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## On the Road: travelling salesmen and experiences of mobility in Britain before 1839

Contemporary studies have recognised the significance of mobility, in conjunction with class and gender, in the formation, management and expression of personal identity. For instance, Binnie highlights migration as a means of accessing gay culture in urban centres.<sup>1</sup> Baker and Stanley demonstrate that ocean travel in the post-war era provided a social context in which gay identities could be expressed more openly, and were more readily accepted, than onshore.<sup>2</sup> Whitelegg identifies mobility as a key factor in the experiences of flight attendants, associated with a sense of personal autonomy and a break from the parameters of domesticity.<sup>3</sup> Indeed he argues that ‘spatial remuneration’ was more important than financial returns for many airline workers. Their mobility was an escape from home life in the 1930s, a means of experiencing exotic destinations otherwise unaffordable from 1950 to 1970; and thereafter flight attendants acquired greater control over their work schedules until the impact of low-cost carriers on working practices.<sup>4</sup>

Such studies add a new dimension to the focus on leisure travel and tourism by demonstrating the significance of service occupations in which mobility is a central feature. The various authors stress that people’s access to, and experiences of, mobility are influenced by class, gender and the relative power of workers, unions, and employers.<sup>5</sup> There is a general emphasis on mobility as a factor in the individual’s capacity to manage fragmented identities. Binnie refers to the ‘time-management of identity’ and emphasises the varying forms and degrees of mobility such as daily commuting, tourism and long-distance migration.<sup>6</sup> As Whitelegg shows neither the

personal nor the occupational significance of mobility are new features or confined to the recent past. This article explores changing uses of transportation and the implications of mobility by focusing on the activities of commercial travellers or travelling salesmen in Britain before 1939. The lengthy time period allows for analysis of the impact of changing forms of transport, including the advent of motor cars, though full-scale use of cars only occurred in the 1960s. The focus on commercial travellers deals with a group whose central function involved travel, but who were not transport workers, and whose service role contrasted with tourism. The article examines changes in the time spent on the road, modes of travel, commercial travellers' experiences, and the social consequences of their mobile lifestyles before 1939.

During the nineteenth century substantial migration from rural to urban areas involved major changes in lifestyles and locations. For some people significant upward or downward social mobility generally resulted in physical moves. Yet, for all classes much daily life centred on local communities with routine and largely short-distance journeys on foot, despite transport innovations. Indeed, Kellett concluded that rail travel remained too expensive in the 1890s to be part of working-class urban life. In contrast, commuting became more common for middle-class and lower middle-class people, linked to suburban growth, the expansion of city centre shopping districts and the development of rail, tram and motor transport.<sup>7</sup> For Schivelbusch, the experiences of travelling were altered fundamentally by the railways which created a more organised and less personal experience where social contact with fellow travellers became shallower and more limited.<sup>8</sup> Other literature has emphasised changes in perspectives on travel and locations derived from tourism with mobility as a leisure activity separate from normal working

environments.<sup>9</sup> Analyses of the ‘tourist gaze’ have focused on how tourists experienced and interpreted new locations and cultures often associated with the wider impact of imperialism on British society and culture.

While localism and tourist travel were both important facets of social life, mobility was central to certain service occupations since the effective coordination of flows of goods and services was a key feature of Britain’s economy to 1914, integrating the domestic market internally and linking to global networks.<sup>10</sup> Transport workers, such as sailors, carters, coachmen, and railwaymen, operated within a complex infrastructure whose economic influence extended to all corners of Britain.<sup>11</sup> Regular flows of migrant workers were linked to seasonal agricultural labour markets or the cyclical demands of construction projects, not least canal and railway-building. The mobility of gypsies and tramps defined their social position as less than respectable for conventional society. Southall highlighted political activists’ lengthy tours, addressing meetings, as an important factor for integrating the national political system.<sup>12</sup> Commercial life and transport innovations then generated new occupations whose experiences of travel were work-related and whose mobility influenced their class and gender relationships.

Commercial travelling first appeared in the eighteenth century. Westerfield described the ‘bagmen’ for drapers or wholesale merchants, carrying their ‘samples in a small box with a handle in the lid which he placed under the seat of his gig or strapped to his saddle. He drove from town to town’.<sup>13</sup> As Defoe noted, bagmen supplied shops and wholesalers, extended credit and were ‘really travelling merchants’.<sup>14</sup> This commercial function distinguished the commercial traveller from hawkers, pedlars or ‘Scotch drapers’ who carried small items for sale directly to consumers either by calling door to

door or by selling at fairs and markets. Commercial travellers took goods, samples or pattern books to show to shopkeepers or manufacturers with the aim of selling items or booking orders. Their judgements influenced decisions about creditworthiness and their reports on market conditions and demand affected product development. It was a burgeoning occupation, emphasising its economic value.<sup>15</sup> Initially wholesale merchants were the main employers of commercial travellers who, therefore, sold a range of products made by different firms. By the late nineteenth century manufacturers, particularly of consumer goods, were increasingly employing their own travellers to promote branded products in order to direct sales efforts and to understand their markets better. During the interwar period, there was greater emphasis on commission-only work as firms responded to depressed sales by increasing the number of men on the road. Differences in income and status became more acute between the well-established travellers for leading national firms in the confectionery, tobacco and engineering sectors and the far less secure commission salesmen, often engaged for a short season, in the textile trades. Even more marked was the divide from the door-to-door salesman, canvassing for orders for vacuum-cleaners or encyclopaedias.<sup>16</sup>

