



Birth of the Modern

Britain in the Age of Jane Austen & JMW Turner

10–12 November 2025 (ML 855)

From £1,060 per person

Twelve 40-minute talks, followed by Q&As, spanning Monday afternoon to Wednesday morning.

Leading historians of the 18th and 19th centuries offer the latest thinking on a dynamic era of British history.

Based at the comfortable Grand Hotel in York for two nights, with dinner both evenings.

The year marking the 250th anniversaries of two of Britain's most significant cultural figures, presents an irresistible opportunity to examine one of the most dynamic and defining periods in British history. The combined lifespan of Jane Austen (d.1817) and J.M.W. Turner, stretching from 1775 to 1851, saw Britain transform from a broadly agrarian to a thriving industrial economy. Until 1815, war was an almost constant feature, having an impact both domestically and on Britain's global standing. Bolstering the machinations of empire and trade were exciting technological and scientific innovations. These developments were reflected in radical ways, politically and socially. They were expressed in vibrant artistic and literary responses, too, not least by our two main protagonists. The 12 talks we present here, from leading historians of the 18th and 19th centuries, explore an age of fascinating – often interlinking – themes and personalities.

We return to the beautiful and historic city of York for this symposium. Our venue is the wood-panelled Grand Boardroom of the former offices of the North Eastern Railway, now a five-star hotel – The Grand, York, where participants also stay and dine on both evenings.

Our speakers include Dr Simon Bradley, Dr Steven Brindle, Professor John Coffey, Dr Louise Curran, Dr Patricia Fara, Professor John McAleer and Nicola Moorby.

Full programme to be confirmed.

The Talks

Simon Bradley

Iron, Steam and Speed: the coming of the railway

The early decades of Britain's railways, spanning the late Georgian and early Victorian



JMW Turner, *Rockets and Blue Lights (Close at Hand) to Warn Steamboats of Shoal Water, 1840*, Clark Art Institute.

worlds, have a special fascination. Artists and topographers were drawn to the impressive technology, recording the mighty structures and convulsive changes that the new iron networks brought. Wordsworth, Dickens and other authors wrestled with the impact of the railways, as fast and easy travel transformed everyday habits and conceptions of time, space and place. In no other country does railway history offer such a rich and rewarding journey.

Steven Brindle

Towns and Cities in Austen's England

Mention of the famous author might conjure up a world of sleepy market towns, but during Jane Austen's lifetime many English communities were experiencing headlong growth and tumultuous change. The fastest-growing saw their populations rise rapidly between 1775 and 1850, from industrial communities like Manchester to ports like Liverpool and resorts like Brighton. The urban middle-classes grew fast, but the ranks of the urban poor grew faster. Steven Brindle explains why the later Georgian age was uniquely transformative for England's towns and cities, their inhabitants and their architecture.

Steven Brindle

People of the Mills: the Rise of the Textile Industry.

The textile industry in England was the first to embrace large-scale factory production. Over a generation the old world of hand-spinners and handloom weavers came to an end, put out of business by the inventions that gave rise to new spinning mills and weaving-sheds. It was a brutal process.

John Coffey

The Secret Diaries of William Wilberforce: Politics, Religion, and Antislavery

The Age of Jane Austen was also 'the Age of Wilberforce'. The Yorkshire MP was one of the era's most celebrated, controversial, and influential figures. Wilberforce set out to reform the religion and mores of the British middle and upper classes, and he was the parliamentary spokesman for the abolitionist movement, indelibly associated with the Slave Trade Abolition Act in 1807 and the Slavery Abolition Act of 1833. This talk presents a fresh account of Wilberforce drawing on contemporary caricatures and on his vast unpublished diaries.

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Patricia Fara

Erasmus Darwin (title, content tbc)

Erasmus Darwin formulated a theory of evolution that influenced his far more famous grandson, and was also much criticised for his support of the French Revolution. He was a prominent member of the Lunar Society, which played a leading role in industrialising Britain.

Patricia Fara

Mary Shelley's Frankenstein (title, content tbc)

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, published the year after Jane Austen died, drew on the latest scientific research to create a wonderfully ambiguous commentary on science's multi-faceted nature and the ethical problems it raises – ones that we still confront today.

Margarette Lincoln

Women and the Sea

In the 18th century, all understood that sea power was key to national defence and to national prosperity. By 1805 around 120,000 men were serving in the Royal Navy alone. Successive wars had a dislocating effect on society and domestic life, causing separation, grief and general economic hardship for women. Yet the war years also meant that they took on more responsibilities. This talk will look at women's varied roles connected to the sea. It will discuss women working in maritime-related trades and as consumers of luxury imports. It will also explore their contribution to healthcare, housing, schooling and shipbuilding. The 'wife-at-war' starts to become visible in this period, even in Jane Austen's novels – a sign of changing parameters.

John McAleer

'They live by Trade': Britain's global trade in the great days of sail

Britain's commercial success was built on complex and multifaceted foundations. The possibilities and profits offered by maritime trade were particularly important in defining the country's development as a global power in the age of Sail. Trade with colonies in the Atlantic Ocean, initially conducted through chartered companies, was increasingly financed, organised and operated by private merchants. Meanwhile, the East India Company, based in the City of London, jealously protected its monopoly on British trade east of the Cape of Good Hope. And all of this commercial activity relied on the protection offered by the Royal Navy.



James Pollard, *The Louth-London Royal Mail Travelling by Train from Peterborough, 1845*, Yale Centre for British Art

Nicola Moorby

A Wonderful Range of Mind: Turner, science, technology and innovation

Turner's lifetime coincided with an age of scientific discovery and technological advances. This talk explores the ideas and events that informed his paintings, and the intersection between art and science in 19th-century intellectual circles. We will look at Turner's fascination with the forces shaping the landscape, and examine the way he addressed the complicated, evolving relationship between humans and the natural world, particularly within his images of steam-powered technology in industrial revolution Britain. The talk ends with an intriguing question: what would Turner be painting today?

