

HERITAGE ON THE WEB:
BUILDING A GATEWAY TO EUROPEAN CULTURAL HERITAGE

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Over two hundred years ago the Scottish lawyer and famous biographer of the English writer Dr Samuel Johnson set out by coach to visit Germany. In his journal for Monday 23 July 1764 he wrote:

'I have been at Berlin some weeks. It is the finest city I have ever seen. It is situated on a beautiful plain, and like London has its river. The streets are spacious and the houses well built. I have been presented to the Queen and all the princes and princesses, but have not yet had an opportunity of being presented to the King ... I am determined to see him before I leave'

In fact despite trying very hard to arrange a presentation to Frederick the Great, Boswell never managed to meet the King.

In his journal for Thursday 11 October 1764 he records that he is in Dresden:

'I went and saw the Elector's Library. It is put up in four different rooms, part of a superb building called the Zwinger. It is numerous, and has a good many manuscripts. But what can a man see of a library from being one day in it? ... I must remark that at Dresden strangers pay monstrously dear for seeing the fine things, which is shameful when they are the property of a prince.' (1)

I am quoting from Boswell's journal partly because he is a hero of mine and partly because it points to some of the problems which travellers have had to face over the years in gaining first-hand experience of European culture. James Boswell travelled hundreds of miles over bad roads across Europe on what was then called The Grand Tour. Luckily for him, his family was wealthy enough to allow him a great deal of time and money to carry this out. Even then, as you have heard, he complains about the high charges he has had to pay in order to visit the Elector's Library at Dresden. And he hasn't the time to see anything more than a fraction of the riches which the library contains.

For those of us without large amounts of time and money to travel and to study the World Wide Web offers the possibility of overcoming some of the problems which Boswell faced.

We don't have to spend weeks on dusty roads travelling across Europe – we can simply click onto the Web.

However, the task which faces cultural historians and web designers is a large one and it's not easy. We are at the very beginning of a process which we need to get right if we are going to achieve our goal of providing access to Europe's cultural heritage to a wide public. What should our ideal be?

We need information on-line which is:

- trustworthy
- well-written
- available in several languages
- regularly checked and updated where necessary
- presented in a lively and attractive manner
- giving information for the non-specialist with tourist and travel details
- giving information for the specialist, with additional depth and details as required
- cross-linked with search facilities across many European sites
- free of charges
- free of advertising (though not necessarily sponsorship)
- accessible through a gateway which groups information and sites together

At Heritage on the Web we have made a start in trying to solve these problems and to provide examples for others to follow. We have built a web gateway which provides access to historic houses in the United Kingdom. With the support of the British Government and of the private owners of great houses we are building web sites and on-line cultural resources which provide both tourist information and scholarly details.

Our modern Boswell, travelling at the millennium, will not only be able to fly to his destination, he will be able to follow links to book his hotel on-line, send an e-mail to Dr Johnson and check the public appointments of Frederick the Great. Well not quite. But we can use the new communications and information technology to provide a quality and extent of access to European culture which has never before been possible.

Footnotes

- 1 Quoted from *Boswell on the Grand Tour; Germany and Switzerland, 1764*, edited by Frederick A. Pottle, William Heinemann, London, 1953.