

PICTURES OF SURREY

A REPORT ON MY TALK "THE PRESS IN THE GARDEN. REDISCOVERING FRANCES BURNEY'S
SURREY" (LEATHERHEAD LIBRARY, 25 OCTOBER 2022)

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Let us imagine for a moment what would have happened if Frances Burney had had her own Chawton House or Haworth parsonage. A location and a house to which the author's biography and work could be clearly and undisputedly linked. A place of the heart as much as 'a place of the book', so to speak, with which she could be readily associated in the collective imagination. Despite the actual unlikeliness of its occurrence, my literary fantasy seems far from idle, given that the interest in writers' house museums has been constantly growing. In fact, this widespread curiosity has slowly turned into a profitable industry in its own right, whose economic impact has come to be recognised by several stakeholders as all but marginal. For one, the white paper on *Robert Burns and the Scottish Economy* by Murray Pittock

(University of Glasgow)¹ presents the most recent, and perhaps the most detailed, study of a multi-layered cultural and socio-political phenomenon going far beyond poetry and Scotland, capable as it is of serendipitously combining today's constructions of nostalgia with the economic drives of a sector that is undeniably central not only to the nation's industry, but to Britain at large.

For a long time now, throughout my ongoing exploration of this geospatial and topologic thread of inquiry, I have been teased by an impish idea lingering at the back of my mind. Would it be possible, I have been wondering, to (re)build modern, transmedia, cultural and economic capital on and around Frances Burney by associating her life and work with at least some of the many places, scattered between England and France, where she lived? Unfortunately, it is impossible to achieve this goal by turning to the houses where Burney resided. Regrettably, they have all been casualties of

¹ [Media 705140 smxx.pdf](#) . Last date of consultation 9 November 2022.

mischievous real-estate interference, due to their being converted, dismantled, or even destroyed by either fatal accident or human action.

Yet, another route may become feasible if only we step away from the micro-level of the house space to the higher vantage point of region and place. After all, the locations where Burney lived are all out there, still quite accessible. In fact, they are located in easily recognisable, much loved, and often culturally connoted geographical areas, well-known to devoted readers and non-experts alike. For one, many critics have remarked that the central districts of London are the true narrative engine of the novels *Evelina; or, the History of a Young Lady's Entrance into the World* (1778) and *Cecilia; or, Memoirs of an Heiress* (1782). Likewise, we are well aware of the extraordinary literary heritage associated with Bath, where Burney and her family lived in the 1810s, until the death of her husband in 1818. The names of the notable residents of this city weave a truly fabulous web, spanning William Beckford to Mary Shelley, if we just consider Burney's lifetime.

Inevitably, my research into the 1790s and Burney's work eventually led me away from the city to Surrey, where the newly married d'Arblays met, got married, and lived until about 1802, the year of their deeply traumatic cross-Channel move. More real than Laputa and much closer to us than Robinson Crusoe's island, Burney's Surrey still is, just as it was, unquestionably blessed by the combined forces of man



Figure 1. Ian Capper/Flint Cottage. Free Domain. URL: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Flint_Cottage_-_geograph.org.uk_-_1356682.jpg

and nature. If we simply scan through its mainstream, best-known associations, this area is bejewelled by, among others, the celebrated beauty of scenic Box Hill, a location of unmistakable Austenian flavour, and the solid brick-and-flint elegance of the homonymous *Flint Cottage* (**Fig. 1**), the picturesque edifice where the acclaimed Victorian novelist George Meredith lived for over four decades.

It is here, within the Mole Valley --right at the heart of the almost mythical triangulation of "English verdure, English culture, English comfort" extolled in *Emma's* perfect geo-cultural tricolon-- that in the early 1790s there found sanctuary, in the blood-stained aftermath of the French Revolution, a colony of notable French émigrés. This fashionable group of *esprits*, politicians, and aristocrats included such lions as the famous Prince de Talleyrand and the notorious Madame de Staël, as well as the less glamorous, but certainly no less interesting (at least, to some eyes), Alexandre d'Arblay, a gallant, yet penniless officer who would be destined to soon become Burney's future "cara sposo." (Please, forgive the fittingly regional quotation from the insufferably smug Mrs E[lton] in *Emma*, whose character is demolished by her show of linguistic incompetence.)

