

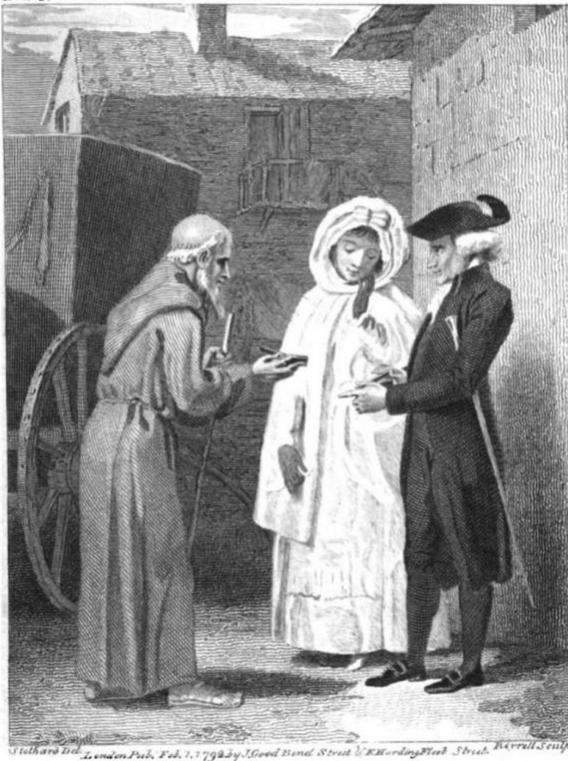
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The Digital Encyclopedia of British Sociability in the Long Eighteenth Century

## Hôtel d'Angleterre at Calais (The)

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### Keywords

France

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### Abstract

The Hôtel d'Angleterre at Calais with its proprietor Monsieur Dessein, which appears at the beginning of Laurence Sterne's *Sentimental Journey* (1768), is by no means a fictitious space but was a well-known institution, popular among English travellers to the continent, who praised the quality of accommodation, architecture, and service. Sterne's writing immortalized the hotel and its owner to an extent that numerous travellers followed in Yorick's footsteps and visited this establishment, enthusing about the remise door and even enquiring after Sterne's room, which became a tourist attraction. The Hôtel d'Angleterre and Dessein figure not only in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century guidebooks and travel writings but also in novels and plays referencing Sterne, the solitary Yorick, as well as his sociable encounters in and near the hotel.

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Subsequent to the success of Laurence Sterne's *Sentimental Journey Through France and Italy* (1768), the Hôtel d'Angleterre at Calais, which was run by Monsieur Dessein and is featured in the first pages of Sterne's novel, enjoyed considerable popularity among travellers.

1 Several short episodes, set at the Hôtel d'Angleterre, exemplify a specific mode of Sternean sentimental sociability. Yorick, central character and narrator, struggles to overcome his essential aloneness by communicating his sensations to other human beings in the face of obstacles which 'amount to a total impossibility'.<sup>2</sup> Among the characters with whom he engages in conversation in the private and public spaces of the hotel are the monk, later the lady in front of the remise door, and the landlord, Monsieur Dessein, from whom he buys a coach.<sup>3</sup> Sterne himself had travelled to France from 1762 to 1764, and again in 1765 and 1766. In his wake came enthusiastic readers searching for traces of Yorick's fleeting encounters. Dessein and his hotel appear in travel writings, journals, and fictional accounts, which reference the same public and private spaces (the hotel, Yorick's supposed room, the remise door, the convent), characters (the landlord, the friar, the lady), and objects (the snuff-box).

Prior to Sterne's publication of *A Sentimental Journey*, the hotel was occasionally mentioned by travellers. In his *Observations on the Customs and Manners of the French Nation* (1766) Philip Thicknesse wrote:

The Hôtel d'Angleterre, kept by Mons. Dessin, in this town, is a very elegant hotel, and you will find here, good provisions, good wine, a decent landlord, and a reasonable bill. It is called the Hôtel d'Angleterre, because it was opened, in some measure, by the liberality of some Englishman of rank and fashion, in consequence of the very grievous hardships imposed upon Mons. Dessin, by the proprietor of the Silver Lion, Mons. Grandsire.<sup>4</sup>