As an initial point of comparison for commercial travellers' experiences, we can consider the activities of an itinerant trader or peddler, Joseph Dixon, who sold cloth, threads, laces, pins and bobbins at local markets and fairs.<sup>17</sup> In 1822 he kept a diary of a longer trip from Birmingham to the south-west of England which offers insights into his life on the road. Dixon walked most of the way as he did on local journeys around Birmingham, but his merchandise was shipped separately by coach or wagon. Overall he was away from home for ninety-one days with the outward journey taking twelve days

and the return trip just six days. He appears to have stayed at inns and boarding houses as well as visiting friends. There was some regularity to his routine: he referred in 1829 to having stayed at Mrs Gourtes's house over the past thirteen years.<sup>18</sup> Dixon was not a lone traveller. On the 1822 trip he met his brother, William, whose home in Devon provided a base for selling at Callington market, and another brother, John, who had travelled from London. All three sold goods at markets in Devon and Somerset. On shorter local trips in the Midlands, Joseph Dixon was accompanied by his oldest daughter, Jemima, in 1824, 1828, and 1829-30 and on the latter occasion by other children. For Dixon then peddling was a family and collaborative venture. His diaries reveal a business-like approach, with detailed accounts of costs and sales for each item and, presumably, a precise knowledge of profit margins. This information was recorded in a personal code, concealing his business affairs from rivals or customers. As well as the routines of selling, the diaries reported details of locations and scenery as well as listing recipes, medical treatments and anecdotes collected en route. Dixon's journeys then blended a clear eye for business with family contacts, socialising, elements of sightseeing, and attention to the novelties encountered en route.

In comparison commercial travellers between 1790 and the 1830s worked set routes intensively and used horses to cover greater distances than did Dixon, though there were similarities in the regularity of their journeys. Schedules were set by employers to maximise contacts with potential customers rather than being linked to fairs and market days. A hardware company divided its four sales routes between two commercial travellers in the 1790s.<sup>19</sup> Around 1800 the East Anglia route, the largest territory, was 'well over a thousand miles' and took four months to complete. The northern route and

the West of England route were each some 700 miles and required ten to fourteen weeks on the road. Popp's study of a Midlands hardware factor around 1810-1814 revealed a similar pattern of two routes each travelled twice per year with journeys averaging between thirty-five days and forty-seven days.<sup>20</sup> Liverpool, Manchester and Rochdale were the most visited destinations as the travellers combined close attention to major wholesaling centres with trips to more remote villages. A similar focus on key population and marketing centres was evident among travellers in the 1820s for a London bookseller who focused on Durham, Hull, Liverpool, Leeds, Manchester and Newcastle.<sup>21</sup> But the bookseller primarily used agencies to cover these towns: two agencies and a few travellers visited between one and seven towns each. Other individual travellers covered a far wide area, each calling on retailers in between twenty-three and forty-nine locations across northern England and the Scottish borders. This pattern was institutionalised in many trades by the distinction between town travellers who concentrated on one or more urban areas and the country travellers who ranged more widely. George Moore sold lace in northern England and Ireland in the 1830s while another partner in the firm worked a Midlands route. From ten country and three town travellers in 1841, Moore's business expanded to seventeen country and ten town travellers by 1852.<sup>22</sup>

As a country traveller William Cubitt worked two routes in 1835 for an Oxfordshire worsted manufacturer, taking about six weeks for each trip.<sup>23</sup> He visited drapers in the same districts in spring, summer and winter which suggests seeing a regular clientele according to the firm's set schedule. While major market towns were to the fore, the pattern of orders indicated a sales strategy based on generating small, but regular, quantities of business from large regional territories through repeated visits.

Cubitt booked seventy-four orders from a total of twenty-six different towns and cities across northern and eastern England. Only York, Leeds, Grantham and Nottingham yielded orders on more than one journey: York generated sixteen orders, Hull five orders and Leeds six orders, but mainly Cubitt took between one and three orders per town. In addition he made some sales to independent travellers, possibly peddlers.<sup>24</sup>

According to Throne Crick, the majority of travellers in the 1840s spent 300 days on the road, which represented a substantial increase compared to the individual cases cited so far. As the first extensive review of all aspects of commercial travelling, Crick's account carries weight. He too identified the pattern of regional routes, citing an eastern counties tour lasting six weeks, for example. More detailed evidence can be gleaned from the diary of Jane Large from Devon in 1848 because her husband, William, was a traveller employed by Nicholsons of London, presumably a merchant house.<sup>25</sup> Based on Jane's diary, William Large was away from home for 223 days out of the year which was significantly less than Crick's average of 300 days, but more than Joseph Dixon's peddling route of 1822. The commercial traveller's pattern of regular routes was apparent: one in Wales completed three times during the year; a Devon and Cornwall route undertaken three times; and a route through Hampshire and Dorset which was covered twice. The south-western route was closest to home and took only two weeks, reducing William's time away. The other journeys lasted for around thirty days each, far less than the duration of the hardware travellers' trips in the early nineteenth century. In part, at least, the shorter time away was due to Large's residential location: he lived in his territory rather than travelling out from his company's home base and only visited the London office once during the year. Advances in postal communications and the general

infrastructures for travel and banking may well have facilitated such specialisation without firms losing contact with, or control over, their salesmen.

The long tours and distinct regional routes remained a feature in the drapery trade into the 1860s when Symons's eastern counties route lasted three months. And one traveller in the 1870s reportedly only took one week's holiday in the summer and ten days at Christmas, though he did not travel on Saturdays. Holidays could be costly and risky since travellers often had to find a replacement to cover their ground and might lose orders or even, if the substitute proved more effective, their position. There are signs, however, that the length of country sales trips declined in the later nineteenth century. A drapery route in the Home Counties took three to four weeks and a northern route lasted six to eight weeks. In 1909 it was more common to work 'in and out' across the territory, covering half during one week before returning home and covering the other half in the following week. By the 1920s a traveller on the same Home Counties route returned home each weekend. One salesman contrasted his week long road trips to his father's four month absences; another noted that three month tours had been replaced by returning home each weekend. It is likely that these changes had the greatest impact for country travellers who, though still away for longer than town travellers, spent shorter periods on the road.