I make no secret of the fact that being able to finally present --perhaps I should say test?-- part of my Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions project *Opening Romanticism: Reimagining Romantic Drama for New*

*Audiences*² in the places where Burney's 1790s plays were prepared for the stage and later revised for possible publication has been one of the most rewarding aspects of my research thus far. Many of the locations where the newly married d'Arblays lived and where they built their dream home, *Camilla Cottage*, are within easy walking distance for the curious and luckily, they can still be visited.



Figure 2. The gate. ©Francesca Saggini

My devoted wanderings in the creative footsteps of Burney led me to a nondescript, unsigned gate just off the Old London Road (**Fig. 2**), the passageway that



Figure 3. Norbury Park Mansion from the Park. ©Francesca Saggini

Susanna Burney must have used many a time when she made her way on foot to Norbury Park, the Locks'

handsome mansion just a

² A new framework to analyse and disseminate Burney's plays (Grant agreement ID: 892230).



Figure 5. The church. ©Francesca Saggini

short trek away (**Fig.3**). This imposing neoclassical residence still towers, in its candid splendour and in contempt of the passing of time, atop the hill



Figure 4. The Locks' pew in Mickleham's church. ©Francesca Saggini

overlooking the village of Mickleham. I identified the ornate box pew where the Locks sat at prayer (**Fig. 4**, in middle ground) in the church of St Michael and All Angels, also in Mickleham (**Fig. 5**), the place of worship where Burney and d'Arblay celebrated their wedding ceremony. Similarly, I was thrilled to spot the house sign for a modern-day *High Camilla* (**Fig. 6**), a to me truly exciting domestic memento from the past,

located on the elegant main street of the delightful



Figure 6. Sign to a modern-day villa in Westhumble.
©Francesca Saggini

hamlet of Westhumble

(formerly, West Humble).

Crucially, the toponym

"Camilla" directly refers to

the fruits of Burney's

remarkable literary industriousness in Surrey, namely

the novel *Camilla; or, A Picture of Youth* (1796),

that she intended as a shrewd, yet as it happens ill-

fated, editorial attempt to secure "a little portion

to our Bambino [her newly-born son, Alexander]."³ **Fig.**

7 shows how creatively

prolific Burney's

Surrey years actually

were when compared with

the whole span of her

very long life. One

novel, at least three

serious dramas, either

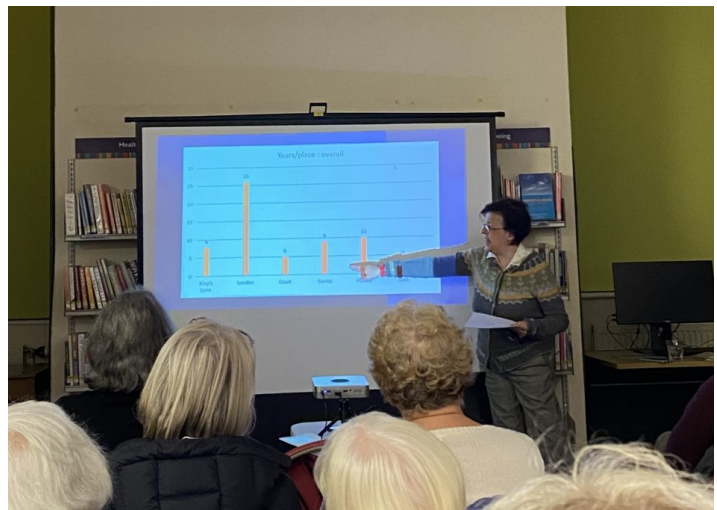


Figure 7. Slide from my presentation. Courtesy of Leatherhead Library.

³ Frances Burney, *The Journals and Letters of Fanny Burney, 1791-1840*. Vol. III. *Great Bookham 1793-1797*. Ed. Joyce Hemlow, with Patricia Boutilier and Althea Douglas. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973, p. 124.

in complete form or sketched, three comedies, and a pamphlet. The ratio to the whole of the Burney works is evident in the slide I am commenting in the relevant picture.