The events alluded to had occurred a few years earlier when Dessein, being the lessee of another inn, The Silver Lion, found himself in a situation of rivalry with its owner, Grandsire. More than once, fires broke out and the inn eventually burned down. Subsequently, Dessein, who did not aim to rebuild the inn but to buy a hotel in rue Royale<sup>5</sup> instead, 'for the Accommodation of Gentlemen passing between England and France',<sup>6</sup> managed to obtain subscriptions from the English. Further details can be gleaned from William Cole, who travelled to Paris and back in 1765: 'I remained at his [Dessein's] Inn, which was new built, & was a fine large Quadrangle, with most sumptuous Apartments & elegantly furnished: &, which was preferable to all, the Master of it a very civil & obliging Man.'<sup>7</sup> Cole describes the Hôtel d'Angleterre, which belonged to the coaching network, as a place of encounter with other English travellers (358-360). In the later eighteenth century, the terms 'inn' and 'hotel' were used interchangeably in English and often without clear differentiation, although the hotel as a type of accommodation for travellers was considered more elegant and more exclusive. In France, a 'hôtel' denoted an aristocratic mansion in town, a public building, a high-class building offering accommodation; these are among the meanings listed in the fifth edition of the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française*.<sup>8</sup> The French term 'hôtellerie' also refers

to places housing travellers (*Dictionnaire*, 697).

Accommodation is referenced throughout *Sentimental Journey*, starting with a hotel dinner and ending with an encounter with a *fille de chambre* at an inn. Combining elements of travelogue and novel, Sterne's text makes no reference to the magnificence of Dessein's establishment, remarked upon by other tourists, but centres on one traveller's (that is, Yorick's) personal encounters. By mentioning a popular hotel, Sterne fulfilled the generic expectations of a travelogue (which however are ignored throughout most of his book), while the descriptions of personal encounters and individual experience paid homage to the new genre of the novel. On the one hand, the episodic descriptions of sociable human interaction promoted the fashionable sentimentalism with its focus on emotions,<sup>9</sup> inviting readers to observe this form of interaction; on the other hand, Sterne frequently shows the absurd aspects of this sentimentalism, its labyrinthine complications as well as superficialities. Sterne's sentimental sociability follows a specific pattern by including very few protagonists at a time, characters previously unknown to one another, and often a spontaneous and intense emotional involvement, at least on the narrator's side. In the framework of the novel, the initial encounters are major events, yet they occur within the time span of little more than one hour.

Dessein himself is no central figure in *Sentimental Journey*. In comparison with other Sternean characters, he has two important features: he is not fictitious and he is no sentimental character in the style of the mourning Maria of Moulins. Yorick's most important human encounters in Calais (the monk, the lady) are involuntarily facilitated by Dessein, who provides a room, which the monk visits, and whose dawdling with the keys allows Yorick to initiate an interaction with the lady outside the remise door. For a hotel-keeper, begging and amorous affairs on the premises were presumably undesirable but not out of the ordinary. In Sterne's fragmented tale, Dessein neither embodies a grand principle such as the liberty symbolized by the starling, nor does he display the overt sentimentality of Maria or the narrator's own emotions; he is a polite, astute, and skilled businessman. If, according to [Samuel Johnson](#), the genre of the novel generally deals with love,<sup>10</sup> then *A Sentimental Journey* often fulfils this criterion, yet by turning a living (and known!) personality, and a businessman, into a literary character, Sterne also points at the possibilities of realism inherent in the new genre.

One reason for the Hôtel d'Angleterre's popularity as a shrine to Sterne lay in the fact that it was on the route of many British travellers who crossed the channel to travel through France. It quickly became 'an item on the tourist agenda', like his character Maria, who figures both in *Tristram Shandy* and in *A Sentimental Journey*.<sup>11</sup> Another enthusiastic visitor was [Hester Thrale Piozzi](#) in 1775: 'The Inn at this Place kept by Dessein is the most magnificent I ever saw'.<sup>12</sup> Her French journal mentions 'an excellent Dinner which a Capuchin Fryar enlivened by his company', whose presence obviously enabled her party to reenact their reading of Sterne, and after being informed of the history of the friar's life, they even have the chance to visit the convent (71). This opportunity for enjoying spontaneous sociable reenactments of Yorick's conversations in their authentic place constituted a continuous attraction for travellers.

It is interesting to note that Thicknesse mentioned the Hôtel d'Angleterre and its landlord again eleven years later in *A Year's Journey Through France, and Part of Spain* (1777),<sup>13</sup> describing a Mons. Dessein who exchanged money and had become wealthy. Once the novelty of the new hotel had worn off, descriptions seemed to take an increased interest in the landlord, like Frederick Reynolds's, who travelled to France in 1782 aged 17 and wrote a journal from which he quotes in his *Reminiscences* (1826), including a description of Dessein brimming with Sternean overtones:

I was full of Sterne and this was Sterne's Dessein. I desired eagerly to converse with him about the former, but knew not how to commence.

