There are many different titles that one might give to a course on British history between 1775 and 1817 (the dates of Jane Austen’s life). These years saw the revolutions in America and France, the loss of one empire in North America and the acquisition of another in South Asia. Nearer to home Britain saw the intensification of economic change that has come to be called “the industrial revolution.” During these years Britain was almost constantly at war, especially during the struggle against Napoleonic France. These conflicts required the mobilization of men and money on an entirely new scale. Yet there are good reasons for titling this period “Jane Austen’s England.” Jane Austen is, of course, a highly esteemed novelist. Her books helped to produce a revolution in the form of the novel. In her novels she engaged with some of the most pressing moral and political issues of her day. Yet in making use of Jane Austen as a portal to her period, I am shifting the focus from the usual concentration on high politics, diplomacy, and military conflict, to an examination of how people experienced the challenges raised during these years. Austen’s novels and letters pose questions about topics not usually discussed in histories of the period: does private life have a history? what impact did war have upon domestic life? how did women participate in the life of the day? what issues were most important to men and women in their daily lives? Our goal in this course is not to displace the more traditional issues raised by the era of revolution and war, but rather to broaden our understanding of what constitutes the history of this period.

The first five meetings of the seminar will provide students with an introduction to the British history between 1775 and 1820. We will also read several sources together in order to practice the skills that will be required once you begin your research. At all times students are expected to join in class discussions.

History 407 is a seminar intended to provide students with an experience of “doing history.” Students must never lose track of the goal of the course, the production of an 18-20 page paper based in part upon the use of original sources. The University of Oregon library provides access to a wide variety of materials for studying the history of late eighteenth and early-nineteenth-century Britain. It possesses a set of the British Parliamentary Debates. Many sources are on-line, such as the Eighteenth-Century Collection On-line (ECCO) and the Burney newspaper collection. The library possesses microfilm of eighteenth-century regional newspapers and of the London Times (from 1785). It also has on the shelves many of the periodicals of the day (the Edinburgh Review and the Quarterly Review), as well as numerous memoirs, diaries, and biographies. The Burdett Collection (in the Rare Books room) is an outstanding collection of pamphlets on controversies of the period. Your paper must involve a significant amount of research in at least one of these sources.

The task of writing a seminar paper can be seen as involving several distinct stages. The first challenge is formidable. It is to choose a topic for your research. The best way to begin is to define a hypothesis that you want to test or a question that you want to answer. In doing so you want to find a topic that is not too “big.” Remember that you only have 18-20 pages to work with, and less than ten weeks in which to write your paper. You also want to make sure that sources exist that will permit you to address the topic of your choice. Although the course is entitled “Jane Austen’s England,” you do not have to write about Jane Austen. Neither are you limited to “England” as the focus of your paper. You can consider other parts of the British Isles, as well as the lands that became the British Empire. Students
are free to select topics from such areas as social, economic, religious, or military history, just so long as
the focus is upon the years between 1775 and 1820. I have offered a list of possible paper topics below,
but you are not limited to the items listed there. The only requirement is that you consult with me, no
later than the end of the second week of the term, about your choice of a topic.

Once you have selected your subject, you should begin reading secondary sources that will help you to
sharpen the focus of your research. You should also begin to use the on-line and library sources that will
provide the raw material for you to answer the question you have chosen to study. By the sixth week of
the term you should begin summarizing your research even as you continue your explorations. As you
write you will begin to see what paths lie open to you and what problems you are encountering. By
week 8 you should be able to come up with a rough draft of your paper, which you will then spend the
last weeks of the term refining.

Because you only have ten weeks in which to write your paper, I will be monitoring your progress
carefully. You are encouraged to visit me during my office hours to discuss your work, and you can send
me an e-mail if you encounter particular issues. I will also be scheduling one-on-one meetings with you
twice during the quarter. At the first of these meetings you will bring your research notes, and we will
discuss both the suitability of your sources to your topic and what to look for in your evidence. At the
second meeting you should bring 10-12 pages of rough draft for us to go over together. We will devote
the last class of the term to a discussion of the major issues raised by your papers. Each student will be
expected to come prepared to participate in the discussion with examples drawn from her or his own
project.

Students are expected to attend all classes and to make all appointments with the professor.
Unexplained absences will result in a substantial deduction from your grade.

Course Objectives:

In this History seminar we have a number of different objectives. First and foremost, I want you to
become familiar with the period we will be studying. This means not only learning such things as names,
dates, and major economic, political, or intellectual trends, but also seeking to understand what shaped
particular historical moments and exploring how people experienced them. In this class discussion will
be an important part of the learning experience. You will be expected to participate regularly with an
informed knowledge of the readings due that day. One of the ways we approach the subject is through
original sources, and in this course you will learn how to analyze and use such documents to build
historical arguments. You will be taught how to read carefully and critically. Our goal is to learn that
reading is not a passive activity, but rather one that requires constant alertness and a questioning mind.
In the paper you will be called upon to write in this class, you will be encouraged to develop the ability
to organize a carefully reasoned argument or thesis out of imperfect or conflicting documents. You will
be expected to develop a position and defend it with well-chosen evidence. These skills -- the analysis
of complex situations, reading with a critical eye, and the composition of well-developed essays -- will
serve you well as you look forward to life beyond the university.

Required readings:

  Jane Austen's Letters, ed. Deirdre Le Faye
  Paupers and Pig Killers, ed. Jack Ayers
  John Nicol, Mariner: Life and Adventures, ed. Tim Flannery
Additional secondary sources:

Janet Todd, *Jane Austen in Context*
John Mullan, *What Matters in Jane Austen*
Oliver MacDonagh, *Jane Austen: Real and Imagined Worlds*
Boyd Hilton, *A Mad, Bad, and Dangerous People*
Amanda Vickery, *The Gentleman’s Daughter*
E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*
Michael Turner, *The Age of Unease*
Linda Colley, *Britons*

Class schedule:

April 6 Introduction -- the “war of ideas”          movie: Persuasion

April 13 The world of the family and the role of letters
         Austen’s Letters, 1-181

April 20 Women’s lives in early 19th century England
         Austen’s Letters, 182-366

April 27 Rural life and clerical concerns
         Holland Diary, 15-162

May 4   Social relations in rural England
         Holland Diary, 163-305

May 11 Student meetings with professor (bring notes to the meeting)

May 18 Looking beyond the middle classes
         Nicol Diary (entire)

May 25 Student meetings with professor (bring draft pages to the meeting)

June 1  No class (professor available for discussion during class time)

June 8  Student presentations

Possible paper topics: (students are encouraged to come up with his or her own topic)

Austen novels and the portrait of early 19th century life
the anti-slavery movement
conduct books and the construction of women’s lives
lower class radical movements in the early 19th century

what criminal records tell us about the lives of the poor in London

newspapers and the reporting of the wars against France

the Evangelical Movement (in relation to social or political life)

a comparison of two or three diaries from the period

the demand for the reform of Parliament

sickness and health in the early 19th century

the discussion of food in diaries, letters and the press

philanthropic activity and its motivation

tensions within “British” identity