

BRINGING THE PAST TO LIFE
A TALK DELIVERED AT BRISTOL FESTIVAL OF LITERATURE
(<http://unputdownable.org/>) ON 16 OCTOBER 2015

Researching historical fiction is a big subject, and there won't be time to cover everything in this short talk. So I'm going to focus on one element of our research, and that's to do with setting, by which I mean, time and place.

Bringing the past to life for your readers means transporting them to a particular time and place. So, how are you going to do it? How are you going to take your reader to eighteenth-century Bristol or first-century Rome? What information do you need to include in your writing, and where can you get it? I'll be giving you some ideas and suggestions about what you need to know and where to find it.

Firstly, then, what information do you need to include in your writing? What clues can you give your reader to let them know where they are in time and place? The following are extracts from reviews in the Historical Novel Society magazine:-

...she evokes the sights and smells of Paris...

Her descriptions of the sights, sounds and tastes of Poland, especially the architecture...work well for the most part

[She] has the gift of transporting her readers back in time to the sights, sounds and smells of life on board ship in Nelson's navy...

[He] describes splendidly the sights, sounds and tensions of this city caught up in World War II.

...all the gruesome sights, sounds, and smells of a depraved Victorian London are vividly depicted.

I think we get the idea! All of these reviews were written by keen readers of historical fiction and non-fiction, and they're a pretty good indication of what works for readers and what kind of detail they are looking for in evocations of historical place – writing that appeals to the senses.

I have to confess that when I read reviews like this, I can't help thinking: how do they know? How can anyone know how Victorian London sounded and smelt? Who can say what Polish food tasted like in the 1900s?

The answer, of course, is that no one can, not really. But we can try to evoke those sensations in our descriptions of historical places. To do that we try to discover not just what eighteenth-century Bristol or first-century Rome might look or smell like to us – though that is part of it – but what it might have looked or smelled like to the people living in it.

Those of you with strong stomachs might like to consider Samuel Pepys's toilet. Well, he didn't really have one. All the waste went into the cellar of his house and workers called night soil men came along every now and again to shovel it out and carry it away.

Samuel Pepys lived above a cellar full of poo! It doesn't take much to imagine what that smelled like. But the point is that to Pepys it was the normal state of things. The only time he mentions his sewage arrangements is when something goes wrong— the night soil men are a few days late coming to empty it, or next door's cellar leaks into his house. His diary isn't full of entries like, "Lord! What a great stink!"

So you need to research these things from your characters' point of view, think about what they notice, what their experience of their time and place is. The question is, what do you need to research in order to do that? What details do you need to know? The short answer is: everything! But that's vague and not very helpful. So, I'm going to suggest a simple method you can use to help bring your character's time and place into sharper focus. Then I'm going to mention some sources that I think are particularly helpful for research that is focussed on "seeing through your character's eyes", and suggest a couple of exercises you might also find helpful.

First of all, then, let's focus on your character's experience of time and place. One way of doing this is by thinking about the basic elements of where and when your story is set.

For example:-

Seeing Through Your Character's Eyes: A Place called Home

Where does your character live? Is it a city, town or village?

Does your character live in a cottage or palace? Workshop or hovel? Mansion or slum?

What sort of roads does your character travel on? Streets or lanes, bridleways or turnpike roads? Cobbled or muddy?

And as you ask yourself these questions, think about how the answer might affect your character.

Seeing Through Your Character's Eyes: A Place called Home

Where does your character live? Is it a city, town or village?

☞ Affects: quality of the air (smog, pea soupers), transport, social activities and pastimes (ridotto in town, football on the village green), speed at which news travels, rate at which fashions change, attitudes, buildings – shops, offices, coffee houses, pubs, churches, theatres etc; architecture; plants and animals (rats and cats, livestock, horses); occupations/jobs.

Does your character live in a cottage or palace? Workshop or hovel? Mansion or slum?

