IN AN article written for *Household Words*, a magazine that he edited in the 1850s, Charles Dickens describes a trip by express train and Channel ferry from London to Paris. The title, ‘A Flight’, gives an indication of his feelings – houses, stations, fields flashing by. After paying his fare at London Bridge he had been, he wrote, “discharged …of all responsibility apart from the preservation of a voucher, ruled into three divisions”.

The article ends: “No hurry, ladies and gentlemen, going to Paris in eleven hours. It is so well done, that there really is no hurry!”

The article reveals Dickens’s enthusiasm for the railways, marvelling at the greatly reduced journey times they had brought about. He could be seen, as John Ruskin said, as “a pure modernist – a leader of the steam-whistle party par excellence”.

Dr Cathy Waters, reader in Victorian studies at the University of Kent, agrees. “There is a strong element of truth in Ruskin’s statement,” she says, “but it is not the whole truth because, though Dickens does see the technological advances as evidence of progress and social advancement, he also sees some of the damaging effects. He would, of course, have been sensitive to poor communities being displaced by the need to open up...
new railway lines and he disapproved of the self-congratulation that sometimes accompanied them. In fact, Dickens’s attitude to the new technology and industrialisation was ambivalent. This ambivalence is expressed in his journalism and in some of his novels.

Progress and nostalgia
It has often been thought that his first novel, The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club, published in 1836-37, is a last look at a pre-industrial time of transport – a nostalgia for the coaching past with horse-drawn vehicles meandering through villages and towns stopping at old coaching inns. Jonathan Grossman, in his book ‘Charles Dickens’s Networks: Public Transport and the Novel’, disagrees: “Dickens portrays and reveals in, not some bygone era of stage coaching bur the speeding up of the stage coaches that had preceded, and was still occurring in, the period he describes.”

By the 1820s, the time in which the novel is set, the speed and organisation of coach transport had improved dramatically. Strong wheels constructed of elm, oak and ash with iron rims and metal spring suspension meant that coaches could go faster without discomforting passengers, and could more easily cope with roads in the bush. But roads were also improving, solidly constructed by “colossus of roads” Thomas Telford and others, the introduction of Macadamisation ensuring a hard, smooth surface.

Fresh, specially bred horses were always available at roadside inns, and professional Mackintosh-attired drivers further improved the service. As Grossman explains: “The fast-driving stagecoach system of Dickens’s day was efficient, regular, interlinked and continuously available, offering a polished national system of routes. It represented to its contemporaries technological progress and accelerating life. It established the internal passenger transport system that the railways would copy.”

Pickwick departs coach travel in 1837-38 when it was nearing its technological peak and could improve no more on horse power alone. Dickens’s nostalgia for those coaching days does show though in an article published in 1860, in which he recounts a visit to his childhood home Chatham, referred to as “Dull Borough”. He mourns the loss of a well-loved playing field, its trees and flowers consumed by the railway station and sees beyond an “ugly dark monster of a tunnel… its jaws open, as if it had swallowed them and were ravenous for more destruction. The coach that had carried me away, was melodiously called Timpson’s Blue-Eyed Maid, and belonged to Timpson, at the coach-office up-street; the locomotive engine that had brought me back, was called severely No. 97, and belonged to S.E.R., and was spitting ash and hot water over the blighted ground.”

So the loss of the family-owned coaches, and probably also the gradual decline in business of the privately owned coaching inns, troubled him – numbers instead of names and the standardisation of everything. As ‘Trey Phillpotts points out in his article ‘Dickens and Technology’, the author’s concerns are voiced through Mr Weller, an old stagecoach driver in ‘Master Humphrey’s Clock’, who complains that all railway stations seem the same – same people, same policeman, same bell ringing, everything the same except the name but even that is written “in the same sized letters as the last name, and with the same colours”.

Monotony and homogeneity
One famous example of the treatment of the railways is in ‘Dombey and Son’, first with the vivid description of Mr Dombey’s railway journey to Lennington after the death of his son in which the steam engine is described as “The power that forced itself upon its iron way – its own – defiant of all paths and roads, piercing through the heart of every obstacle, and dragging living creatures of all classes, ages, and degrees behind it, was a type of the triumphant monster...”. However, Dr Waters sees this not as a criticism of the railway but “more as a vehicle being used to say something about Dombey’s inner state”.

In the same book, Dr Waters continues: “Dickens describes Saggars garden, an area that is being dug up to make way for the new railway terminus, with lives being thrown into chaos. But later in the novel we see that the railway has brought a whole lot of benefits to the neighbourhood – new shops have opened up and Mr Poodles has had his position improved by becoming a stoker on the railway.” So Dickens acknowledges the pain of technological progress but ultimately celebrates the benefits.

Similarly, with regards to the new factories, Dickens and his authors record in Household Words the wonders of the new manufacturing processes and the mass production of affordable consumer goods. But according to Dr Waters, the downside is examined in ‘Hard Times’: “Coketown has itself upon its iron way – its own – defiant against the powers of fancy and imagination.” The picture reflects the feelings of increased busyness, of people flying off in all directions, Grossman continues: “Their diverse world is shrinking, their means of mobility is accelerating, and everyone all around seems on the go.”

