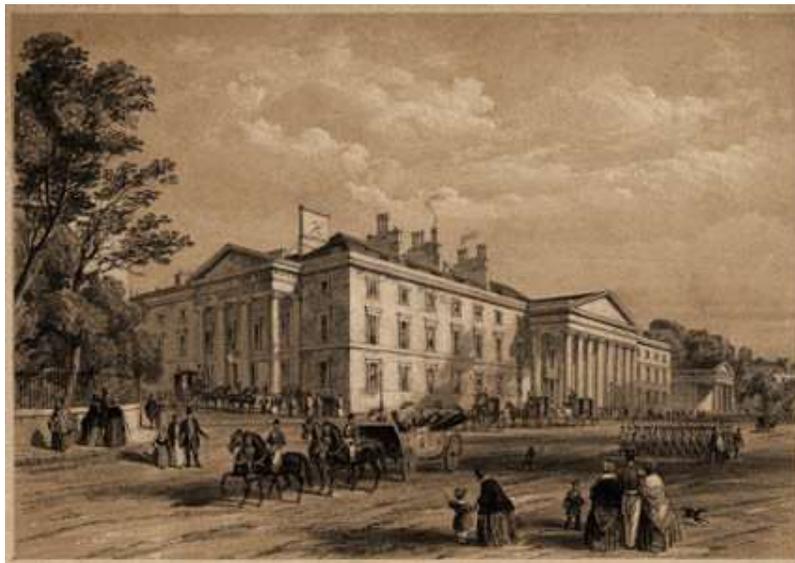


Image 7 SC2159, Royal Hotel, Theatre and Athenaeum, Plymouth, Day & Son, 1835

8. Public transport: the stagecoach

- *The Book of the Axe*
Pulman, G. R
London: Longman, Green, Reader, and Dyer, 1875. pp. 78-9

My relative [...] was in the habit of occasionally visiting London about the close of the last century, and although he invariably booked himself by the "flying coach," so as to have protection, if need arose, yet he generally walked the one hundred and fifty miles in preference to the purgatory of being for three days sealed up in the jolting and rumbling machine. His custom was to carry his gun, walk on ahead, shoot by the roadside, and hasten on and have the game cooked by the time the "flyer" arrived at its halting-place for the night - the passengers sharing the feast, and the whole party spending the evening in accordance with the custom of the time.

Hazardous and very uncomfortable stagecoach journeys are demonstrated in this print (SC0953).



Image 8 SC0953, Exeter from Pennsylvania Hill, J Henshall, 1832

9. Maps and Directions

- *Early Tours in Devon and Cornwall*
Pearse Chope, R
Exeter: James G. Commin, 1918 p. 308.
- *Letters from England*
By Don Manuel Alvarez Espriella
(Robert Southey) 1802

I bought here a map of England, folded for the pocket, with the roads and distances all marked upon it. I purchased also a book of the roads, in which not only the distance of every place in the kingdom from London, and from each other, is set down, but also the best inn at each place is pointed out, the name mentioned of every gentleman's seat near the road, and the objects which are most worthy a traveller's notice. Every thing that can possibly facilitate travelling seems to have been produced by the commercial spirit of this people.

An early direction pillar near Bicton giving spiritual as well as actual directions can be seen in print (SC0179). In 1675 John Ogilby produced his strip maps.



Image 9 SC0179, Direction-Pillar Bicton, George Rowe, 1829

10. Improved and Regular Public Transport

- *The Book of the Axe*

Pulman, G. R.

London: Longman, Green, Reader, and Dyer, 1875. pp. 80-1

In time [...] The country became covered with excellent roads, and the coach-system attained extraordinary perfection. Sixteen four-horse coaches passed daily through Axminster in various directions, but chiefly from Exeter to London, until at length the journey between those places, through Honiton, Bridport, Dorchester, and Salisbury, - some through Chard and Crewkerne, and others through Ilminster and Yeovil, - to London, a distance of about one hundred and seventy miles, was regularly performed in sixteen hours. This was effected by means of excellent cattle and short stages. All the "appointments" were in keeping, from the polished and brass-mounted harness up to the "swell" coach-man and the scarlet-coated mail-guard, with "cheery horn" and formidable blunderbus. People now advancing in life cherish "pleasant memories" of the old coaching-days and the agreeable associations therewith.

The stagecoach approaches the Crown Hotel in Lynton.



Image 10 SC 1638, Crown Hotel Lynton Devon, Rock & Co, 1859

11. Town Development

- *The Route Book of Devon*
Henry Besley
Second Edition. Exeter: 1846. pp. 268-9

The town of Plymouth, as it existed up to the first ten years of the present century, consisted principally of mean and very narrow streets. From the conclusion of the late war up to the present time, great improvements have been made in enlarging the principal public thoroughfares; erecting new lines of streets and public buildings; and in fact, forming on the western side of the town, an entirely new portion; consisting with the noble Ionic pile of buildings, the Royal Hotel, Theatre, &., of handsome terraces, streets, a square, and crescent. The recent alteration of widening Whimble-street has produced a marked improvement in the trading and more crowded part of the town. When this is completed, and properly carried out by the removal of the Guildhall, Plymouth will then have her principal streets no longer subject to the reproach of being narrow and contracted, but open and of good width.

Union Street, Plymouth.



Image 11 SC2182, Union Street Plymouth, George Townsend, 1853

This thematic guide started with a poem lamenting the condition of Devon's roads, so it seems appropriate to end with an anonymous poem, quoted by Edmund Pearse Burd in 1936, but written in 1825, bemoaning the green lands of Devon lost to the road-makers:

Ye Road-makers of Devon,
Who sit and plan at ease,
Ah! little do ye think upon
Our cherish'd lawns and trees.

Give ear unto the Gentlemen,
And they will plainly shew
All their cares and their fears,
When a measuring you go.
This goodly realm of England,
With all its bower and halls,
Is turning fast to turnpike-roads,
And prisons and canals.
The Sylvan elves and fairies
Have vanish'd long ago,
Else what cries would arise
Whilst a measuring you go.
How merrily we jogg'd it
O'er breezy hill and down,
Till grateful rest at even-tide
Our daily toil did crown.
Now all our roads must level be,
Our pleasant hills made low,
Whilst the Mail, thro' each vale,
All a measuring doth go.

Our music's sole provider
The bugle horn must be,
Now every bush has lost its thrush
Its linnet every tree.
Then to the sound of coaches,
Since brooks have ceased to flow,
How we'll sleep, sound and deep,
Whilst a measuring you go.
Here freedom once was cherish'd
And Englishmen were bold,
To call their homes their castles, and
Their lands secure to hold.
But you despise our liberties,
And laugh to scorn our woe,
O'er our land, ACT in hand,
Whilst a measuring you go.[...]
Then courage all brave gentlemen,
Your honours forth advance,
And yield to ne'er a despot yet,
From Scotland nor from France.
Mac Adam would employ us
To break up stones, we know -
May our stones break his bones,
When a measuring he'll go.

Sources

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- Sheldon, Gilbert. *From Trackway to Turnpike*. (Oxford University Press, 1928)
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- Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. *Poetical Works*. (OUP, 1912)
- Burd, E. P. *Okehampton Turnpikes*. (Reprinted from the Transactions of the Devonshire Association together with Correspondence, Acts of Parliament and Maps relating thereto, 1937)