As time continually away from home declined, the frequency of contact with customers increased. Shaw's hardware salesmen averaged around seventy customers in one year from visiting thirty to forty towns.<sup>26</sup> In the 1850s an old salesman stated that he had visited major cities every six weeks and smaller towns every three months.<sup>27</sup> A Reckitt's traveller similarly recommended visiting major town every six weeks in the

1870s.<sup>28</sup> Reckitts created a new category of sub-travellers who visited smaller retailers and canvassed consumers directly with samples of their washing powders, supported by advertising.<sup>29</sup> As Church shows, firms focused their efforts on smaller territories and on contacting more of the small shops. In the 1880s, Allen was clear that contacts with customers had become more frequent: 'In the driving days I visited my customers every two months, which was considered by many of them as much too often.'<sup>30</sup> By the 1880s he reported seeing customers every four weeks and some every two weeks. Parcel post and the carrier network apparently allowed retailers to buy smaller quantities more often rather than making only two large orders each year. Salesmen, Allen argued, now visited many more towns each week, saw more customers though for shorter periods, and faced more intensive competition for orders. Burroughs Wellcome expected their travellers to make more than 45 calls per week to doctors and chemists in the 1880s.<sup>31</sup> A high turnover rate among the firm's travellers indicated the resulting pressures.

One salesman stated in the 1920s that 'In the olden days we went round once, twice or perhaps three times a year. Now-a-days we may have to go round once a month. That means that the ground is very much restricted, and of course more men have to be employed to go round.'<sup>32</sup> Spring and autumn journeys were characteristic of the drapery trade where fashion cycles placed a premium on generating orders quickly. This imperative was reflected in intensive periods on the road and, especially when business was slack, in the use of short-term or seasonal contracts for some salesmen.<sup>33</sup> Such practices intensified during the 1920s and 1930s, although Customers' preferences limited the intensity selling.<sup>34</sup> Some buyers saw salesmen only at fixed times: in 1933 it was claimed that such restrictions limited the time available to sell to fifteen hours per

week.<sup>35</sup> When a confectionery firm experimented with calls on retailers every three weeks in the 1930s, the more frequent visits failed to generate increased orders.<sup>36</sup> The firm reverted to its previous five to six week cycle of visits.

The distinctions between town and country travellers remained. One Rowntree salesman operated intensively in a few locations: visiting only thirteen towns and with forty-eight of his 116 customers in Hull. But the average for eight Rowntree travellers was forty-seven towns and 290 customers during the year which indicated a far more extensive canvassing for orders.<sup>37</sup> When business and profit margins declined firms frequently sent out more travelers. In 1889 it was estimated that 40,000 salesmen were canvassing for orders from just 50,000 drapers; there was a similar expansion in the use of travelers in key markets in the brewery trade.<sup>38</sup> Travellers who carried large stocks of samples, such as china, hired display rooms in commercial hotels to show off their samples to local retailers, reducing the need to undertake individual visits. Similar, though more chaotic, arrangements had operated in Leeds in the 1860s where grocers came in from the surrounding area on Mondays and visiting salesmen exhibited their samples 'in stairs, and in public houses'.<sup>39</sup> Such practices continued well into the twentieth century, but the general trend was for salesmen to work smaller territories more intensively by the late nineteenth century. Allen believed that the urban environment produced more energetic and intelligent salesmen compared to the more routine life of the country traveller.<sup>40</sup>

Their mobility and commercial value made salesmen early users of new forms of transport compared to their middle-class and lower middle-class peers. The predominant mode of travel changed from walking or horse riding to railways and then motor cars

though the timing and extent of the changes varied according to the line of goods sold and type of territory. Town travellers were more likely to walk, especially if their samples were lightweight or their customers were closely clustered. Maintaining contacts with remote retailers could necessitate footslogging. In the 1890s one of Rowntree's routes was 'a difficult district to work. There is a great deal of rough walking along turnpikes and footpaths across fields'.<sup>41</sup> Where a four mile stretch proved too arduous to walk, the traveller resorted to the railway, changing trains three times and taking nearly two hours to cover the short distance. Generally, though, country travellers covered longer distances, making greater use of horses, wagons, coaches and then railways. They used horse-drawn vehicles, buses and taxis in remoter areas or for short connecting journeys between railway stations. Jones noted a shift from riding horses to driving a horse and gig between 1780 and the early 1800s.<sup>42</sup> One traveller recalled two week tours on horseback averaging fifteen miles daily in the 1830s.<sup>43</sup> However by 1850 demand for commercial travellers' saddlebags had apparently virtually disappeared.<sup>44</sup> Carrier's carts were used, for instance, to cover rural Wales in the 1890s and early 1900s.<sup>45</sup> Coach travel was common with its networks of routes linked to hotels and inns: both William Cubitt in 1835 and William Large in 1848 relied on coaches.

The implications of selling and gender for experiences of travel were evident from a comparison of daily lives of Jane and William Large in 1848. When away from home William moved by coach to a new location most days when on one of his four regular routes. This routine meant lodging regularly at the same inns and boarding houses, though he possibly stayed with his daughter when visiting Bath. When not working William stayed close to home, discussing business with tradesmen and working in the

garden; on several occasions during the year he was ill in bed. He walked locally though less often than his wife who was a more regular churchgoer. Jane's daily life was in a female household, including her sister, a daughter and a female servant, except when William was home or their son visited. Her diary records her walking locally every day, centring her life on church, neighbours, a local school and trips to village and town where she posted mail, shopped and conducted banking business. She travelled in a wagon only occasionally, and then often accompanied by her husband or son.