At length, however, *apropos des bottes*, as the French say, I asked him, without preface, whether he remembered "Monsieur Sterne?" The good old *aubergiste* smiled, and replying in the affirmative, one word led to another, till his presence being suddenly required elsewhere, he hastily concluded in the following manner: -

"Your countryman, Monsieur Sterne, von great, von vary great man, and he carry me vid him to posterity. He gain moche money by his Journey of Sentiment - mais moi - I - make more through de means of dat, than he, by all his ouvrages reunies - Ha, ha!" Then, as if in imitation of Sterne, he laid his forefinger on my breast, and said in a voice lowered almost to a whisper, "*Qu'en pensez vous?*" and then departed.<sup>14</sup>

Like other travellers, Reynolds enjoyed good company at the dinner table, as is documented in a passage stretching over several pages (181-184).

Another feature of the Hôtel d'Angleterre, which incited the imagination, was Yorick's supposed room, which was visited, for example, by the Polish traveller Krystyn Lach-Szyrma. In Poland in the 1780s, a group of Sterneans was gathered in Princess Izabela Czartoryska's famous Puławy circle, where contemporary English literature was read, Sterne being one of the authors, while the Princess herself was a devoted Sternean. Her children's tutor was Lach-Szyrma, who accompanied her son on a journey to Britain and mentions reading Sterne's *Sentimental Journey* and *Tristram Shandy* in Calais. They not only stayed at Dessein's hotel but were offered Sterne's room, where Lach-Szyrma mused about the famous writer's aesthetics.<sup>15</sup> Thus Dessein's hotel attracted tourists by enabling them to engage in posthumous contact with the celebrated author. Sterne's room in particular became a place of pilgrimage. In 1823 *The Ladies' Monthly Museum* carried the following notice: 'LAURENCE STERNE - The apartment in Dessein's-hotel at Calais, in which Sterne is said to have written his celebrated *Sentimental Journey*, remains in is original state; and there is on the door the inscription: "THIS IS STERNE'S ROOM".'<sup>16</sup> Percy Fitzgerald's biography of Sterne (1864) also confirms its existence and its popularity among tourists but raises doubts about its authenticity, explaining that 'the famous Sentimental Inn' had burnt down shortly after Sterne's death;<sup>17</sup> a new Sterne chamber had been 'invented to satisfy English tourists'.<sup>18</sup>

The Hôtel d'Angleterre was not only mentioned in travelogues but also featured in several of the literary imitations of Sterne, which often took the shape of humorous narratives. *A Sentimental Journey* became a model for fictional texts describing sentimental trips or 'Shandean pseudo-journeys' to France, not only in the years after Sterne's death but well into the 1820s (Newbould, *Adaptations*, 36, 70). A few examples will suffice to show how the fictitious Shandean travellers fared at the Hôtel d'Angleterre. The episodes recycled the same ingredients as the travelogues: a friar, a convent, the Sterne room, the remise door, Sternean digressions, and sentiment.

Foote's comedy *A Trip to Calais* (1778) centres on a love plot: a young couple, Jenny and Dick, escape to France to get married; soon they are pursued by the bride's relatives. Act I, set at the Hôtel d'Angleterre, features a landlord called Tromfort (obviously Dessein), who boasts of his wealth, of his house built from English money, and of the income generated from changing English into French currency. The play also incorporates a Capuchin friar and a convent, where Jenny is staying for some time. It is the setting in which Foote is more interested than in the sentimental style, which he largely eschews.

Samuel Pratt's two-volume *Travels for the Heart: Written in France* (1777) is much closer to the literary style and narrative pattern of *A Sentimental Journey*, with a narrator whose digressions imitate Sterne's. Much of the first volume parodies the conventions of the travelogue, focusing on the trip to Dover, where the narrator eventually considers giving up his journey, thus mocking the conventions of the genre. Having nevertheless finally made it to Calais, he meets Dessein and a Franciscan friar, who invites him to the convent before the journey continues.<sup>19</sup>

Finally, *Maria; or a Shandean Journey of a Young Lady Through Flanders and France, During the Summer of 1822 by my Uncle Oddy* (1823) also mentions the hotel in Calais.<sup>20</sup> Uncle Oddy (an allusion to Uncle Toby) takes a young woman, Maria, and her companion to France and Belgium. On their return journey they visit the courtyard of Dessein's hotel, yet instead of reenacting the encounter between Yorick and the lady outside the remise door, they witness an unsentimental argument about money, which disillusiones the tourists (139-143).

Sternean travellers in search of sentiment often enjoyed and reenacted Sternean moments together while visiting the Hôtel d'Angleterre. In most of the fictional imitations and travelogues, the original sentimentalism of the Sternean kind has given way to less sentimentally charged interactions, to emotionally less intense encounters and more ordinary exchanges on the practical side of travelling. The hotel is represented as a public space, e.g., as hosting convivial evenings, while the by now famous proprietor embodies an economic success he is proud to display to tourists. If early descriptions tend to be more enthusiastic, a disillusionment is discernible in later writing. For some travellers, the tourism, which had grown into a money-spinner for the landlord, seemed to devalue the sentimental experience.