☞ Affects: size and crowding of household; social division in household – employers and servants; number of servants; where people cook, eat and wash; health and comfort if manufacturing processes carried out on (or near) premises; noise from neighbours and streets.

What sort of roads does your character travel on? Streets or lanes, bridleways or turnpike roads? Cobbled or muddy?

☞ *Affects: noise – cobbled roads; mobility – muddy roads impassable in winter; provision of fords or bridges; toll houses; drains; type of transport – pedestrian, coach, horses, trams, cars, penny farthings, bicycles – are women riding them? Occupations/jobs – postilions, carriers, drivers etc.*

By focussing on your character's experiences, you'll be able to identify what you need to know. If your character is a nobleman you'll probably need to find out more about life in a mansion than a slum.

Thinking about the details of your character's settings like this will also help make their experience more authentic. For example, if he lives in the country, he's going to have different leisure or job opportunities from someone living in a town.

You can do the same thing for other elements of place, such as *Home Comforts*:-

Seeing Through Your Character's Eyes: Home Comforts

Heating: open fire – wood or coal? stove, electric bar fire. Weather – quality of insulation – windows or shutters – wattle and daub or brick walls?

☞ *Affects: rooms have warm and cold spots – who sits nearest the fire?; cleanliness – coal dust; smell – smoke and fumes; cost of supply – bills, gas or electricity meters.*

Lighting: candles, rush lights, gas lamps, electric lights, oil lamps, kerosene lamps.

☞ *Affects: time people go to bed and get up; ability to study or read; bad for the eyes, smells.*

Sanitation: outhouse, chamber pot, water closet, earth closet, drains.

☞ *Affects: smell; household chores, health.*

You can adopt a similar approach to other elements of place such as furniture, water supply and landscape.

Furniture

Furniture – tester bed, pallet bed, divan, chaise longue; grandfather clock, carriage clock; wooden chair, upholstered chair; fire screen, fire dogs; curtains, shutters; dirt floor, tiles, lino, carpet.

☞ *Affects: comfort; scope for display of wealth or poverty – an indication of status; domestic workload.*

Water Supply

Water supply: A well in the yard or a pump in the street? Piped from a reservoir? Are there taps and cisterns?

☞ *Affects: how often they wash themselves and their clothes; servants' workload; health – epidemics; cost of water supply – who can afford piped water?*

Landscape

Landscape – country, urban, industrial. Are there forests, streams, heaths? Pollution, noise?

☞ *Affects: occupations, transport, agricultural production.*

You can also use this approach for other elements such as fashion, law and order, and weapons, all of which will affect your character's environment. For example, in an age of capital punishment the landscape might be littered with gibbets, stocks, and gallows.

I'm not suggesting that you should rush off and research all these things in depth before you start writing. But asking yourself these sort of questions is a way of keeping your research and your writing focussed – you don't have to have all the answers straightaway. In fact, you'd probably be wasting your time if you tried to do that. Bernard Cornwell advises:-

“There's no point in researching everything before you begin to write, because you're probably wasting time. I usually advise people to write their first draft and then see if it demands more detailed research. Knowledge of period furniture, for instance, isn't going to be of huge use to Sharpe, but if, in writing a book, I discover a need to know something about tables and chairs then it's far quicker to look up what I need than to have spent weeks making notes on the basis that I might possibly need it one day.”

It's only when you start writing that the detailed information you need becomes clear – you'll suddenly find you need to know all sorts of odd little things. How did people clean their clothes? Could you travel by coach from London to Ipswich? How did you send letters in the days before postage stamps?

Sources

So, once you know what sort of information you need, where do you go to get it? Obviously a lot will depend on the era you're researching. If it's Roman the sources available are very different from what you're going to find for something set in the eighteenth century. There isn't time today to deal with specific eras, but here are some general pointers which I hope will help.

1. Books

“The greatest part of a writer's time is spent in reading in order to write: a man will turn over half a library to make one book.”

