What was it like before the coming of the railway?

The state of the roads
The way people travelled

Do you know who the person in this picture is?

The roads that existed were constantly in a state of disrepair which made them dangerous and slow. Most roads were just muddy trenches whichcheered vehicles could only go in summer when the mud dried up. One man who fell off his horse near Ipswich was drowned in an enormous pothole full of water!

Improvements came in the late 1700s when a turnpike system was adopted. A group of men, usually landowners, formed a ‘turnpike trust’ to look after one stretch of road, or to build a new one. In exchange for all that work and the money that this cost them, they were allowed to charge road-users a ‘toll’ to use the road. They could charge a penny for a man on a horse, or a shilling for a coach pulled by four horses.

Until the reign of Queen Victoria, there were no proper roads and most people didn’t travel very far from their village.

The Romans had built many good roads but they had all fallen into disrepair and, for hundreds of years after the Romans left Britain, the roads were very bad.

No one had built any decent roads in Britain since Roman times.

The system wasn’t always perfect even when the turnpike roads were well kept. Often the stretches of road before and after the turnpikes were as bad as ever. Sometimes the turnpike trusts didn’t do their jobs properly, so, although people had to pay the tolls, the turnpike roads were not well kept. Repairs were poor because the turnpike trusts didn’t know how to do them properly.

However, by the time Victoria became queen, improvements were being made.

John McAdam invented a way of making roads smooth and hard by adding tar to bind stones together on the surface of new roads. The new roads meant people could travel faster. Instead of the fastest London stage coach taking a week to travel to Edinburgh, it took only two days.

For hundreds of years, horses provided the only means of transport on land. Local farmers sent their goods to market using a horse and cart.

Most children who grew up during Victoria’s reign would have walked to school. Sometimes the school was a long way from the children’s homes.

People who had enough money could afford a horse and cart to take them on their journey, but the main form of public transport was the stage coach.

Very rich people were able to afford their own carriages. They often had a servant to drive them and another servant to look after the horses.
Stage coaches followed long distance routes. They would break up the journey at inns along the way so that the passengers and horses could have a break.

Stagecoaches were expensive and very uncomfortable. Poorer people could pay for a cheap ticket but this meant that they had to travel on the outside of the coach in all weathers.

If it rained, passengers got very wet and if it was cold, their teeth would chatter.

The mail was carried by Mail Coach which also carried passengers. This painting shows the Mail Coach at an Inn.

There was a desperate need for better roads and better transport so that people and goods could be carried faster and further.

The poorest people had to walk because they couldn’t afford a horse and cart or a cheap ticket to travel on the outside of a stagecoach.

The mail was carried by Mail Coach which also carried passengers. This painting shows the Mail Coach at an Inn.

The Duke of Bridgewater had no easy way to transport the coal from his coal mines to the mills in Manchester. So, in 1761, with the help of the engineer James Brindley, he dug a canal across the land so that he could send his coal by boat to Manchester.

After that, more and more canals were dug but there was still a need for even faster transport.

Canal barges were towed by horses that walked along a tow path.

Then, things began to change and it all began with steam.

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John McAdam’s new roads went a long way towards solving this problem but, there was still a need to carry even more goods further and faster.

Until then, the best way of carrying large loads had always been by water but, boats couldn’t reach all parts of the country.

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