Where coach routes were limited travellers hired local carriages, a practice that persisted in remoter rural areas well into the twentieth century. Salesmen who carried numerous or heavy samples were more likely to drive a horse and gig. Symons recalled his first journey in East Anglia in the 1830s, selling draper's goods; he still used a waggonette in 1881.<sup>46</sup> Joseph Brown noted the pleasures of driving a horse and trap as a drapery traveller in 1858. By 1863 he was working for a 'large general house' in Cambridgeshire with routes in Essex, Bedfordshire and East Anglia selling a wide range of goods to 'drapers, grocers, saddlers, builders, chemists, ironmongers, painters and plumbers etc'.<sup>47</sup> However by 1879 it was estimated that only two or three thousand commercial travellers drove their own horse and gig out of 80,000 on the road. Indeed the image of the old horseman became a stock figure in nineteenth century travellers' nostalgia for a slower paced, less competitive golden age of commercial travelling. The railway had become the standard mode of transport.<sup>48</sup>

According to Schivelbusch, railways industrialised travel, accelerating its pace and transformed the experience from one of contacts with fellow travellers and different localities to one of a hasty rather confined transit between destinations.<sup>49</sup> Crick's account

in the 1840s lends support to the claim that railways brought greater pace and urgency: 'the innovation of steam and the continual onward movement of the day, have dissipated the quietude of a commercial career and all that pertain to commerce must be effected at railway speed, to keep pace with the excessive competition of the times'.<sup>50</sup> Since nostalgia was a constant theme in a competitive occupation, the impact of railways should not be overstated. Trains were an asset in terms of speed and carrying capacity. In the 1850s the commercial traveller was apparently recognizable at railway stations for his 'sundry weather-beaten, brass-cornered, matter-of-fact-looking boxes, in which are deposited his samples, a portmanteau, hat case, portable desk, together with a pile of overcoats, rugs, and mufflers, sufficient for an expedition in search of the north-west passage'.<sup>51</sup> Adjustment to rail journeys was swift; by the 1870s practicalities and comfort mattered more to traveling salesmen rather than the novelties of a train journey. Thus the experienced commercial got his luggage stowed, chose a carriage in the centre of the train, preferably in a mixed 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> class coach which would be better sprung and more comfortable, ideally had no children in it, and sat with his back to the engine to avoid dust. Much humour in trade journals and magazines for salesmen featured ways of tricking fellow passengers on trains or gaining more space and comfort at someone else's expense. Avoiding excess railway charges for luggage was virtually an obsession. Commercial travellers' associations devoted a great deal of attention to the cost, frequency and quality of railway travel. One petition for cheap rail travel to allow return home at weekends attracted 650-700 signatures.<sup>52</sup> Contacts with porters and the hotel manservant-the 'Boots'- were vital to transferring luggage from trains to the hotel storage rooms and travellers' complaints frequently centred on the costs and challenges of

transporting their luggage on and off trains or in and out of hotels, complaining about delays and seeking damages when trains were late or cancelled or luggage was lost.

Railways and the networks of commercial hotels provided the basic infrastructure for commercial travellers until the adoption of motor cars in the twentieth century. In 1909 commercial hotel advertisements included references to the availability of stabling alongside those to garages and motor inspection pits. Often hotels ran omnibuses to collect salesmen from local railway stations.<sup>53</sup> The switch to motoring gathered pace in the 1920s which some commentators attributed to the increased costs of railway travel. In some cases town travellers were assigned drivers. James Gandon, a biscuit salesman, relied on the railways from 1889 to 1912, but was given his first car, a Ford Model T, in 1913. He moved on to driving a Rover in 1922 and then to a Morris 12 horsepower saloon. It illustrates the social advantages for men, who were often lower middle-class, of having the use of a motor car earlier than their peers. With motoring came an additional flexibility. Gandon emphasized the business value of motoring, but also recalled the enjoyment of summer driving after calls were finished. His detours to visit places of interest continued a nineteenth century lineage of travellers engaging in tourism alongside their work. It resembled the recording of sights and scenery by the peddler, Joseph Dixon, in the 1820s.

Trade journals stated that motoring increased business efficiency and freed commercial travellers from the 'tyranny of the timetable' of trains.<sup>54</sup> By the 1920s it was claimed that the car enabled salesmen to be fresh when they arrived at a customer and increased the number of daily calls while reducing incidental expenses.<sup>55</sup> Their use facilitated the trend towards more intensive canvassing of retailers. One salesman

concluded that motoring allowed the salesman to 'call upon villages and open up a great many small accounts which firms at one time would not look after'.<sup>56</sup> An article in the *Confectioners' Union* in 1938 estimated that salesmen drove 10,000 to 25,000 miles per year.<sup>57</sup> As well as commercial advantages, motor cars added to the prestige and status of the company. Some firms provided cars directly; others paid additional expenses to cover the cost of the salesman using his own car.<sup>58</sup> From 1938 Cadbury books provided a motor car allowance which salesmen repaid as part of their monthly earnings. It was reportedly unusual to meet a confectionary salesman without a car and average daily travel was estimated at eighty miles in 1938.<sup>59</sup> In the intense competition of the 1930s one job-seeker advertised that he owned his own car.<sup>60</sup> One correspondent complained that car owning was too great a burden and that an employer 'would not expect a machinist to provide own machine'.<sup>61</sup> The attractions of motoring were accompanied by complaints about motor tax rates and problems with parking, especially limits on waiting times in towns and cities. Commercial travellers' associations introduced badge systems to identify salesmen's cars. There were constant complaints that police applied the parking and traffic laws too closely and calls for the commercial importance of salesmen to be reflected in exemptions from parking restrictions.

While there was a clear shift from horses to railways, pragmatism and diversity prevailed. In March 1929 a jute salesman left Dundee by train on a three week journey seeking orders for Baxter's range of jute products.<sup>62</sup> The first stop was Edinburgh where fourteen calls in one day yielded no orders. Day two in nearby Boness and Grangemouth included eleven visits, but he reported 'A lot of time wasted today and I rather grugged the time wasted at Bo'ness, however, it is only by investigating places that one can

satisfy oneself whether or not business is there to be had.’ Following further excursions in and around Edinburgh the salesman had visited thirty-three customers in four days without his ‘cold-calling’ generating any sales. After a train journey to Carlisle, the salesman spent his weekend visiting a friend before a round of further fruitless calls. He reported ‘If Penrith is of any use to us Carlisle visit could be boiled down considerably- don’t travel here on a Friday or Saturday if it can be avoided.’ A train journey to Preston was followed by local calls using buses and trains around Morecambe and Fleetwood and a tour using railways through Rochdale, Bury, Bolton and Burnley before returning to Dundee by train.