But he adds: “The picture falls short of imparting any sense that the advances in public transport were interconnecting passengers,” so the book also demonstrates “public transport’s systematic networking of people and the difference it makes – how it revolutionized time and space, how it involved re-imaging the community”. Dickens was aware of these developments and their effect on his own life, developments he wrote about in his journalism and portrayed in his novels, where the community of some of his characters expands beyond those living closest to them as they travel more widely.

Dickens saw these changes as gradual developments rather than a sudden break with the past. The Pickwick Papers shows a national transport system in place with efficient stage coaches and smooth roads, a system that would be enhanced by the arrival of steam railways. So the rapid speeding up of life and the networking of people, shown in some of his novels as a late 20th century development, was already underway in the 19th century and would be improved in his own life by the electric telegraph, made better by the telephone and, ultimately, superseded by the mobile phone and Internet. Just as some people see the Internet and mobile phones as destroying community rather than enhancing it, so Dickens, while on the one hand celebrating the developments, also has some nostalgia, for the more leisurely past where people connected with those around them rather than rushing past to meet others more distant.

Jonathan Grossman describes his book ‘Charles Dickens’s Networks: Public transport and the novel’ as being “about people’s journeying” and “the 19th century revolution in passenger transport”, a time when people saw all sorts of possibilities for the speed of travel. However, few of their wild imaginations, as illustrated by William Heath in ‘The March of Intellect’ and reproduced by Grossman, were realised. The picture reflects the feelings of increased busyness, of people flying off in all directions. Grossman continues: “Their diverse world is shrinking, their means of mobility is accelerating, and everyone all around seems on the go.”

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produces an inferior product, just as the turning machine produces items of standard design and poor quality.”

The Great Exhibition

Britain felt it had much technological progress to showcase. The result was the Great Exhibition of 1851, partly a response to the French Industrial Exposition of 1844. In an article, Dickens praised the Great Exhibition and the vast array of machinery on display including his highlight – the printing press, “an extraordinary piece of mechanism” on which the Illustrated London News was produced.

However, Dr Waters suggests that, “as the exhibition opened with massive publicity, he felt there was a self-congratulatory aspect to the whole thing which he found repugnant when there was so much evidence around of lack of progress in the relief of poverty and the provision of education”.

Dickens also detected a lack of progress in British bureaucracy, which he saw as stifling inventiveness and driving inventors abroad, causing the country to lag behind. This was famously expounded in ‘Little Dorrit’ with his fictional creation – the Circumlocution Office, an institution that was foremost in the provision of education”.

The frustrated engineer Daniel Doyce, who fails to have his invention accepted by the office, complains of bureaucracy’s “fixed determination to be miles upon miles, and persisting in the use of things long superseded, even after the better things were well known and generally taken up”.

Written at the time of the Crimean War, the book was a response to bureaucratic bungling that had left soldiers ill-provisioned and lacking in the most up-to-date rifles.

Of course, Dickens profited from the new technologies as an author and journalist. “He would not have become the household name he did,” Dr Waters comments, “without the mass circulation of his journalism, and of course the developments in publishing too helped with his fiction.”

The steam printing press enabled the rapid and cheap production of his journal Household Words, and railways its wide circulation. With steam ships, his novels could be published and distributed at the same time on both sides of the Atlantic. Trains enabled him to travel as a journalist and to undertake frequent public readings of his novels. But if he wondered at the technology that allowed him to “fly” to Paris in 11 hours, another rail journey may well have curtailed Dickens’s creative spirit.

The train crash on 9 June 1865, east of Staplehurst Station in Kent, in which 10 people were killed and 15 badly injured so traumatised Dickens, who was a passenger, that he completed only one more novel, leaving ‘The Mystery of Edwin Drood’ unfinished. If he had realised that unfettered and unregulated development could also be a menace.

In the end, as Philpotts writes: “Dickens desires to have it both ways: to acknowledge the dark side of industrialisation and technological innovation, but also to promote a more positive outlook, one that accords with his general optimism and personal buoyancy.”

The Great Exhibition

LITERARY IMPRESSIONS

In an article, ‘The Great Exhibition and the Little One’, written with Richard Horne, Dickens marvelled at the technology on display.

“The railway engines, and agricultural engines, and machines; the locomotives in all their variety; the farm-engines…, the sowing-machine, the reaping, the thrashing, and the winnowing machines,… the combined thrashing, shaking, and blowing machine; the “machine to sow and hoe an acre of turnips in five minutes”… sawing-machines of great power; machines for planing; others by which a large hurdle can be cut from the solid timber, and put together in nine minutes, and a fifty-six gallon beer-barrel made in five minutes… the machinery of our manufactures, with all their complex powers, their wonderful stringed, velocity, and minutely precise manipulations, one’s head whizzes with the recollection of them… iron bridges… self-supporting suspension-bridge… the great Electric Clock… clocks that will go for four hundred days with once winding up; watches that are so accurate from injury by damp, that they are exhibited suspended in water, and performing with regularity; a money-calculating machine, suited to the currency of all nations; clocks showing the days of the month, months of the year, motions of the sun and moon, and the state of the tide at the principal sea-ports of Great Britain, Ireland, France, America, Spain, Portugal, Holland and Germany – and showing all this for a whole year with only one winding up; oxyhydrogen microscopes; daguerreotype and calotype apparatus; and, above all, the electric telegraphs.”

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