Samuel Johnson

Obvious, really. Books. We have to read up on our subject – a lot. In fact, if you’re planning to write about history you’ve probably done some reading already. You already know enough about the period to decide that it’s the one you want to write about. I’ve put some notes on putting together a reading list and suggested a few references sources below.

I find the most fruitful printed sources are contemporary ones, such as:-

*Diaries, including
Letters;
Autobiographies; and
travel narratives – Daniel Defoe (Tour Through the Whole Island of Great Britain, 1724-6); Celia Fiennes (Through England on a Side-Saddle, 1685-1703); John Leland (Itinerary, 1535-1543*); Captain Cook (Journals, 1768-1779*).*

Contemporary fiction, drama and poetry

Contemporary newspapers, journals, magazines NB many are available on line, eg *The Times* and *Illustrated London News* are available free from Libraries West on-line resources

**Text available free on-line.*

I read as many diaries as I can, because I think they put you as close as you’ll ever get to the people of the past. They are packed with the sort of detail that we historical writers need.

Consider James Woodforde. He was a Norfolk parson in the eighteenth century. He didn’t do anything remarkable and he wasn’t famous. What he did do was keep a diary. For over forty years he recorded what he ate, his illnesses, his journeys, the seasons, the weather... This is an extract from his diary:-

“The Frost severer than ever in the night as it even froze the Chamber Pots under the Beds.”

Parson James Woodforde, February 28 1785

In just one short sentence, we have a wealth of detail about some of the elements we’ve looked at. If we take the category “*Seeing Through Your Character’s Eyes: Home Comforts*”:-

Seeing Through Your Character’s Eyes: Home Comforts

Heating: open fire – wood or coal? stove, electric bar fire. Weather – quality of insulation – windows or shutters - wattle and daub or brick walls?

Affects: rooms have warm and cold spots – who sits nearest the fire?; cleanliness – coal dust; smell – smoke and fumes; cost of supply – bills, gas or electricity meters.

Sanitation: outhouse, chamber pot, water closet, earth closet, drains.

Affects: smell; household chores.

Parson Woodforde lived in a house with cold spots and apparently little insulation, and there was no indoor privy. And someone had the chore of emptying and washing the chamber pots in the morning.

The same thing goes for contemporary fiction, drama and poetry. It's packed with clues about what it was like to be in a particular place at a particular time.

I think there can be few pieces of writing that will tell you as much about what it was like to travel by coach through the landscape of the early nineteenth century as this (abbreviated) passage from *The Pickwick Papers* by Charles Dickens:-

They have rumbled through the streets, and jolted over the stones, and at length reach the wide and open country. The wheels skim over the hard and frosty ground; and the horses, bursting into a canter at a smart crack of the whip, step along the road as if the load behind them—coach, passengers, cod-fish, oyster-barrels, and all—were but a feather at their heels. They have descended a gentle slope, and enter upon a level, as compact and dry as a solid block of marble, two miles long...A few small houses, scattered on either side of the road, betoken the entrance to some town or village. The lively notes of the guard's key-bugle vibrate in the clear cold air...

2. Visual Material

The second resource I want to mention is visual material, including paintings, drawings, photographs and postcards, as well as sculpture and carving. Trajan's column, for example, is a mine of information about the first century Roman Army – and you don't need to go further than London to see it – there's a cast of it in the Victoria and Albert Museum.

When I was writing *To The Fair Land* I looked at paintings by marine artist Nicholas Pocock of Bristol; landscape painter William Hodges who travelled with Captain Cook; portraitist Thomas Lawrence and many others.

My book is partly set in Bristol, and there are lots of fantastic images of Bristol and the south west in the Bristol City Museum and Art Gallery, the MShed and Bristol's other free museums. If you live in or can visit the town where your novel is set, you can spend some worthwhile hours in whatever local museums and art galleries are there.

And for paintings in galleries you can't get to, you can look on line – in particular see the *Art UK* website (<http://artuk.org/>) (Formerly *Your Paintings*.)

The National Portrait Gallery and the Victoria and Albert also have lots of information and images on line.