A three week trip in 1931 took a Baxter’s salesman from Dundee to Edinburgh, then to Carlisle, northwest England and the English Midlands. He travelled by train over the longest distances and used buses, tram and walking to cover each district. Motoring featured only once when a colleague brought his car to allow ‘a number of calls in the outlying districts covering 25/30 miles. I thought if he could take me to some of these out of the way places I could cover those nearer at hand.’<sup>63</sup> The following day was spent walking to places, again illustrating the pragmatic use of different modes of transport. The mix of rail, buses, car and walking was repeated on a sales trip in 1948 as the firm sought to re-establish business connections and knowledge of the market that had been severed during the war. Huddersfield described then as a ‘real footslogging district.’<sup>64</sup>

In addition to transportation, salesmen were supported by networks of credit, exchange, and distribution plus the infrastructure of inns, roads, carriages, wagons and stagecoaches, railways, ports, post-offices and banks.<sup>65</sup> The functional aspects of travelling were reflected in a literature of journals, guides and maps which categorised

locations according to essential features, such as market days, posting times and train services. Commercial hotels were key points for collecting and sending mail, and accessing information. The functional and network elements were encapsulated in an account of the White Hart in Spalding in the 1840s as the embodiment of the ideal commercial room. In addition: 'The room has a notice of mail times and costs, notice of dinner hour. The walls are hung with maps of the world, England and Lancashire. Also on the wall is a scroll of the National Mercantile Assurance companies, a portrait of Joseph Gilstrap Esq.,, Pigott's Reciprocal Distance Tablet and the 'far-famed Indian Ale Tablet' Along one wall is a long range of pegs for garments, space for trunks, bags, boxes, and desks; numbered hooks on which to hang whips; an umbrella stand; side-board with decanters and glasses; sofa, chairs and a centre table; smaller writing tables under windows with japanned ink and wafer stands, rulers, wax, pens &c. The chimney piece presents, in addition to the mirror, (the interstices between the frame and the glass of which are, as usual, filled with cards announcing the houses upon the road which gentlemen are pleased to recommend) a sovereign and letter balance, with wax taper and improved noiseless lucifers.'<sup>66</sup>

Surviving corporate records prioritise business-related information on orders customers, prices and market conditions since these details were routinely recorded in sales ledgers. During the nineteenth century central records and travellers' notebooks were increasingly pre-printed in order to structure the collection and reproduction of such information. Travellers' notebooks and report forms for companies classified places in terms of the names and addresses of customers along with summaries of their orders, commercial reputation or general character.<sup>67</sup> Where Dixon, as a peddler, kept his own

records, commercial travellers generated reports and financial returns for their employers, which gave their record-keeping a more formal and bureaucratic element than his personalised notes.

Company records and travellers' reminiscences support the view that commercial travelling involved a narrow focus on business affairs and the logistics of life on the road. But travelling salesmen were themselves consumers, supported by expenses provided by their employers. One account in the 1850s asserted that 'The physical beauties of a country possess no attractions for him; his views being materially influenced by the quality of accommodation at the respective inns on the way, and the extent and variety of the orders received in the locality.'<sup>68</sup> Where Urry emphasised tourism as a leisure activity beyond normal routines, travelling salesmen combined mobility, work and leisure in their daily schedules. Some salesmen's writings barely mentioned business and instead detailed opportunities for sightseeing in the course of long road trips and reflected on local conditions and people.<sup>69</sup> A Sunday away from home provided opportunities for recreation and sight-seeing; James Gandon tried to spend his weekends at seaside resorts.<sup>70</sup> Such accounts echo Dixon's eclectic notes on his travels. Commercial travellers were routinely mobile and operated within a framework of travel services and business activities. Yet they enjoyed a 'tourist', or recreational, 'gaze' in addition to their business concerns. Their work became more supervised and regimented between the 1840s and 1930s and salesmen themselves placed greater emphasis on respectability. But employers had limited oversight of their employees and the emergence of greater corporate bureaucracy prompted commercial travellers to emphasise their relative autonomy while travelling even more.

Mobility was prized as a marker of autonomy and masculinity, particularly in comparison to office workers. They embodied a masculinity that was autonomous, mobile, actively consuming and womanising.<sup>71</sup> Mobility meant that salesmen operated beyond the parameters of family, local community or even workplace. It was therefore a factor in perceptions of salesmen as disreputable, particularly a reputation for excessive drinking and eating, womanising, an ostentatious style of dress and deceitful behaviour.<sup>72</sup> The selling role was in many respects highly individual with travellers often in direct competition with their peers. Yet a community existed among travellers, which had parallels to the freedom from domestic ties that Whitelegg identified for flight attendants. The travellers socialised through formal dinners in commercial hotels and in the travellers' associations whose membership expanded in the late nineteenth century.<sup>73</sup> The exclusivity and camaraderie of the commercial room provided its own supporting culture and refuge from the general public, cementing the sense of a distinctive professional identity and worth. The salesmen's distinctiveness was symbolised by the commercial room, closed to other travellers, in which they dined, relaxed and attended to business matters. Commercial travellers' associations created elements of common identity that cut across corporate ties and provided a social focus locally. The etiquette of the commercial dinner marked out a community in itself, but also among travelling salesmen since not all could afford the cost or time involved in lengthy meals. There was a hierarchy which appears to have been related to the standing of the firm represented.

Mobility had its risks. Salesmen featured regularly in press accounts of fatalities and injuries associated with runaway horses, upturned carriages, derailed trains and motoring accidents. Theft of goods or cash was another hazard whether through

opportunistic thefts or the deliberate targeting of commercial rooms or commercial travellers. On occasions the helpful hotel servants stole from salesmen. Frequently criminals presented themselves as commercial travellers in order to facilitate thefts from hotels or shops or to obtain goods on credit from manufacturers. Indeed travellers' associations regularly demanded that courts bar such people from describing themselves as commercial salesmen when on trial.<sup>74</sup> The commercial room culture and the practice of treating customers were factors in arrests for drunkenness and their role in collecting payments offered its own temptations to defraud or embezzle from their employers. Such activities and the resulting newspaper coverage sustained salesmen's disreputable image in popular culture.

