English Tourists in the Georgian Period: A Cultural and Leisure Pursuit

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English Tourists in the Georgian Period: A Cultural and Leisure Pursuit

Karina Jackson, Amanda Jeffs, Whitney Metcalf

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Abstract

During the Georgian period (1714-1830), the upper-middle class joined the aristocracy in the world of travel and vacation. The wealthy merchant class began vacationing to new fashionable resort towns such as Bath. The authors of the time popularized the English countryside in their writings for England’s new vacationers as well. Furthermore, the aristocracy began reaching outside of England to the Continent for trips of art, culture, and intellectual stimulation. The Georgian period, in essence, introduced the upper-middle class to leisure vacations, made the English countryside fashionable for tourists, and broadened the reach of the aristocratic vacation to continental Europe’s rich culture.

Introduction

The Georgian period was a time in history when the upper-middle class began traveling, rather than solely the aristocracy. Bath, England was originally a small town where the elite traveled for a spa getaway, but this city’s popularity soon grew and the elite were joined by the upper-middle class. Tourism was also redefined by renowned English authors who made the beautiful English countryside into an attraction that had previously gone unnoticed. During this time, the English aristocracy began to expand their cultural horizons by studying abroad on the Continent.

The Pleasures of Bath

Originally a sleepy spa town at best, Bath quickly became England’s most popular pleasure spot in the eighteenth century. With the appointment of Richard “Beau” Nash to Master of Ceremonies in 1704, Bath rapidly rose in popularity among England’s aristocracy and upper-middle class. To make Bath more tourist friendly and accommodating, Nash instituted social and municipal reforms including lighting the streets, paving roads, and a code of proper behavior to be followed by all residents and visitors. Architect John Wood the Elder wanted to turn Bath into a showpiece of classical architecture with columns, porticoes, and simple symmetry. With Bath’s elegant makeover, the population tripled between 1700 and 1750, rising from 3,000 to 9,000 people. A typical tourist day consisted of bathing in the natural baths, drinking the water and socializing in the Pump Room, prayers in the Abbey, shopping, the theater, gambling, and dancing. The upper-middle class especially enjoyed Bath as a place where they could mingle with nobility. Unfortunately, the heyday of Bath was short-lived, as the aristocracy soon felt the city was being overrun by the lower classes and looked elsewhere to vacation towards the latter part of the eighteenth century.

The Grand Tour

The Grand Tour was a cultural trip taken by young Englishmen who had recently graduated from esteemed universities such as Oxford and Cambridge. These young men stayed on the Continent for long periods of time, up to two years in some cases, viewing artistic masterpieces and ancient structures which have become must-see attractions for any cultured citizen. The principal cities visited were Paris, Rome, Venice, Florence and Naples.

Women who went on the Grand Tour noticed the fashions in the major cities like Paris and Venice. Fashion was almost always a matter of conversation for women of rank. It was expected of high-class women to be up to date on the fashions in France. The way that they presented themselves in society showed their status.

Although the main purpose of the Grand Tour was to show the English the world and give them cultural experiences, there was a feeling that many tourists did not truly appreciate art, and that their pretensions to culture were superficial. Many of the young men who went on the tour went merely to have a good time, not to further their education in the least. Regardless of their motivations, the Grand Tour continued to play an important part in the vacationing of the English aristocracy.

Summary

Tourism in and from England during the Georgian period underwent changes as more upper-middle class people were able to travel, broadening the tourism market. As Bath grew in popularity, the amenities expanded from a mere spa to include other diversions such as theatre, gambling, and dancing. Literature produced during this period introduced the English countryside to the tourist by making it a place of beauty and contemplation as described by Austen and Wordsworth. The principal cities visited were Paris, Rome, Venice, Florence and Naples.

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Authors began to redefine tourism as they opened the eyes of the English to the natural landscape. These authors drew in tourists to the countryside with descriptions of nature’s beauty and to their own biographical sites through their postmortem celebrity status.

Jane Austen’s (1775-1817) works were widely read and many visitors to England began to see the rural countryside of England through the eyes of Marianne Dashwood, Sense and Sensibility’s Romantic heroine. After her death, Austen’s life and literary works spurred pilgrimages to her personal heritage sites in Bath and Winchester Cathedral, destinations that continue to be popular today.

The increase of visitors to the Lake District in England is in part due to the Romantic Era writers, duly named the “Lake Poets,” who changed society’s view of nature as wilderness to nature as the vestiges of the Garden of Eden. William Wordsworth (1770-1850) is considered to be the father of tourism in the Lake District. Through his poetry and guidebooks, Wordsworth opened the eyes of the English to the beauty of the Lake District, a virtually unexplored or appreciated landscape prior to the Romantic writers. William Wordsworth also has personal heritage sites such as Dove Cottage and the Wordsworth Museum in Grasmere.

While literature is not wholly responsible for tourism in the English countryside, it is in fact inseparable. In this way, literature, beyond the obvious guidebook or magazine, has played a key role in the development of English tourism and its many cultural landscapes.

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