

interpreter

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Learning from England's Museums

Anne Schone, a teaching interpreter, writes of her extended stay in England a year ago and her opportunities to study and compare education through museums.

It is exciting to examine museums in England! As I departed for a nine-month stay there, the department of interpretive education asked me to become familiar with a variety of English museums and educational resources—a voluntary task I accepted with pleasure. It was to be a leisurely visit for me. Seldom do we have time to observe, reflect, and compare; and that time increased my understanding of what we are trying to interpret to Colonial Williamsburg visitors. During that year I visited sites, spoke with museum professionals, observed visitors, and considered how English museums interpret change over time. I found that England tells its rich history in many ways.

Without a doubt, I learned the most about English museums during a week-long course given by the British government called "The Educational Use of Museums, Ancient Monuments, and Historic Buildings." Approximately ninety museum professionals and teachers, including fourteen from the Continent and two of us from America, gathered at a college in Southampton for the program. We spent four days of field study on previously chosen topics: prehistory, Roman study, the castle, the cathedral, and the country house. Each group was given reading assignments on its topics prior to the program and an extensive bibliography upon arrival in Southampton.

Our group of eleven studied a small town in Hampshire, Bishop's Waltham, a town with elements familiar to us in Williamsburg: it was a planned community with a large palace (in ruins) and has a historic church and interesting architecture dating from medieval

times to the present day. Group leaders gave us an introductory lecture, and an exploratory walk through the town. They pointed out useful documentary evidence such as a series of paintings and photographs of the town square showing historical change.

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Thomas Willoughby I: England and Virginia

How can interpreters convey a sense of the differences between the experience of immigrants in Virginia compared to what they had known in England? What "cultural baggage" did settlers bring with them, and in what ways were they compelled to make significant adjustments in the new land? Anne Willis illustrates one way to answer such questions: examine the known details of one man's life.

[1626] Thomas Willowby of Rochester in the County of Kent gentleman agd 27 years or thereabouts sworne and examined as aforesaid; Saith and deposeth uppon his oath; That this Examinee is now bound a passenger for Virginia in the said shippe the Peter and John of London (from *The Old Dominion in the Seventeenth Century*, edited by Warren M. Billings).

So Thomas Willoughby sailed once more to Virginia in 1626, having first come over as a young boy in 1610. From the census of 1625 we know he had lived in Elizabeth City with four indentured servants in his muster and these enumerated provisions: "Come, 16 barrels; Fish, 200 cts; houses, 3; pallizados, 1. Armes: Peeces, 4; pistole, 1; swords, 3; Armers and Coates, 4; powder, 5# [pounds]; lead, 150.#"

Ocean traveler, man of property, Indian fighter, and bearer of a pistol, the person of (continued, page 2)

England's Museums, *continued*

Each group was given time to discuss various ideas and interests. I found myself making comparisons with Williamsburg and began to investigate the home, work, and community activities of this Hampshire town and to wonder how they changed over time. We explore this same theme in the Preliminary Interpretive Education program here in Williamsburg, and I was struck by how universal the framework is.

My interest coincided with those of a teacher from Shropshire, and we worked together on a project to develop inquiry-method questions for student use. Visual evidence of prior use, such as bricks grooved by a no-longer-present rope hoist on a granary, gave us raw data for student questions as we examined various areas of the town. We developed appropriate sources to teach students historical research methods as they explored the questions. We also cited examples of pitfalls to avoid such as reading the environment without carefully examining all available evidence.

Not all of the members of the group looked at the town in the same way. One person developed a vernacular house-dating project by examining chimneys and brick building details. Another looked at window styles and created a program for young children to locate and sketch examples. (Children in England were often asked to draw objects during school museum visits as an important way to understand the objects.) The church was rich in information, and several projects focused on that source. One inventive member even had students examine the incised graffiti throughout the town for both chronology and social history information.

We quickly became a local curiosity. People in the town got interested in our activities. When one of us decided to tape oral history interviews, we all found ourselves involved. A fascinating discussion took place as we stood on the bell tower of the church overlooking the Hampshire countryside. How real their World War II experience seemed to us as that bell tower became a watch tower waiting for a dreaded invasion that fortunately never came! These projects helped reveal the life of the community through time.

Each group explored its sites during the day but returned to the college for the evening programs on a variety of topics. The most exciting evening program was the presentation of a project offered to schools in Suffolk designed to help students understand the

medieval community. Students became apprentices charged with the maintenance and repair of a castle. Sixteen different work groups learned twelfth-century skills, many of them like activities done by our Williamsburg students; however, the Suffolk program went even further. Students portrayed a living drama, complete with "accusations," "a suspicious illness," and even a "trial" with the verdict decided with a "joust." Dressed in coarse costumes, children aged nine through thirteen "lived" in the year 1175, learned of problems and responsibilities, and gained insight into the values of the period. It was an exciting and creative program, and discussions about this project lasted long into the night.