Salesmen's mobility complicated their domestic relationships. Town travellers had the most conventional domestic lives since they could return home each evening whereas country travellers were away from home for extended periods. An account in the 1850s referred to some salesmen travelling with their wives, but this appears to have been rare.<sup>75</sup> Advice manuals, trade journals and commercial travellers' associations consistently advocated respectable and moderate behaviour, but salesmen's transience and relative autonomy limited the force of social conventions. Newspapers regularly reported commercial travellers who had broken a promise of marriage, abandoned their wives, lived with other women or married bigamously. Their associations with womanising and immorality were reinforced by the notorious case of Alfred Rouse, who was hanged in 1931 for murdering and setting fire to a stranger in his car.<sup>76</sup> Rouse was married, but had fathered a child by another woman and promised to marry other women. The murder was apparently intended to fake his death. Newspaper headlines referring to

his 'harem' drew on and reinforced popular perceptions of the disreputable commercial traveller.

The tensions of life on the road were apparent when John Shaw wrote that he was thinking of his wife even though he had not written lately and begged her to reply quickly.<sup>77</sup> Poor sales accentuated such isolation. Shaw noted in 1819 that '...things are so dreadfully flat and bad that it is almost impossible to keep in good spirits travelling these times is certainly one of the most irksome and disagreeable callings I think a man can follow'.<sup>78</sup> In 1823 as their tenth wedding anniversary approached, Jane Shaw reflected that they had only spent six years together. William and Jane Large maintained contact in 1848 through regular letter-writing: he sent eight letters over thirty-eight days in February and March with Jane replying by return. The death of a relative stimulated much of this correspondence and letters were less frequent during the remainder of the year. William sometimes enclosed money, presents, newspapers or letters from their son. The couple discussed family affairs and the progress of building works on their house. Commenting on their thirty-ninth wedding anniversary-Jane noted that 'notwithstanding all our trials and afflictions our affections for each other remains undiminished and we feel we have much to be thankful for. Wm recovered his spirits and we spent altogether a peaceful happy day'.

John Shaw's business correspondence was brief, principally listing orders and cash received and noting or enquiring after orders dispatched. His letters home often included information on business affairs and sometimes instructions or information to be passed on to firm, indicating that Elizabeth Shaw was in contact with the firm's offices.<sup>79</sup> In one case she copied price information and business replies into her letter to her

husband.<sup>80</sup> The intermingling of business and personal information, as well as expectations about the appropriate balance, was evident in Elizabeth's comment that 'I was disappointed in your letter for it is all about business and nothing about yourself you do not say how your rheumatism is or anything Crane just now came to say that Horderns have rec'd your last remittance.'<sup>81</sup> Shaw's case may have been unusual since he was a partner in the firm, but the correspondence suggests that his wife had a long-term and detailed knowledge of business affairs.

Family was important in commercial travelling as in other occupations. John Shaw brought his sons into the family firm and Reckitts initially relied on relatives as travellers.<sup>82</sup> Such entrepreneurial succession became less common for later generations of commercial travellers as upward mobility was more limited. But even for salesmen who were only employees, business knowledge, especially contacts with potential employers and customers, was a key asset.<sup>83</sup> Family successions still featured in the twentieth century. James Gandon's eldest son learned travelling with him and then worked for Carrs in another region.<sup>84</sup> Similar cases were reported in confectionery and one family boasted three generations 'on the road' in East Anglia in the drapery trade.<sup>85</sup> But performance mattered: William Large persuaded his employer to hire his son, Edmund, in April 1848 as a salesman. Within five months Edmund was dismissed for 'imprudent and unsteady conduct'.<sup>86</sup>

During World War I more female commercial travellers were employed and a few women took on their husband's routes when the salesman entered military service which again suggests the importance of contacts and family involvement.<sup>87</sup> Such cases appear to have been temporary though wives sometimes featured in commercially oriented

activities such as Candy Weeks and Mother's Day events designed to promote confectionary sales.<sup>88</sup> Women were more often involved at social events organised by commercial travellers' associations between the wars. Many local associations had a Ladies Committee that arranged children's parties at Christmas, summer picnics, whist drives and their own afternoon meetings during the week. Summer excursions usually involved couples or families. The continuation of all-male business meetings and dinners reflected the persistence of salesmen's masculine culture developed from life on the road. But the greater participation of women in other social events signalled a change toward closer contacts between salesmen's professional associations and their domestic lives. This change was linked to salesmen returning home more often rather than being away continually for long periods and was reflected in an emphasis on domestic life as a source of support against the stresses of selling. Employers increasingly saw wives as potential allies who might usefully be invited to company dinners, outings or even sales conferences. From this perspective the wife was expected to help to maintain salesmen's morale and to urge them to sell more in order to increase family income. Such notions encountered resistance from salesmen who resented an employer informing their wives about their earnings.

Mobility defined commercial traveling in terms of daily experiences and in the ways in salesmen negotiated their sense of identity. There was diversity, notably between the town travellers moving around a single city, such as London, or the country traveller whose routes covered a wider geographical area. Their commercial functions shaped their perspective since their employers primed salesmen to view, and to categorise, their environment in terms of customers, orders and payments, creditworthiness, future

prospects and travel schedules. There was a supporting network of transport and communication infrastructures and literature from maps and guides to timetables. With a premium on speed, efficiency and pragmatism, commercial travelers were early users of new modes of transport. Sales routes were worked regularly, establishing elements of routine. In fact the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries commercial travellers were absent from home for shorter periods returning home more frequently at weekends. It became more common to work smaller territories more intensively and their work was subject to closer supervision by their employers. Yet such developments made travelling salesmen value their mobility and autonomy even more highly as a marker of their commercial and professional significance.

