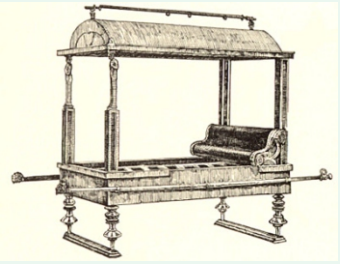
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SEDAN CHAIR H179

The sedan chair is thought to have arrived in England at the end of the sixteenth century. However, similar contraptions are found around the world and have a much longer history than this.



For example, in Ancient Rome a litter, called a *lectica* (right), often carried members of the imperial family, but also dignitaries and other members of the rich elite. A council of the church in AD 675 ordered that bishops, when carrying the relics of martyrs in procession, must walk to the church, and not be carried in a chair, or litter, by deacons clothed in white!



In India such forms of transport were called palanquins (also *palkhi*). The photograph on the left shows an Indian palanquin, taken in the 1890s.



They were also popular in China and Japan.
A Japanese lady in a *kago* can be seen in the photograph on the right, taken in about 1870. The image below left shows a sedan chair in the Chinese city of Tianjin, again taken in the late nineteenth century.

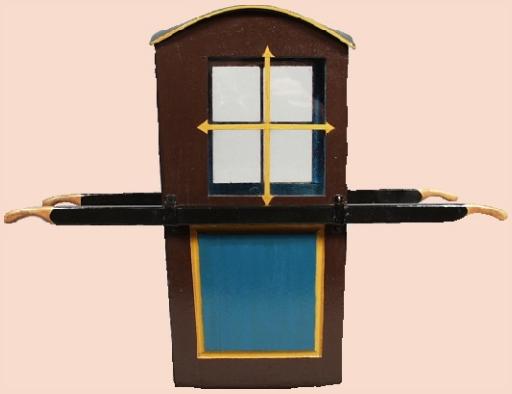


A European living in Hong Kong in the nineteenth century wrote that: 'There are no cabs in Hong Kong; sedan chairs are the only public conveyances. The newly arrived resident seldom takes kindly to this substitute for the wheeled vehicles of home, and is for a time affected with a sentiment of compassion towards the unfortunate men who bear him on their shoulders. This, however, soon wears off: he feels the necessity of rest after a hard day's work in a hot trying climate, and marks the happy contented faces of the sturdy chair bearers who clamour, all unconscious of degradation, for the favour of his regular patronage, and for the trifle which is to be paid for his fare.'

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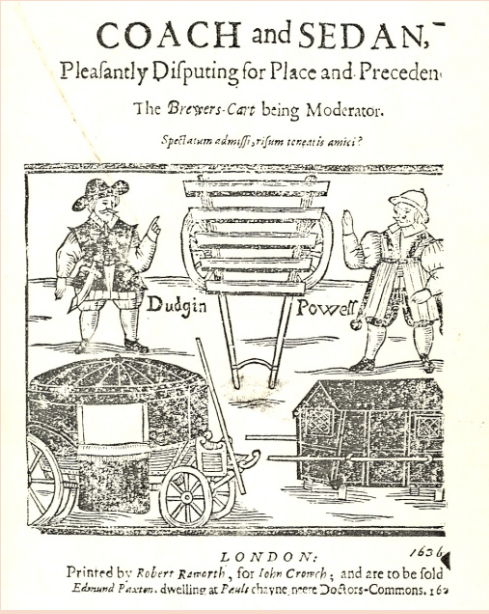
SEDAN CHAIR H179



The sedan chair may have been used in England in the sixteenth century, but references to litters of any kind are rare in this period. The English traveller Fynes Moryson (in 1594) comments on chairs called *seggioli* that he saw in Naples and Genoa. These seem to have been chairs slung from poles and borne on the porters' shoulders.

In 1619, King James I was carried by chair from Newmarket to Theobalds, Hertfordshire. Prince Charles and the Duke of Buckingham are said to have brought three chairs back with them after they visited Spain in 1623.

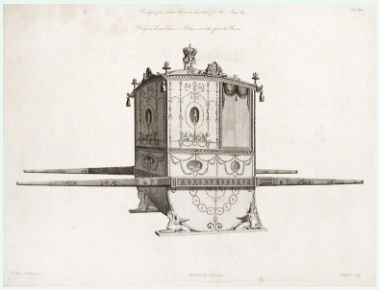
In 1634, Sir Saunders Duncombe patented his own version of the sedan chair and obtained a monopoly for fourteen years on the rental of 'hackney chairs' . The explanation in Duncombe's patent of why such chairs were necessary is revealing. It claims the streets of London are 'so encumbered with the necessary multitude of coaches that many of our subjects are thereby exposed to great dangers and the necessary use of carts and carriages for provisions are thereby much hindered.' The name sedan chair is said to have been concocted by Duncombe, who first saw them in use in Sedan, France.