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Thomas Willoughby, *continued*

Thomas Willoughby offers us an opportunity to speculate on the experiences of one Virginia settler—to compare and contrast the natural and cultural landscapes he knew so well: that of tidewater Virginia when it was raw, vacant, and hostile to Englishmen, and Rochester when it was an English cathedral town with a 1,400-year history.

In 1626, Rochester was a port town on the River Medway that flows from the North Downs into the Thames Estuary and the English Channel. The north shores of Kent, with its wide beaches, ports, and salt marshes, had been the "Gateway to England" for invaders from pre-Christian times onward. The town of 3,000 inhabitants in 1600 lay thirty miles midway between London and Canterbury. On either side of the river valley of the North Downs. Beyond the North Downs stood the Weald of Kent with its scattered farms and enclosed fields, orchards, and pastures. With its compact villages and virgin oak forests, the weald for centuries provided produce for London. Many of England's wealthy and powerful families built their great country houses there.

Thomas Willoughby had grown up surrounded by historic, massive buildings. Rochester was first settled as a walled Roman town in the third century. In 604, St. Augustine established the town as the second oldest see in England. The early Saxon cathedral was later replaced by a Norman cathedral built between 1078 and 1108. Much of the cathedral and its bishop's palace, cloisters, chapter

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Occurrences

JANUARY

25–27 Colonial Weekend

FEBRUARY

1–3 Colonial Weekend

3–8 Antiques Forum

15 Retreat, 4:30 P.M.

16–18 Washington Emphasis Tours

16 Eighteenth-century play, *The Spirit of Contradiction*, 8:30 P.M.

18 George Washington Birthday Review, 4:30 P.M.

22 Washington Emphasis Tours

22–24 Colonial Weekend

MARCH

1–3 Colonial Weekend

7–10 Learning Weekend

9, 16 Eighteenth-century play, *The Spirit of Contradiction*, 8:30 P.M.

12 Militia Review begin every Tuesday at 5:15 P.M.

15 Retreat Programs begin every Friday at 5:15 P.M.

Be sure to check your copies of the "Visitor's Companion" for the latest information programs and events.

The King's English

For many eighteenth-century words there are several definitions. The following words are defined according to their use in this issue of *The Interpreter*:

Keep—the innermost and strongest structure or central tower of a medieval castle, serving as a last defense; a tower; a stronghold.

Seat—a city in which a throne, court, or government is established.

See—the seat, chair, or throne of a bishop in his church.

Undercroft—a crypt; an underground vault.

Weald—a wooded district or an open country; a wold. Portions of Kent, Sussex, and Surrey in England were formerly wooded.

Thomas Willoughby, *continued*

house, and dormitory undercroft were built in the twelfth century. In 1100 Henry I began to build a massive castle with a 125-foot keep to defend the river. The great stone bridge (not unlike London Bridge) was built in 1387. Medieval houses lined the old streets of the town.

Willoughby was a Virginia planter and merchant by 1624, with the acquisition of 200 acres of land. As he had in England, he settled on a river, the James, close to the sea where there were broad beaches, natural harbors, and salt marshes. But, unlike the River Medway at Rochester, the James was broad and deep, its tributaries reaching far beyond the flat land of the Tidewater into the uncharted Piedmont. To settlers like Willoughby, Virginia was a vast and threatening wilderness. A few tobacco plantations, with their makeshift wooden shelters and worm fences, were widely dispersed along the banks of the James. In the woods beyond the clearings were the villages and camps of the native Americans, the "Indian salvages" whose customs and actions were still strange and threatening to Englishmen. There were no gentle English fields and orchards under cultivation, no settled villages or walled towns, no handsome country manor houses.

In time Willoughby became a vestryman, a justice, a Burgess, and a member of the Virginia Council of State. The colony was divided into "English" counties and parishes where English civil government and the rites of the Church of England were dispensed. But the buildings that housed these familiar institutions were made chiefly of wood, not of stone or brick. Absent from Thomas Willoughby's eye were the Roman walls, Norman castle, great stone bridge, and ancient cathedral where the powerful lay in their tombs reminding men of their heroic deeds and their English heritage.

It is interesting to wonder how his separation from home and his confrontation with the Virginia wilderness shaped Willoughby's life and thoughts. Perhaps he longed for the permanence of stone, the continuity of institutions, the settled landscape shaped over time by the human aspirations of Rochester and North Kent. Perhaps his several trips back to England indicate a longing for his origins and a sense of permanence, akin to that of an exile. He may have died in England. Or, as with many other colonial entrepreneurs and opportunists, he may have been sparked by the very rawness and unsubdued vitality of Vir-

ginia. His passion to develop, cultivate, and legislate may have been fueled by his freedom from the social and cultural institutions he left behind in England. No existing documents can help put us in his mind. As a man transporting himself between two worlds, Thomas Willoughby made his lasting mark under uncertain conditions in a new continent, not in the old. He poured his considerable energies and skills into converting the cultural landscape of Tidewater into something resembling home.