They operated within a variety of commercial, transport and professional networks that formed distinct communities. Their separation from other people in the commercial room embodied this distinctiveness as did their humour, which depicted them as superior to other travellers. These communities resembled those of twentieth century mobile occupations, identified by Binnie, Whitlegg and others, in the escape from domestic ties and the scope to operate in a distinctive culture. It was a paradoxical position: freedom from close oversight, but regular routines and reporting and competitive pressures. Salesmen negotiated their identity in different contexts: meeting retailers on behalf of their employers; being customers of transport and hotel services; and as part of an occupational culture bonded by experiences of life on the road. Whether in the surroundings of the commercial room or in their daily conduct then salesmen's mobility contributed to a particular expression of masculinity. Mobility complicated their relationships to domesticity and conventional notions of respectability. Life on the road

was associated with drunkenness, theft, violence, accidents and deception as well as womanising in their contacts with servants, barmaids and women in public. Although they might have been expected to become blasé about their travel, they valued mobility and they were active consumers, supported by their expense accounts. Leisure and recreation were part of their lives on the road which runs counter to Urry's emphasis on tourism as separate from work. Rather they shared elements of the tourist experience through the displacement from their local communities which their work required. Overall commercial travelers balanced the routines, risks and personal rewards associated with mobility by emphasizing the value of autonomy in ways that echo the experiences of twentieth century workers.

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<sup>1</sup> J.Binnie and B. Skeggs, 'Cosmopolitan knowledge and the production and consumption of sexualized space: Manchester's gay village', *The Sociological Review*, 52:1 (2004), 39-61; J. Binnie, *The Globalization of Sexuality* (London, Sage, 2004) I am grateful to Matthew Waites for these references.

<sup>2</sup> P. Baker and J. Stanley, *Hello Sailor: the hidden history of gay life at sea* (London, Longman, 2003).

<sup>3</sup> D.Whitelegg, *Working the Skies: the fast-paced disorienting world of the flight attendant* (New York, New York University Press, 2007).

<sup>4</sup> Whitelegg, *Working the Skies*, 16-18.

<sup>5</sup> See also A.R. Hochschild, *The Managed Heart* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2003, 2nd Edition).

<sup>6</sup> Binnie, *Globalisation of Sexuality*, 90.

<sup>7</sup> J.R. Kellett, *The Impact of Railways on Victorian Cities* (London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969), pp.92-5, 97-8, 357-80.

<sup>8</sup> W. Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey: the industrialisation of time and space in the nineteenth century* (Leamington Spa, Berg, 1986).

<sup>9</sup> J. Urry, *The Tourist Gaze* (Second Edition, London, Sage, 2002).

<sup>10</sup> L. Hannah, 'Logistics, Market Size, and Giant Plants in the early twentieth century: a global view', *Journal of Economic History*, 68:1 (2008), 46-79.

<sup>11</sup> B. Harrison, *Drink and the Victorians: the temperance question in England, 1815-1872* (London, Faber and Faber, 1971) 50-2.

<sup>12</sup> H. Southall, 'Agitate! Agitate! Organise! Political Travellers and the Construction of a National Politics, 1839-1880', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 21:1 (1996), 177-93.

<sup>13</sup> R.B. Westerfield, *Middlemen in English Business particularly between 1660 and 1760* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1915), 362-9.

<sup>14</sup> D. Defoe, *A Tour through the whole island of Great Britain* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1986) 502-3.

<sup>15</sup> R. Church, 'Salesmen and the transformation of selling in Britain and the US in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries', *Economic History Review*, 61:3 (2007), 7.