The relationship between Burney's places of residence in Surrey and her literary production -- what I refer to as Burney's "press in the garden," to signify her astonishingly creative prolificness while residing in those amene neighbourhoods -- were explored in the talk I gave at Leatherhead Library (Surrey) on 25 October 2022. The event was one of the outcomes of my ongoing collaboration with Julian Pooley (Public Services and Engagement Manager, Surrey History Centre), Craig Jones and Sarah Haynes (Surrey Library Service). On the occasion, the Burney Society UK was represented by two Surrey residents, Miriam al-Jamil and Trudie Messent, respectively the chairperson and the treasurer of our Society. Miriam and I could not help noticing --and commenting on-- the truly remarkable lack of a copy of *Camilla*, Burney's most obvious, as well as best-known, Surrey literary

product, on the display stand that was installed in the lecture room (**Fig. 8**). The librarian explained



Figure 8. Leatherhead Library's new Burney acquisitions. ©Francesca Saggini

that their supplier had not been able to find a single copy of this novel in time for purchase. A melancholy sign of the times and, sadly, of the current Burney-related editorial market, too! And, indeed, another spur, if at all necessary, for me to invest

in what appears to be a timely and necessary rediscovery of the place-poetics nexus in Burney.

On the occasion of my talk, a photography competition was launched (**Fig. 9**), whose aim is to make the local residents rediscover their oft-forgotten Burneyan heritage. Therefore, the warm invitation I issued



Figure 9. Courtesy of Leatherhead Library.

to the local friends of Burney, including the enthusiastic members of the very active Mickleham & Westhumble Local History Group who have been supporting my field research all along, was to grab their smartphones and shoot! No professional expertise or specialised camera equipment is required for this particular competition, with a closing date of 22 January 2023. In fact, the whole idea behind the project is to move back (perhaps move up?) Burney closer to our present time, and to 'open up', as per the subtitle of my MSCA project, her life, connections, and work to new non-academic, yet engaged audiences. If possible, my final aim would be to help promote among these communities the idea of Frances Burney as a benign *genius loci*, albeit a kind of home-y, next-door one. There is nothing sacred or canonical in the connections between a community, an author, and an author's work that I aim to recreate. In truth, the beautiful Surrey hills, their greenery, and the historic buildings scattered among those conservation villages are still alive with, and breathe, Burney. They are places animated by an all-

pervasive, quotidian, and absolutely peerless Burneyan spirit. In this exquisitely circadian cycle of nature, the Mole Valley villas, the quirky railway stations, even the time-honoured churches still used for daily worship hark back to --in fact, they transubstantiate-- whole pages from Burney's *Diaries and Letters* and her fiction, populated as they are by the phantoms of both real people and imaginary characters, all inextricably part of, and even now benevolently haunting, this splendid Burneyland of the mind.

The next episode in my exciting collaboration with the Surrey History Centre and Surrey Libraries will take place on 2 February 2023, once again courtesy of Leatherhead Library. Once more, it will be the fascinating connection between Burney and Surrey, and between an author's life places and their poetics, that will hold sway. This time round, the audience will have the added benefit of a gallery of pictures to accompany my talk because the entries to our photography competition will also be on display in the library. Thus, it only remains for me to close

these notes with an appropriate, home-grown cliff-hanger, leading on to the next volume of my very own Surrey novel: "Camilla scarce breathed from impatience for the important moment... ."4

*** Prof. Francesca Saggini is Principal Investigator in the EU-financed MSCA project Opening Romanticism: Reimagining Romantic Drama for New Audiences (Grant agreement ID: 892230), based at the University of Edinburgh. She is also a member of the Burney Society UK committee.*

⁴ *Explicit*, vol. IV, bk. viii in Frances Burney, *Camilla; or, A Picture of Youth*. Eds. Edward A. Bloom and Lillian D. Bloom. Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, [1992] 2009, p. 693.