Here's an exercise you might like to try:-

Using Visual Material

Look at a photograph or painting of a room from the same period as your character and write them into that setting. What will they see, hear and feel? What will they think? For example, a maid will look at a stately home and think how much work it's going to need to keep clean; a lady will think about who she might meet at the ball tonight; a soldier might worry about defences; a lawyer might rub his hands at the thought of all that work handling estate matters...

3. Sound

The third resource I want to mention is one you can listen to. Much of my writing is set in the eighteenth century, and I listen to as much music of the period as possible – not just classical music, but the music of the people: sea shanties, ballads, protest songs. These are the songs my characters sang in their homes and inns and churches.

For more recent eras we also have film and radio recordings – you can hear Christabel Pankhurst talk about women's suffrage thanks to the British Library Sounds Archive. There's also the BBC Archive and the British Pathé Archive, and they're all available free, on-line.

4. Place

And finally, one of the very best ways of seeing through your character's eyes is by visiting locations associated with their period. Although places have changed over time, it's worth doing even if you are researching ancient history. A while ago I visited the Roman fort at Richborough. The sea's gone from the walls, the walls are gone, and there are modern buildings close by. Even so, I got so much from the trip. The sky, the weather, the size of the fort, a sense of being in a place that people I want to write about had been in – these are all invaluable things to enhance my writing. Visit ruins and battlefields – even the contours in the ground at the site of the Battle of Dyrham in 577, will give you something that no book or picture or film can give you.

And these days most places have excellent visitor information, such as:-

- *Information on websites*
- *Guide books*
- *Museums/information centres at site – often with reconstructions*
- *Information boards on site*
- *Excavations*
- *Re-enactment events*

Some writers find re-enactment very useful. Elizabeth Chadwick, Author and Re-Enactor with Regia Anglorum, comments:-

“I know at first-hand how it feels to spin wool using a drop spindle. I know how to weave tablet braid and sprang. I know what a 13th century knight would have seen when looking through the eyeslits of a jousting helm.”

Whether you decide to join a re-enactment group or just go along to watch, they are a great way of doing research.

Here are a couple of exercises you might like to try:-

Time and Place

Go out with your notebook and visit a historic place – a house or battlefield, a Roman fort etc. Sit and take notes – what can you see, hear, smell? How does it feel to be where you are? Is it cold? Open to the elements? Cramped? Dark? What’s the landscape like – has it changed? What’s the furniture like – heavy and dark, flimsy and light? (You can use the elements of place categories as prompts here.) There are timeless sensations that you can use to make your character’s reactions to a place seem more vivid and personal.

Look at your notes from the previous exercise. What do you think your characters could have seen that you didn’t see (horse-drawn vehicles, gas lamps, toll houses)? What did you see that your characters couldn’t have seen (pylons, tarmacadam, computers)? How would the absence of modern structures have made a difference to what your character experienced (no pylons – a clear view of the countryside; no gas lamps – no smell or sputtering noise, dimmer/brighter)?

I’ve suggested that bringing the past to life for your readers means transporting them to a particular time and place, and that it’s writing that appeals to the senses that achieves this. To evoke these sensations, we need to look through our character’s eyes. Using the elements of place questionnaire will help to focus on your character’s experiences. I’ve also suggested using diaries, letters and autobiographies; sculpture, paintings and photographs; listening to music; and visiting places. One thing I haven’t mentioned that you might also like to try, is digging out period recipe books and trying a few out!

Research is a big job, and you won’t use all of the material you gather. But it’s the well from which you select the telling details, and it’s all worth doing. All writing transports readers to a particular place, but if you are writing historical fiction or non-fiction you also need to take them to a particular time to bring the past alive. I hope you find these suggestions useful.

Resources

Imagination in the Archives

You don't just need your imagination when you're writing the novel. You need to take it into the reading room with you.