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- <sup>16</sup> P. Scott, 'Managing Door-to-Door Sales of Vacuum Cleaners in Interwar Britain', *Business History Review* 82:2 (2008), 761-88.
- <sup>17</sup> University of Birmingham Information Services, Special Collections Department, S 14/3 Journals and Notebooks of Joseph Dixon.
- <sup>18</sup> University of Birmingham, MS 14/4 Journals and Notebooks, 6.
- <sup>19</sup> S.R.H. Jones, 'The Country Trade and the Marketing and Distribution of Birmingham Hardware, 1750-1810', *Business History*, 26:1 (1984), 24-42.
- <sup>20</sup> A. Popp, Building the Market John Shaw of Wolverhampton and Commercial Travel in the Early Nineteenth Century', *Business History*, 49:3 (2007), 321-47.
- <sup>21</sup> National Library of Scotland, Acc 5000/78(i), Travellers' Reports, 1820s.
- <sup>22</sup> S. Smiles, *George Moore: Merchant and Philanthropist*, (Second Edition, London, George Routledge & Sons, 1878), 83-5, 165.
- <sup>23</sup> Oxfordshire Records Office, Gillett family of Banbury, Catalogue reference GIL/XVI/i/1a-m.
- <sup>24</sup> Gillet papers, letter 7 August 1835.
- <sup>25</sup> University of Birmingham, MS54, Diary of Jane Large of Devon, 1848.
- <sup>26</sup> Popp 'Building the Market,' 321-47.
- <sup>27</sup> *The Commercial Traveller's Pocket Companion* (London, 1858).
- <sup>28</sup> Borthwick Institute, University of York, HIR 10/6, Information on Reckitts' travellers.
- <sup>29</sup> Church, 'Salesmen', *Economic History Review*, 10-11.
- <sup>30</sup> A.P. Allen, *Ambassadors of Commerce*, (London, T. Fisher Unwin, 1885) 104.
- <sup>31</sup> R. Church and E.M. Tansey, *Burroughs Wellcome & Co.: Knowledge, Trust, Profit and the Transformation of the British Pharmaceutical Industry, 1880-1940*, (Lancaster, Crucible Books, 2007) 62-3, 69.
- <sup>32</sup> George R. Mason testimony, 14 April 1926 in Committee on Industry and Trade, *Minutes of Evidence, 1924-1927*, volume III (London, 1926) 1522.
- <sup>33</sup> *The Drapers' Record*, 4 January 1890 11 and 28 May 1892, 1191.
- <sup>34</sup> B Hargreaves Wood, *From Salesman to Sales Manager*, (London, Sir I. Pitman & Sons Ltd, 1939) 17-9.
- <sup>35</sup> *The Draper's Record*, 1 December 1934, 14.
- <sup>36</sup> Borthwick Institute, M/S/ELF/8 Notes from conference held for District Managers 1 April 1932.
- <sup>37</sup> Borthwick Institute HIR/9/5.
- <sup>38</sup> S. Chapman, *Merchant enterprise in Britain: from the industrial revolution to World War I*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1992) 187; T. Gourvish and R. Wilson, *The British Brewery Industry, 1830-1980*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1994), 125-6.
- <sup>39</sup> *The Leeds Mercury*, 27 November 1866, 5.
- <sup>40</sup> Allen, *Ambassadors*, 148-9.
- <sup>41</sup> Borthwick Institute, HIR/9/5.
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- <sup>43</sup> Viz., An Old Commercial, *Reminiscences on the Road of Travellers and Travelling, half a century ago* (Simpkin, Marshall and Co., London, 1884) 1-2.
- <sup>44</sup> *The Morning Chronicle*, 15 November 1850, 6.
- <sup>45</sup> J. Gandon, *Sixty Years 'on the road'*, (Mitre Press, London, 1952), 36-7.
- <sup>46</sup> R. Symons, *A Commercial Traveller's Reminiscences*, (London, Catty and Dobson, 1884), 11-2.
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- <sup>48</sup> A. Walker, *The Road: Leaves from the sketchbook of a commercial traveller*, By 'The Whistling Commercial', (Smart and Allen, London, 1877).
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- <sup>50</sup> Crick, *Sketches*, 175.
- <sup>51</sup> Advice, *Advice to a Young Commercial Traveller, etc* (Glasgow, McPhun, 1857), 61-2; Traveller, *The Commercial Traveller in Light and Shade* (David Bryce, London, 1856), 16-7.
- <sup>52</sup> *The Commercial Travellers' magazine of commerce, literature and general information 1856-1857*.
- <sup>53</sup> UKCTA London branch, *Handbook*, 1909.
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- <sup>57</sup> *Confectioners' Union*, 26 October 1938, 17.
- <sup>58</sup> Wood, *From Salesman*, 55-9.
- <sup>59</sup> *Confectioners' Union* 19 October 1938, 6.
- <sup>60</sup> *Confectioners' Union* February 1933, 88.
- <sup>61</sup> *The Draper's Record*, 12 January 1935, 17.
- <sup>62</sup> Dundee University Archives, Baxters MS11/8/3 Representatives Report Books.
- <sup>63</sup> Dundee University Archives, Baxters MS 11/8/3 Representatives' Report Books, 7 December 1931.
- <sup>64</sup> Dundee University Archives, Baxters MS 11/18/9 Representatives' Report Books, 14 June 1948 and 28 April 1948.
- <sup>65</sup> Westerfield, *Middlemen*, 362-9.
- <sup>66</sup> Crick, *Sketches*, 138-41.
- <sup>67</sup> Church and Tansey, *Burroughs Wellcome*, 66-9; Wood, *From Salesman*, 66-9.
- <sup>68</sup> Traveller, *The commercial traveller*, 11-2.
- <sup>69</sup> *Letters from Scotland by an English commercial traveller, 1817* (Longman, London, 1817); JDC, *Rambles by Nithsdale, Loch Cree, ascent of Lochnagar, visit to Aberdeen and Cromarty, including a tramp from Thurso to Glasgow, from the journal of a commercial traveller* (Glasgow, 1879); Symons, *commercial*.
- <sup>70</sup> H. Hughes *Glimpses of my Life "on the road" Extracts from the notebook of a commercial traveller* (Walter, Bensted and Forwood, London, 1902).
- <sup>71</sup> For gender and mobility see *Journal of Transport History* 23:1 March 2002; V. Burton, "'Whoring Drinking Sailors': Reflections on Masculinity from the Labor History' in M. Walsh(ed), *Working out gender: perspectives from labor history* (Ashgate, Aldershot, 1999), 84-101; Huggins, 'Sinful pleasures?' 585-601.
- <sup>72</sup> C.P. Hosgood, 'The 'Knights of the Road': commercial travelers and the culture of the commercial room in late Victorian and Edwardian England', *Victorian Studies*, 37 (1994) 519-48; M. Huggins, 'Sinful Pleasures? Leisure, respectability and the male middle classes in Victorian England', *Journal of Social History*, 33:3 (2000), 585-601; M.French and A.Popp, 'Ambassadors of Commerce: the Commercial Traveller in British Culture, 1800-1939', *Business History Review*, 82:2 (2008), 789-814.
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- <sup>74</sup> French, 'Commercials, 354.
- <sup>75</sup> Advice, *Advice*, 64-6.
- <sup>76</sup> H. Normanton, *Trial of Alfred Arthur Rouse*, (W. Hodge, London, 1931).
- <sup>77</sup> University of Birmingham, Shaw, letter 9 April 1816.
- <sup>78</sup> University of Birmingham, Shaw, letter 28 November 1819.
- <sup>79</sup> University of Birmingham, Shaw letter 8 June 1813.
- <sup>80</sup> University of Birmingham, Shaw letter 13 March 1815.
- <sup>81</sup> University of Birmingham, Shaw letter 11 April 1815.
- <sup>82</sup> Church and Clark, 'Origins of competitive advantage', 102-3.
- <sup>83</sup> *Confectioner's Union* 1 January 1926, 121.
- <sup>84</sup> Gandon, *SixtyYears*, 66-7.
- <sup>85</sup> *Confectioner's Union* 1 January 1925 117-121; *The Draper's Record* 7 January 1928 25.
- <sup>86</sup> University of Birmingham, MS54 Diary of Jane Large 24 and 26 August 1848.
- <sup>87</sup> *The Drapers' Record* 24 June 1916 549 and 15 June 1918 335.
- <sup>88</sup> *Confectioner's Union*, 15 January 1925, 213 and 1 March 1925, 695-7.