

Country Houses & Politics in the 18th century



A guide to free online sources

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Cover photo: detail, east façade,
Wentworth Woodhouse, South Yorkshire

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Introduction

The long eighteenth century was a period of remarkable change for Britain, setting the framework for the landscape, political process, and social systems we experience today. Country houses of the period often contain articles and stories, and are themselves records of those changes, reflecting the political power inherent in land holding, displaying the increasing wealth derived from the growing empire and all its associated trading opportunities, as well as testaments to growing dissent and social unrest.

There is much known about the period from archives and accounts, but more can be learned of people's day-to-day experiences from the many historic homes around the nation, adding to the body of knowledge and our understanding of a period of tension, opportunity, fear, and frivolity.

Working in a heritage role gives unique access to individual stories and case studies, and being able to place those in the wider context of national and global events enables a richer perception. It is hoped this toolkit provides direction to a range of free online resources for people interested in researching the part their property and its owners played in this fascinating period.

The sources have been carefully selected to provide well-researched and reliable information. Whilst they have been listed under headings, some provide a wide range of articles or essays spanning a number of subject areas. Please click on the hyperlinks.



Architectural Styles and Art

RIBA - The Royal Institute of British Architects - has excellent articles describing Palladian and Gothic architectural styles prevalent in the eighteenth century. They also have a useful guide to researching your own country house.

RIBA Knowledge and Resources: [Palladian](#)

RIBA Knowledge and Resources: [Gothic](#)

A [history of architectural styles](#) is available on the BBC website, written by Adrian Tinniswood, consultant to the National Trust, writer, and historian.

If you are particularly interested in how the Palladian architectural style manifested in buildings, Francis Terry's article, '[How Palladian were Palladians?](#)', may give fresh insights on a building you thought was 'pure Palladian.' The article focuses on Ionic capitals and shows - with detailed illustrations and diagrams - that the difference between Baroque and Palladian can seem forced.

The website 'History World' also has an excellent and succinct [page](#) on architecture in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.



The Georgian Society offers useful advice guides in the conservation section of their [website](#). Focused on the preservation of Georgian architecture, the organisation also aspires to stimulate public knowledge and appreciation of the style.

For art, collecting, and display within the country house, the Paul Mellon Centre's project, '[Art and the Country House](#)', is an excellent online resource, containing numerous essays focused on eight specific houses, as well as several thematically-oriented essays.

Although the lectures from the associated course on the 'Country House' are not available online, a useful [reading list](#) is included with the course description.



Harewood House, West Yorkshire
designed by John Carr and Robert Adam, 1759-1771
for Edwin Lascelles, 1st Baron Harewood, West Indian planter and slave owner, and MP for
Scarborough, Yorkshire, and Northallerton



Landscaping and Agriculture

The Royal Collection Trust and King's College London has established an online Georgian Papers Programme with essays pertaining to the eighteenth century. An [article](#) by James Fisher expands on how George III earned his nickname 'Farmer George', describing the improvements and changes in agriculture during his reign. The programme itself aims to increase access to the Royal Archives and the Royal Library at Windsor Castle, and their collections of personal letters, diaries, and accounts. The site also includes a number of links to other potentially useful sites.

Historic England has information on William Kent and Capability Brown, both leading landscape designers practicing in the eighteenth century. The site has a [PDF document](#) that gives a brief history of garden and landscape design, which acts as a good starter when trying to place the character of your site.

capabilitybrown.org.uk contains detailed information about Capability Brown and the individual landscapes he created, along with a guide to his work and how to 'read' his landscapes.

The Metropolitan Museum has an [essay](#) giving a short account of how estate landscaping changed during the century.



The Paul Mellon Centre also hosts a series of online lecture courses on the 'Artist and the Garden'.



Bowood House, park designed by Lancelot 'Capability' Brown in the 1760s for William Petty, 2nd Earl of Shelburne, politician and ultimately prime minister, 1782-83

Politics and Parliament

History of Parliament Online and the National Archives website both include a range of essays and articles relating to political personalities, issues, and events of the time.



Though presented in quite a dry format, [History of Parliament Online](#) includes detailed and comprehensive coverage of the workings of Parliament and biographies of all MPs. You can search for individual MPs, useful in ascertaining whether a country house owner was active in politics. A [detailed survey](#) of the activities of Parliament from 1754 to 1790 is available. [Surveys](#) of other periods within the eighteenth century can be also be selected.

The impact of the French Revolution is explored in a British Library [subject page](#) by Ruth Mather; it focuses on political, intellectual, and creative responses.

A more light-hearted series of essays and insights into the political shenanigans of the period includes '[The will of the people? The Middlesex elections of 1769](#)'.

The British Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies has relevant essays such as '[You're dead to me](#)', on the history of elections, written in a lively and comic account. The site also has [reviews](#) of events and media about the eighteenth century. For example, see the review of the '[In Our Time: The Gordon Riots](#)' (1780), a significant event marking a growing appetite for social and political reform.

The term 'liberty' was much bandied around in the eighteenth century, and though we have a clearer understanding of its meaning today, two hundred years ago it was a developing principle.

History Today has a useful article concerning [ideas of liberty](#) as well as a number of other interesting essays. (Whilst initial access to the article is free, repeated access will require a subscription payment).



