

Sovereign Hill Education

Transport of the 1850s

Research Notes for Secondary Schools



Travel, in the early days of Australia's white history, was a rather difficult matter. In Europe a network of roads connected the large populations living close together; however, in Australia, made roads were very rare and distances between the sparse settlements must have been daunting. Even in 1850, the year before the gold rushes started, Melbourne roads left a lot to be desired:

"There were no roads made, stumps and logs of trees lay about in Collins Street ... The footpaths (were) all gravel and no kerbing ... It seems to me a hot, dusty, thirsty place with nothing but a lot of long bullock teams which kicked up the dust so that you could not see a yard (a metre) in front of you when you passed them." (Chandler pp. 16-17)

When gold was discovered, thousands of men gave up their jobs and set off as best they could for the diggings. The cost of a horse and feed was too much for most of them and up to 80,000 roamed the goldfields on foot, trudging along with a bundle or pushing their possessions on a hand-cart or wheelbarrow. (Unstead and Henderson p. 28)

Most supplies were taken to the goldfields on drays, pulled by either bullocks or horse teams. In winter, it could cost fifty pounds (\$100) per ton to transport goods from Melbourne to Forest Creek and up to one hundred and fifty pounds (\$300) to Bendigo, the latter trip taking up to fourteen days with bullocks. (Chandler p. 66)

Conditions on the road were horrific:

"Horses were bogged everywhere, and often horses and bullocks left to perish. We have taken a whole day to get our drays half a mile ... the horses would sink up to their bellies, and then we had to dig both horses and drays out. Very often we got stuck ourselves ... and frequently we lost our boots and had to dig them out ... our feet were always wet. Our clothes we never took off ..." (Chandler p. 66)

The two-wheeled dray was normally favoured by the drivers as it was manoeuvrable in rough country, dodging stumps and ruts. The four-wheeled wagon had a larger turning circle and proved hard to drag from a bog. It was also more difficult to build as it required a front axle that pivoted to permit the cart to turn. While slow, bullocks were often used, as they were very strong and could work on half as much fodder as a horse. They were easy to harness as they were yoked in pairs, rather than harnessed individually. Six to eight bullocks usually made a team although as many as forty-two have been recorded. (Unstead and Henderson pp. 15-16)

Public transport originated with the carrying of mails, at first on horseback, and then by light carts. As early as October 1851, a coach service ran from Melbourne to the Ballarat diggings. The fare was twenty-five shillings (\$2.50) each way, the equivalent of twenty-five hours of work. Another way to reach Ballarat was to take the steamer to Geelong and then the coach from there at a cost of three pounds (\$6), or sixty hours' work. Coach horses were changed at ten-mile (11 km) intervals and the very early journeys involved at least one overnight stop.

Travel by coach was not only expensive but difficult, over rough roads and steep gullies. The roads were so bad that passengers often had to get out and walk or help push the vehicle through a mud hole or creek. The most frequent accident was a broken metal spring which meant a long wait for a blacksmith or abandonment of the vehicle. With the shortage of labour caused by the rush to the goldfields, blacksmiths, farriers and teamsters could charge outlandish prices for their services. (Unstead and Henderson p. 28)

In 1853, the first Concord coach was imported from the USA by Cobb & Co. It was much more suited to Australian conditions. It was lightweight and its body rested on leather straps called thoroughbraces. This made them more durable and they were able to travel over ruts at speed, without risk of damage. Unfortunately, many passengers became "seasick" due to the rocking motion of the vehicle.

The early Concord coaches carried up to fifteen passengers and, in 1858, a few twenty and thirty-two passenger Concorde were imported. In 1862 the Leviathan coach was built in Ballarat for Cobb & Co.'s Geelong run. It was reputed to have a passenger capacity of between fifty-six and eighty-nine and, although it normally required only eight to twelve horses, it appeared on its first run with an impressive twenty-two horses. The Leviathan was impractical as the drivers could not reach the lead horses with their whips and had to resort to carrying pockets full of stones to throw as a substitute.

The gold rushes created incredible prosperity for many and a huge increase in the colonial population. In the early days most coaches and carriages had to be imported from Europe or the United States, but with wealth came greater demand and a growth of local support industries. Coaches, carts and carriages became more common in the towns and cities. (Mulvaney p. 4)

The streets of Ballarat were filled with two-wheeled gigs and sulkies – the latter seating only one person who was presumably 'sulky' (Unstead and Henderson p. 60) four-wheeled phaetons and carts and even a few elegant broughams owned by those with new-found wealth. Businesses required delivery wagons and farmers' wagons brought produce to the city. Fire engines and

hearses would occasionally be seen and those who were out of bed late at night might even have come across the night cart doing its rounds.

The coachbuilding industry flourished in Ballarat, employing large numbers of people. They included coachbuilders, wheelwrights, salesmen, drivers, booking agents, stable-hands, saddlers, farriers and road builders. Until the arrival of the steam railway in 1861, transport in Ballarat was totally reliant on the power of animals.

For photos of Cabs on Mark's Corner in the 1880s and The Ballarat Bicycle Club in 1883, visit the *Students* section of the Sovereign Hill Education website.

Bibliography

Chandler, John. *Forty Years in The Wilderness*, Loch Haven Books, Main Ridge, 1990.

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