



## Birth of the Modern

Britain in the Age of Jane Austen & JMW Turner

10–12 November 2025 (ML 855)

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, Margarette Lincoln, Andrew Loukes, Professor John McAleer, Dr Nicola Moorby

### 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 worlds, have a special fascination. Artists and topographers were drawn to the impressive



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

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.

### The Making of Modern Britain continued

**Louise Curran**

***Jane Austen and the Art of Letter-Writing***

About 160 of Jane Austen's letters survive today from an estimated total of 3,000 or so originals. This lecture will explore Austen's everyday habit of letter-writing: her allusiveness, love of punning, and her sense of the epistolary as an experimental form of prose writing with its own distinctive literary history. It will reconsider these letters as an important part of Austen's literary output using examples of surviving manuscripts to connect her real-life letters to those of her fictional writings.

**Patricia Fara**

***Poet of Progress: Erasmus Darwin***

A best-selling author and Fellow of the Royal Society, the medical doctor Erasmus Darwin altered the public face of science by sponsoring industrial innovation in the Midlands as well as writing popular poems about plants, technology and evolution. Politically radical, he campaigned for the abolition of slavery, supported the French Revolution, promoted education for women, and challenged Christian orthodoxy by publishing controversial ideas on evolution long before his grandson Charles.

**Patricia Fara**

***Mary Shelley's Frankenstein and the Secrets of Life***

*Frankenstein* (1818) may be the first work of science fiction, but it is rooted in scientific facts. Mary Shelley drew on the latest research to create a wonderfully ambiguous yet well-informed commentary on science's multi-faceted nature and the ethical problems it raises. Since then, scientific knowledge has vastly expanded, yet *Frankenstein* poses fundamental questions that still perplex us today. Can living matter be created? Is evil learnt or innate? Are humans fundamentally different from animals? Does progress inevitably come with a heavy moral price?

**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



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

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.

**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 Making of Modern Britain continued

the twists and turns of their intertwined stories and discusses a complicated history of competition and comradeship.

### Andrew Loukes

*From House of Orange to House of Art: a Regency revolution in country house patronage.*

This talk will look at one of the great patrons of British culture during the early 19th century – the 3rd Earl of Egremont, who supported both Austen and Turner among many others. Also a sponsor of agricultural and industrial developments, he welcomed numerous great figures of the day to his country seat at Petworth, West Sussex, including John Constable, who christened it ‘that house of art’. Along with his multi-faceted patronage, we will also explore Egremont’s drastic rearrangement of the grand state rooms at Petworth to create an environment which reflected patriotic and political sentiments pertinent to his own age.

## 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*.

### Dr 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 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 19th-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*.

### Andrew Loukes

Curator of the Egremont Collection at Petworth House, Andrew previously held curatorial roles at Tate Britain and Manchester Art Gallery. He is a specialist in British art of the Romantic period and has curated several exhibitions on J.M.W. Turner, along with others on John Constable and William Blake. Andrew is also a former Trustee of Turner’s House.

### 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).

## Practicalities

**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 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.