In the English Landscape:
An Interdisciplinary Study Abroad Travel Course

Shakespeare said it: “All the world’s a stage and every man must play his part.” Viewed this way, history is a drama played out by living persons on a “stage” that is the landscape where they live. Every generation inherits a landscape already structured by generations before it, and no set of actors is truly free to redesign the stage completely. At the same time, some generations modify their landscapes more dramatically than others, and the trend over time has been toward ever more profound manipulation. The motives for change differed widely: some landscape alterations aimed at protecting order and tradition, while others purposely fed accelerating transformations. Finally, whatever any generation planned, unanticipated consequences usually interfered to produce outcomes (for good or ill) that nobody intended.

At the end of a long period of feudal organization, land was the lynchpin of early English culture. Land conveyed wealth, power, social status, and moral authority on a tiny class of owners called the landed gentry. Over time economic pressures, private ambitions, religious and political turmoil, and the rise of a science-based worldview stimulated changes in how English gentry used their land, ornamented their landscapes, and exploited economic opportunities. Land that once had been managed for the benefit of stable local communities increasingly was dedicated to private interests, economic rationalization, cash revenue, and social display. These changes in the role of the landed gentry profoundly shaped the English landscape itself, which in turn influenced the lives of common Englishmen who owned no land at all. To understand how such changes came about, these two interlocking questions will inform the course: 1) How did the landscape direct the efforts of human actors? 2) How did the actions and ambitions of human actors in turn affect the landscape?

Taught during Maymester in even-numbered years, this class begins with two days of intensive lecture preparation followed by three weeks in England experiencing and studying built and natural landscapes, industrial sites, and history. Following brief looks at prehistoric and Roman foundations, we begin building the modern landscape with medieval agriculture and manorial life. We explore the rise of the country gentry, the landscape garden movement and the wars of religion in the 17th century, scientific inquiry, the Enlightenment, and the rationalization of the rural economy in the 17th and 18th centuries, urbanization and industrialization, global plant exploration, and the Darwinian revolution in the 19th century, and several threads of reaction, reform, and renewal into the early 20th century. Thoroughly interdisciplinary in nature, this course links social and political development with changing land-use patterns, environmental history, horticulture, aesthetic and ornamental designs, scientific discoveries and technological
innovations, all the while keeping in focus the two central questions linking culture and society with the landscape itself.

Because this is a study abroad course and because the landscape is a key player, we emphasize the importance of a “sense of place,” actually experiencing the remnant or restored landscapes as artifacts that embody the interactions between people and the land. Students of landscape architecture and horticulture, environmental history, history of science and technology, and cultural history all will find exciting points of connection. Our pre-travel classroom preparation will introduce essential components of social, political, economic, and scientific history, all tied together with a time-line to help keep the threads separate but related. Students with a general interest in history, horticulture, or landscape architecture will find it easy to get a working grasp of the central issues. (Nobody will be strong in all areas!) Background information on key actors, places we will visit, and important events or developments are provided in a course study guide provided to each student. Podcast narratives have been developed for many of the sites we visit; in other cases the course instructors will provide detailed on-site orientation in person. While in England, class meetings will help students integrate seemingly disparate experiences. Study abroad always generates much of its value from the experience of “being there.” The places we visit and the questions we will pose promise to create a lasting impression not only about England but about how to really “look at” another country. At the same time, the academic content of this course is demanding. Students must work through as much material as any 3-hour semester course, and they will write a final exam at the conclusion of the class. The course is cross-listed as History 45000, Horticulture 45000, and Landscape Architecture 45000, and students may seek credit under any of those titles. An honors option is available for students wishing to contract for honors credits.