In the run up to giving this talk at Bristol Literature Festival, I wrote a guest blog for Amy Morse about research, *Imagination in the Archives*, which you might also find useful. You can read the blog post on Amy Morse's blog

<http://authorpreneur.amymorse.co.uk/imagination-in-the-archives-a-guest-post/>

Research: Where to Go

Libraries

Libraries West – catalogues and free resources – <https://www.librarieswest.org.uk>

British Library – catalogue and resources for researchers <http://www.bl.uk/>

National Archives – <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk>

Public Record Office – see the on-line catalogue <https://www.bristolmuseums.org.uk/bristol-record-office/>

British History On Line – primary and secondary texts – <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/Default.aspx>

Groups/organisations

Historical Novel Society – <http://historicalnovelsociety.org/>

Romantic Novelists' Association – <http://www.rna-uk.org/>

The Crime Writers' Association – <http://www.thecwa.co.uk/>

Re-enactment groups – <http://www.clash-of-steel.com/> has links to re-enactment groups (or just Google “re-enactment groups” and lots come up)

Magazines and Books

The HNS Magazine has lots of useful articles on research and other aspects of writing set in the past, covering every period. Recent features have included:-

- primary research sources available online
- passenger ships as historical setting
- time and place in Arthurian fiction

The Writer – eg the April 2013 issue has an article on researching biographies – available free from Libraries West online resources.

Writing Historical Fiction, Marina Oliver (Studymates Ltd, 2005)

The Creative Writing Coursebook, ed Julia Bell and Paul Magrs (Macmillan, 2001), especially chapter 7, “*Setting*”

How to Write Killer Historical Mysteries, Kathy Lynn Emerson, Perseverance Press 2008

Maps

Know Your Place – maps of Bristol <http://maps.bristol.gov.uk/knowyourplace>

A Vision of Britain Through Time – <http://www.visionofbritain.org.uk/index.jsp>

MAPCO: Map and Plan Collection On Line – antique maps and views. Free access. <http://mapco.net/>

Buildings, Architecture, Home

English Heritage Listed Buildings database – <http://www.english-heritage.org.uk/caring/listing/listed-buildings/>

Geffrye Museum – history of the home, has interactive material and pictures on web site <http://www.geffrye-museum.org.uk/>

Hidden House History – <http://www.hiddenhousehistory.co.uk/asktheexpert/faq.php>

Photographs, Paintings

Museum of London Picture Library – <http://www.museumoflondon.org.uk>

Art UK – Public Catalogue Foundation list of entire UK oil painting collection with links to galleries, images – <http://artuk.org/>

Film and Sound Archives

British Library Sound Archive – <http://www.bl.uk/nsa>

BBC Archive – <http://www.bbc.co.uk/archive/>

British Pathé Archive – <http://www.britishpathe.com/>

Film Archives UK – <http://filmarchives.org.uk/>

Visiting Places

English Heritage – <http://www.english-heritage.org.uk/>

National Trust – <http://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/>

Blogs

Reading the Past – <http://readingthepast.blogspot.co.uk/>

The History Girls – <http://the-history-girls.blogspot.co.uk/>

English Historical Fiction Authors – <http://englishhistoryauthors.blogspot.co.uk/>

Historical Fiction Online – <http://www.historicalfictiononline.com>

Putting Together a Reading List

- Use the key word and subject searches in the library catalogues (available on line).
- Use the British Library on-line catalogue – eg there's a useful section on resources by subject type.
- Browse in a library
- Browse in a bookshop.
- Look on Amazon by subject.
- Bibliographies in books

Some Useful Reference Sources

Print books you might keep on your shelves for quick reference – *Chambers Dictionary of World History*, *The History Today Companion to British History*.

On-line resources – *Dictionary of National Biography*; *Oxford Reference*; *Who's Who and Who Was Who* – if you're in Bristol, available free from Libraries West online resources. Check with your local library.

The Annual Register – year by year record of British history since 1758 – available free from Libraries West online resources.

The Oxford History of England – a bit ponderous to read but a good starting place; volumes from Roman history to 1945. Available in the Bristol Central Library, Reference Library.

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