1. My thanks go to Jakub Lipski for sharing and discussing material relevant for this entry.

2. M-C. Newbould, 'Solitary Confinement, Aloneness, and Sociability in Sterne', <em>Literature & History</em> (vol. 32, no. 2, 2023), p. 129-143 (131, 133); Laurence Sterne, <em>A Sentimental Journey Through France and

Italy

, ed. Graham Petrie, with an introduction by A. Alvarez (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967), p. 33.

3. On the affinities of Sterne's fiction with eighteenth-century conversation see Alexis Tadié, *Sterne's Whimsical Theatres of Language: Orality, Gesture, Literacy* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003).
  4. Philip Thicknesse, *Observations on the Customs and Manners of the French Nation, in a Series of Letters* (London: Davis, 1766), p. 2-3.
  5. *Letters of Laurence Sterne*, ed. Lewis Parry Curtis (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1935), p. 177-178, note 4 to Letter 95.
  6. *Public Advertiser*, 9 March 1765, p. 4.
  7. William Cole, *A Journal of my Journey to Paris in the Year 1765*, ed. Francis Griffin Stokes, with an Introduction by Helen Waddell (London: Constable, 1931), p. 358.
  8. *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française. Tome premier (A-K), revu, corrigé et augmenté par l'Académie elle-même. Cinquième édition* (Paris: Smits, 1798), p. 697: HÔTEL. s.m. Grande maison d'un Prince, d'un grand Seigneur, d'une personne de qualité. *L'Hôtel de Condé*. *L'Hôtel de Conti*. *L'Hôtel des Ambassadeurs extraordinaires*. [...] On appelle *Hôtel de Ville*, la maison publique où l'on s'assemble d'ordinaire pour les affaires de la Ville; [...] HÔTEL, se dit aussi d'Une grande maison garnie. *L'Hôtel de Hollande*. *L'Hôtel de Venise*. *L'hôtel d'Angleterre*, etc. The *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française*, the authoritative dictionary of the French language, appeared in its first edition in 1694 and is in its ninth edition today.
  9. W. B. Gerard and M-C. Newbould, 'Introduction: *A Sentimental Journey*'s Critical Legacies' in W. B. Gerard and M-C. Newbould (eds.), *Laurence Sterne's A Sentimental Journey: A Legacy to the World* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2021), p. 1-20 (2); Jakub Lipski, 'The Masquerade Metaphor and the Paradoxes of Sentiment in *A Sentimental Journey*' in *Sterne, Tristram, Yorick: Tercentenary Essays on Laurence Sterne*, eds. Melvyn New, Peter de Voogd, and Judith Hawley (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2016) p. 187-199 (189).
  10. Samuel Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language* (London: Strahan, 1755), n.p.
  11. M-C. Newbould, *Adaptations of Sterne's Fiction: Sterneana, 1760-1840* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), p. 41.
  12. *The French Journals of Mrs. Thrale and Dr Johnson*, ed. Moses Tyson and Henry Guppy (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1932), p. 70.
  13. Philip Thicknesse, *A Year's Journey Through France, and Part of Spain*, 2 vols. (Bath: Cruttwell, 1777), vol. 1, p. 9-10.
  14. *The Life and Times of Frederick Reynolds. Written by Himself*, 2 vols. (London: Colburn, 1826), vol. 1, p. 180-181.
  15. Jakub Lipski, *Re-Reading the Eighteenth-Century Novel: Studies in Reception* (New York: Routledge, 2021), p. 64-65, 71; Lipski references the following text: Krystyn Lach-Szyrma, *Anglia i Szkocja: Przypomnienia z podróży roku 1820-1824 odbytej*, ed. Paweł Hertz (Warsaw: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1981), p. 14-15.
  16. *The Ladies' Monthly Museum* (vol. 18, December 1823), 'Intelligence Relative to Literature and the Arts', p. 334-335 (335).
  17. Percy Fitzgerald, *The Life of Laurence Sterne*, 2 vols. (London: Chapman & Hall, 1864), vol. 2, p. 275-289 (281).
  18. Samuel Foote, *A Trip to Calais; and The Capuchin* (London: Cadell, 1778).
  19. Courtney Melmouth [Samuel Jackson Pratt], *Travels for the Heart: Written in France*, 2 vols. (London: printed for John Wallis, 1777). Further episodes contain more information about stays and encounters in hotels.
  20. *Maria; or, a Shandean Journey of a Young Lady Through Flanders and France, During the Summer of 1822 by my Uncle Oddy* (London: Hatchard and Son, 1823), p. 156.
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## Further Reading

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[Dessein and his hotel \(1768\)](#)

[Dessein's Hotel as Sentimental Site \(1823\)](#)