The Exchange

Bettye Jean Lendrim, a senior interpreter, describes a special exhibit that she visited last summer at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London.

Rococo, Art and Design in Hogarth's England, was a special exhibit at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London May 16–September 30, 1984. This important event, the first major exhibition devoted exclusively to the rococo style in England, featured objects from over 120 museums and private collections, many of which had never been on public display before.

The rococo, an aesthetic style with its roots on the Continent, is characterized by whimsical, fantastic curves in light and playful decorations. Rock and shell motifs, often in asymmetrical arrangements, are used frequently. This "fantasy on a theme" ornamentation developed out of the late baroque style with its characteristic sobriety and carefully controlled, stately, dramatic manner. The rococo style flourished in all aspects of English decorative arts from ca. 1740–1770. During the last quarter of the eighteenth century, the rococo gave way to a renewed interest in classical design, spurred by excavations at Pompeii and made popular by such designers and craftsmen as the Adam brothers and Josiah Wedgwood.

This extensive exhibition of rococo masterpieces opened with a display of early eighteenth-century continental rococo engravings and selected examples of the finest continental rococo objects. Engravings and silver pieces by the French master silversmith, Juste Aurèle Meissonnier, who is generally accepted as one of the founders of the *rocaille* fashion, were featured in the introductory display.

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England's Museums, *continued*

During the final day of the program we met with people from the other interest areas. Roman family life came alive in one project; work in a castle was explored in another. Many projects stressed activities to involve students. Not only did I discover exciting ways for students to learn from museums, but also I viewed Warwick, the town where we lived, through different eyes. A magnificent castle dominates Warwick, demonstrating its continuous presence as a "power house" in a changing world. Tombs in the fifteenth-century chapel of the local church furthered the story. A hospital, standing since 1383, told of community responsibilities. Architectural change was evident in a historic district of still-occupied homes. Housed in a local museum, a tapestry richly depicted the medieval settlement pattern in Warwickshire, which differs from that of today. Victorian Warwick was brought to life in a museum program when children, dressed in period clothing and seated in a Victorian classroom, chanted their lessons as they did one hundred years ago.

In Williamsburg, we also have to go no further than down the street to learn of then and now. We have our Palace, our hospital, our Frenchman's map, church, school, and architectural statements. We have our opportunities for learning and teaching. What I learned in England was how to see Williamsburg better.

Rococo, *continued*

The exhibit progressed into the English rococo with a chronology of the style and its adaptation to applied art in England. A display featuring Slaughter's Coffee House in London's West End was next. Men like William Hogarth, artist Francis Hayman, and French engraver Hubert Gravelot exchanged ideas and designs in the convivial setting of such coffee houses, stimulating the spread of the rococo in England.

Roubiliac's bust of William Hogarth and Hogarth's own self-portrait (with the elongated S-curve of his influential "line of beauty" on the palette in the foreground) were featured at the beginning of the English section of the exhibit. At a pivotal point in the show were full-sized replicas of supper booths or arbors at the Vauxhall Pleasure Gardens. These supper boxes not only had full-sized figures dressed in appropriate period clothing

but also displayed some of the paintings by Francis Hayman and his followers. These paintings had decorated some of the backs of the original arbors. Hogarth is credited with giving impetus to this way of decorating the supper booths, which created the first open air art exhibition space in England.

Working drafts and engravings for textiles and silver illustrated the powerful influence of rococo motifs on English design. Two items on loan from the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation were a solid silver epergne and a silk gown and petticoat, the fabric for which was probably woven in Spitalfields, a suburb of London.

The 1740s sack back gown (with later alterations) from Colonial Williamsburg is of ivory silk extravagantly brocaded with metallic silver gilt and very brightly dyed silks in an undulating vine pattern running down the gown in a serpentine line. The serpentine robings (trim) on the gown's front and sleeve edges echo this waving "line of beauty." The original stomacher is heavily trimmed with silver gilt and sequins. This beautifully preserved court gown is a wonderful example of rococo silks of Hogarth's England and will be on exhibit in the Wallace Gallery.

Other popular elements of rococo design were motifs and ideas from the Orient. The solid silver epergne lent by Colonial Williamsburg is an elaborate centerpiece made in London by Thomas Pitts in 1762. The epergne is a superbly crafted piece; the skillful integration of the rococo and chinoiserie elements in the design establish Pitts as an artist as well as a master craftsman. This rare piece was featured prominently in the chinoiserie cases of the Victoria and Albert exhibition and will also be in the Wallace Gallery.

The exhibition catalog contributes concise, informative descriptions of the hundreds of items in the exhibit, as well as several short essays on the rococo by various decorative art authorities. The library at collections has a copy of this significant scholarly work.

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