



What's Beneath Your Feet?

Georgian Guidebooks

In the Georgian times the middle and upper classes began to travel. The really rich would take what was known as 'The Grand Tour' around crumbling, romantic Italy and Greece. Others travelled around Britain, searching out the 'untamed', the 'natural' and the 'wild'. It was a time when the countryside began to be mythologised and romanticised, where the poor were 'noble savages', living in rustic splendour in their picturesque cottages.

What prompted this romantic view? There was certainly a wish to escape the rapid industrialisation of Britain, the new world of factories and progress. The loss of America and the wars with France had also stimulated a new type of patriotism. The wish for a simple, 'back to nature' lifestyle was reflected in a variety of ways, such as dress, where a freer, more informal style was worn.

As more people journeyed the road less travelled, for example adventuring into the Lake District or the Highlands and Islands of Scotland, an appetite for recording and documenting what one saw began. This became the guidebook. One of the first guidebooks was by Thomas Pennant who published his *Tour in Scotland* in 1772.

The early guidebooks would describe an area in detail and would often have engravings of notable landmarks and ruins. Walking was an important part of the guidebook's early beginnings, and authors would tramp around the country discovering Roman remains and bottomless lochs for their readers.

Improved transport networks also played a significant part in the guidebook's emergence: new turnpike roads cut journey times in half.

Walking suddenly became fashionable; no longer something poor people did to get from A to B. Some people ridiculed the middle and upper classes for their new found enthusiasm for picking up a stick and getting muddy. Critics felt the countryside, thick with vagabonds and thieves, was no place for a gentleman.

Nevertheless touring and walking caught on: aristocrats had their portraits painted as intrepid ramblers, clutching their all-important guidebooks. Women too ventured out into the landscape. The character Elizabeth Bennet in Jane Austen's 1813 *Pride and Prejudice* is defined by her love of walking, which reflects her independent and romantic nature. When Elizabeth and her aunt and uncle tour Derbyshire they are very much representative of their period: the middle classes breathing in the wild air, experiencing the countryside afresh.