Leaflet advertising an event at Wentworth House (and elsewhere) with three 'Canzonettes', traditional lullabies with lyrics adjusted to support electoral candidates in the contested Yorkshire election of 1807.

Three New Canzonettes,
 SUNG AT WENTWORTH-HOUSE,
 4th MAY, 1807.

I.

BABY BUNTING'S LULLABY.

TUNE, "HUSHABY BABY."

Hushaby BABY upon a Tree Top,
 When the *Poll opens* the BABY will hop,
 When the *Poll closes* Fitz' William will fall,
 And down tumbles Cradle and BABY and all.

II.

TUNE, "LITTLE BO-PEEP."

Poor Little FITZ
 Has lost his Wits,
 And he cannot tell where to find 'em;
 Let him alone,
 Till FAWKES comes home,
 And brings his SEAT behind him.

III.

DUETTO.

TUNE, "PUSSY CAT, PUSSY CAT."

Dramatis Personæ, the late Speaker of a certain House and BABY BUNTING—Scene, *St. Stephen's Chapel*.—Time, Dec. 1806.

Speaker—Puffy Cat, Puffy Cat, whence did you drop?

Baby—Came up from *Malton* to vote for the POPE.

Speaker—Puffy Cat, Puffy Cat, what did you there?

Baby—Turn'd out Papist G—tt—n and fat in his Chair.

To be had with the Music for a full Band at Wentworth House, Castle-Howard, Farnley-Hall, Cusworth, Byram, Parlington, Up-leatham, and at the Corresponding Society's Office at Birfall, near Leeds.



Empire

If you can spare a few hours per week, an online FutureLearn course, '[Empire](#)', provides a wealth of information relating to many aspects of Empire including colonisation, slavery, propaganda, and religion, though it is not limited to the eighteenth century. The course is available free-of-charge if you are able to complete the learning (estimated to take 3 hours per week) within a six-week period.

A detailed and descriptive timeline of the 'peaks and troughs' of empire in the eighteenth century is available [here](#), as well as a very useful tabulated [version](#) which includes world events and developments in the arts and sciences.

The East India Company had a significant impact on the lives of many in country houses, providing employment opportunities and wealth. The [2020 James Ford lectures](#) at Oxford University, presented by Margot Finn, especially lecture 5, concentrate on aspects of the interaction between family and empire and offer an interesting perspective for those living or working in a house with a heritage of empire.

Margot Finn has also co-authored with Kate Smith, *[The East India Company at Home, 1757-1857](#)*, (2018), which is freely available. There is an accompanying [website](#) with online resources.



The Slave Trade

The National Trust's 'Interim Report on the Connections between Colonialism and Properties now in the Care of the National Trust, including Links with Historic Slavery' (2020), explores 93 places in the care of the National Trust that have links to colonialism and historic slavery. It documents sources of wealth associated with slave trades, enslaved labour, and the East India Company, as well as historic sites connected with the abolition of slavery and campaigns against colonial oppression. The report is part of the National Trust's commitment to ensuring these links are represented and explored.

University College London maintains the Legacy of British Slavery database and website, containing information about every slave-owner in the British Caribbean, Mauritius, and the Cape at the moment of abolition in 1833; estates identified in the British Caribbean in the period 1763-1833; and all the slave-owners, attorneys, mortgagees, and legatees identified to-date for the estates between 1763 and 1833. Entries for individuals include information about the activities, affiliations, and legacies of these men and women, with a particular emphasis on 'absentee' owners based in Britain.





Sampler worked in coloured silks on linen by Martha Hague, 1837 © Bristol Culture:
Bristol Museum & Art Gallery



Social Life

The Victoria and Albert Museum's [website](#) offers interesting and informative articles on eighteenth-century design styles, fashion, interior design, opera, and theatre. Styles such as Baroque, Rococo, and Palladian are described and examples from the V&A collection are included.

Eighteenth-century British [fashion](#) is also described in an article from the Metropolitan Museum of New York.

The British Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies has an area on its website devoted to [reviews](#) of plays, concerts, and operas of the period as well as exhibitions, films, and broadcasts of contemporary interpretations.

Online Archive

For researchers or those interested in archive material, [British History Online](#) is a digital library of surveys, records, manuscripts, and other primary sources dating primarily from 1300 to 1800. It is enormously helpful for investigating such things as the Hearth Tax and topographical surveys, and is worth consulting for information relevant to a property or person.



Overviews of the Period

The British Library website has a number of [essays](#) offering background knowledge and understanding of the wider social issues of the period, covering issues such as poverty, the rise of cities, and health and hygiene.

Reviews in History, the Journal of the Institute of Historical Research, offers a source of academic articles, essays and book reviews of the period.

The [Institute of Historical Research](#) also holds fortnightly seminars which are free to attend and offer a forum for the exchange and sharing of knowledge and experience.

Podcasts

For those wanting to gain background information on-the-go, the BBC '[In Our Time](#)' radio programme has many excellent podcasts relating to the eighteenth century, covering leading personalities of the period, movements, and issues. Lasting around 45 minutes, pertinent episodes include: The Gordon Riots, Politeness, Gothic, The East India Company, Slavery and Empire, The Grand Tour, The Lunar Society, The French Revolution legacy, The Baroque Movement, Mary Wollstonecraft, The Enclosures of the Eighteenth Century, The South Sea Bubble, The Jacobite Rebellion, Washington and the American Revolution, and many more!



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