Nicola Moorby

Turner and Constable: Brothers in Arts?

Arguably Britain's two greatest painters, J.M.W. Turner and John Constable were close contemporaries. Born within 14 months of one another (and either side of Jane Austen), they were differing personalities with contrasting landscape visions but between them they revolutionised the making and meaning of landscape. Posterity has remembered them as rivals, but is this fair? This lecture charts the twists and turns of their intertwined

stories and discusses a complicated history of competition and comradeship.

The Speakers

Simon Bradley

Joint editor of the Pevsner Architectural Guides, to which he has contributed a number of notable revised volumes. Simon studied at Oxford and the Courtauld Institute of Art, where his PhD explored the early 19th-century Gothic Revival. On the railway side, his books include the bestselling *St Pancras Station* (2010), *The Railways: Nation, Network and People* (2015), and *Bradley's Railway Guide: a journey through two centuries of Britain's railway history, 1825-2025*.

Steven Brindle

Born in Blackburn, Lancashire, Steven read History at Oxford and subsequently completed a doctorate on the architecture of late-medieval Spain. He has worked for English Heritage since 1989. As Inspector in the Crown Buildings team, he was closely involved in the post-fire restoration of Windsor Castle. Since 2008 he has been a Senior Properties Historian in the Curatorial Department. His publications include *Brunel, the Man who Built the World* (2005), and *Windsor Castle, a Thousand Years*

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of a Royal Palace (2018, as editor). His latest book, *Architecture in Britain and Ireland, 1530–1830*, was published by the Paul Mellon Centre in 2023.

Dr Louise Curran

Associate Professor in Eighteenth-Century Literature at the University of Birmingham. She is the author of *Samuel Richardson and the Art of Letter-Writing* (CUP, 2016) and has co-edited volume 9 of The Cambridge Edition of the *Correspondence of Samuel Richardson* (CUP, 2024). She is part of the editorial team for the Oxford Edition of the Writings of Alexander Pope and is currently writing (supported by a Leverhulme Fellowship) a book on *The Making of Letters as Literature: 1737-1824*, which traces the influence of the publication of Pope's letters from his lifetime authorised editions to the death of Byron.

Professor John Coffey

Director of the Wilberforce Diaries Project and the general editor (in preparation with Oxford University Press). Wilberforce's diaries and religious journals were written between 1779 and 1833, they amount to almost a million words and form a remarkable record of the later Hanoverian age. As Professor of History at the University of Leicester, John has published extensively on the relationship between religion, politics and ideas in early modern and nineteenth-century Britain and America. Dr

Patricia Fara

Emeritus Fellow of Clare College, Cambridge, where she was Senior Tutor for ten years. She is a former President of the British Society for the History of Science and her prize-winning book, *Science: A Four Thousand Year History* (OUP), has been translated into nine languages. She has published widely and contributes to journals including *History Today*, *BBC History*, *New Scientist*, *Nature* and the *Times Literary Supplement*. Broadcasts include BBC Radio 4's *In our Time*.

Dr John McAleer

Associate Professor of History at the University of Southampton. John's work explores the British encounter and engagement with the wider world in the 18th and 19th centuries, situating the history of empire in its global and maritime contexts. He was previously Curator of Imperial and Maritime History at the National Maritime Museum, Greenwich. He is a Fellow of the Royal Historical Society.

Margarette Lincoln

Curator Emerita at the National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, where she was Deputy Director until 2015. Margarette has held research posts at Goldsmiths, University of London, and at the University of Portsmouth, and gives regular talks and podcasts. Her latest book: *Perfection: 400 Years of Women's Quest for Beauty* was published by Yale in 2024. Other books include *London and the Seventeenth Century: The Making of the World's Greatest City* (2021) and *Trading in War*, which was shortlisted for the Wolfson Prize in 2019.

Nicola Moorby

Curator, British Art 1790-1850 at Tate and specialist in British art of the 19th and early 20th centuries. Her early career was spent at Tate (2000-2011), where she variously worked as an assistant curator, cataloguer and as registrar and manager of the Prints and Drawings Rooms. As an independent art historian (2011-2024) she was an accredited lecturer for the Arts Society and a regular teacher at the Courtauld Institute of Art. She has curated exhibitions for Hampshire Cultural Trust ('Turner and the Sun', 2017, and 'Constable: The Dark Side', 2023), and Turner's House ('Turner's Kingdom: Beauty, Birds and Beasts', 2025). Her book, *Turner and Constable: Art, Life, Landscape* is published by Yale University Press (2025).

sizeable; most have showers over baths. There is a spa and indoor pool. Some car parking is available. Please contact us should you require extra nights either side of the symposium.

Group size: up to 110 resident participants.

Practicalities

Prices. Two sharing, standard double/twin:

£1,060 per person. **Double room for single occupancy:** £1,180.

Included: hotel accommodation for two nights; breakfasts; two dinners with wine; admission to the talks; drinks reception; refreshments during breaks; gratuities for hotel staff.

Accommodation. The Grand Hotel, York Station Rise, North Yorkshire, YO1 6GD. Tel: 01904 890731

An award-winning five-star hotel, out of earshot but just five minutes (0.4 miles) walk from York station. Originally built in 1906 as a 'Palace Of Business' for the North Eastern Railway Company, the hotel retains many of its Edwardian features. The symposium and dinners take place in the former Grand Boardroom. Bedrooms are well furnished, spacious and comfortable – bathrooms are