COACH and SEDAN,
Pleasantly Disputing for Place and Preceden
The Brewers-Cart being Moderator.
Dudgin
Powell
LONDON: 1636
Printed by Robert Raworth, for John Crowch; and are to be sold Edmund Paxton, dwelling at Pauls chayne neere Doctors-Commons. 162

Clearly traffic congestion was a problem even then. Sedan chairs offered a form of personal taxi service that could weave between the carts and carriages and easily pass through narrow alleys. In doing so they left the streets clear for the carts bringing essential provisions into the city. It was a nice idea, but it is doubtful if it had much impact, though its introduction was resented by both coachmen and watermen (who ferried people across the Thames in rowing boats). The illustration on the left shows the cover of a pamphlet published in 1636 debating the relative merits of coaches and sedan chairs. An early sedan chair can be seen in the lower right of the picture.

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SEDAN CHAIR H179



The model in this box shows a plain sedan chair, of the type that became available for hire in several of the larger towns in Britain during the course of the seventeenth century. Some, that were made for the private use of rich individuals, could be highly decorated (right - a chair designed by Robert Adam for Queen Charlotte in 1775).

The chair is upholstered within and has windows fitted on three sides - though the front poleman necessarily obstructed the passenger's view ahead when the chair was travelling. The poles are threaded through metal staples from which they could be quickly removed when the chair was not in use. Passengers entered and departed at the front, stepping between the poles if they were in position, but were saved having to stoop too low because the sedan's roof was hinged at the rear and could be lifted.

Travelling in such chairs could be an exciting experience, for a variety of reasons. Cesar de Saussure, a foreign visitor to London in 1725, wrote that 'the bearers going so fast that you have some difficulty in keeping up with them on foot. I do not believe that in all Europe better or more dexterous bearers are to be found; all foreigners are surprised at their strength and skill.' The men shouted warnings of 'Have care!' or 'By your leave, sir!' to alert pedestrians of their presence and expected them to give way.

Not everyone, though, was prepared to be bundled to the side of the street. In 1766, when Lord Eldon came to London as a schoolboy and stayed at the White Horse in Fetter Lane, he describes coming home with his brother in a sedan. Turning out of Fleet Street into Fetter Lane, some 'rough fellows' pushed against the chair at the corner and upset it in their eagerness to get past. Sometimes there were collisions between sedan chairs.



Other hazards could be even more unexpected. The picture on the left is from William Hogarth's *Rakes Progress* sequence of paintings (1734) and shows Tom Rakewell being dragged from his sedan chair by a bailiff who is about to arrest him for debt!

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SEDAN CHAIR H179

Sedan chairs were popular with the old and infirm who wanted a bump-free journey. For this reason they were common in the city of Bath, where rich invalids flocked to drink and bathe in the medicinal waters. Sometimes they would be conveyed in a chair enclosed in baize curtains, especially if they had taken a heated bath and were going straight to bed to sweat. The curtains kept off a possibly fatal draft. In the mid-eighteenth century Bath had a hire chair service of up to 60 sedans (or 'glass chairs' as they were sometimes called because of their windows) while London and Westminster were permitted 300.



At night sedan chairs were accompanied through the dark streets by a linkboy. A link is an old word for a flaming torch, so a linkboy was the name for a lad who made a living guiding people with a torch. In the eighteenth century a linkboy's services cost a farthing. Sir Joshua Reynolds (1793-1792) painted a typical London linkboy in the guise of cupid (left).



By the beginning of the nineteenth century sedan chairs were almost extinct. In 1821 there was only one operating in London. They lingered on in other places a little longer. In Glasgow, Scotland, the licensing records show 27 sedans in 1800, eighteen in 1817, and ten in 1828.

The reasons for the decline are varied. Invalids increasingly preferred Bath chairs (right), which only needed one person to operate them. In 1834 the hansom cab was invented. This provided a comfortable and manouverable vehicle for one or two people. A typical example can be seen in the photograph below. By the late nineteenth century 3,000 hansom cabs were operating in London.

