



THE REGENCY ERA

England and the World in the Late Georgian and Regency Era

The reigns of George III and George IV encompass the elegant, glittering world of the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth. The transition embraces the Napoleonic Wars, the madness of George III, the War of 1812 (1812-1814) and the Regency (1811-1820). This period, from the beginning of the war with France in 1793 to George IV's ascension to the throne in 1820, illustrates the vast change in England's economic and social face. England moved swiftly from the artisan/cottage industry firmly into the industrial revolution and the fringes of the Victorian age and the British empire.

This time in history featured a wide gap between rich and poor, and at the same time, a rise in the merchant middle class. Merchants, insurers, bankers, and shipping companies all strengthened England's move toward the vast empire it was to become.



George IV

The haut ton played, and played hard. Beau Brummell rose to fame and then crashed in 1816 when he was forced to France to escape his creditors. Emma Hamilton catapulted from prostitute to Lady and became the lover of Horatio Nelson, England's most honored naval hero.

Lord Byron wrote darkly romantic poetry; Lady Caroline Lamb openly chased him then outraged society with her scathing novel, *Glenarvon*, which satirized Byron, Lady Melbourne, and Caroline's husband, who later became Queen Victoria's Lord Melbourne. The poet Shelley abandoned his wife to elope with Mary Godwin, daughter of Mary Wollstonecraft, to the Continent. The sixth Duke of Devonshire became a most eligible bachelor, renovated his estate, Chatsworth, and lived in Regency splendor.



Lord Byron

The Prince Regent spent a fortune redecorating his Brighton pavilion and Carleton House in London. The construction of Regent Street and Regent's Park began in 1816, only a small part of the grandiose and unrealized plan for transforming that part of London. The Regent's beloved daughter, Charlotte, married for love in 1816, then died in childbirth in 1817. Her husband, Prince Leopold, became the uncle and mentor of Princess Victoria, then took up the throne of Belgium.



Sea battle from the War of 1812

Britain fought a war with the United States (1812-1815); causes included British blockading of American ships. The U.S. army burned Toronto in 1812, and in retaliation, British troops burned Washington DC in 1814. Many historic sayings and songs emerged from this war: Frances Scott Key wrote the poem that was to become *The Star Spangled Banner* while watching the battle of Fort McHenry (1814) from a British vessel. The USS *Constitution* proved itself in battle and was nicknamed *Old Ironsides*. "Don't give up the ship," became a battle cry. In the 1814 Battle of New Orleans, actually fought after the war's end (word had not yet reached either army of the truce), Americans under Andrew Jackson caused heavy losses for the British army, including many veterans of the Peninsular War (1808-1814). The Duke of Wellington felt those losses as he gathered troops for the battle of Waterloo in June, 1815.

Napoleon Bonaparte of France rose from obscurity as an artillery officer to ultimately crown himself Emperor in 1804. He spread himself from Spain to Egypt to Russia, but was eventually defeated by the combined might of England, Russia, Prussia, and Austria. Lord Nelson stymied the French by destroying a good many of their ships at Alexandria, then he won the decisive naval victory at Trafalgar, at the price of his life.

General Arthur Wellesley, later Duke of Wellington, slowly but surely pushed Napoleon's forces back from Portugal to Spain and into France. The loss of life in Napoleon's army during his Russian campaign was devastating. At last, Napoleon abdicated, only to escape his confinement at Elba to begin his One Hundred Days, gathering French forces as he marched back to France. At Waterloo, Wellington was victorious, despite his misgivings, and Napoleon's power was broken for good.



Napoleon Bonaparte



The French Guillotine

French émigrés, those aristocrats who fled to England to avoid the guillotine, began returning to France in 1814-15, although many chose to remain in London. They had lived there, after all, for more than twenty years, and the France they had known was forever gone.

By the time the Prince Regent was crowned George IV, England was industrial, crowded, elegant, powerful, and troubled. Poverty and food prices soared, and in 1819, the Peterloo Massacre of protestors at St. Peter's field outraged the nation. The time was right for England to step into reform, empire, and the modern age.

Suggested Reading

For a general history of the Regency period and the Napoleonic Wars, the following books are recommended. Most provide excellent bibliographies for further research.

Robert Blakeney. *A Boy in the Peninsular War.* Presidio Press, 1989 (Blakeney's memoirs.)

Carolly Erickson. *Our Tempestuous Day.* William Morrow, 1986.

Ian Fletcher. *Wellington's Army.* 1996.

Celina Fox. *London: World City 1800-1840.* Yale UP and the Museum of London, 1992.

Philip Haythornthwaite. *British Cavalryman: 1792-1815 (Warrior Series),* 1994, reprint. 2000.

Christopher Hibbert. *George IV. (2. vols.),* 1973-74.

Christopher Hibbert. *Wellington: A Personal History.* Addison-Wesley, 1997.

Jane Aiken Hodge. *Passion and Principle: The Loves and Lives of Regency Women.* London, John Murray, 1996.

Joan Lock. *Tales From Bow Street.* Robert Hale, 1982.

Donald Low. *Thieves' Kitchen: The Regency Underworld.* 1957. (Dated, but entertaining.)

Rory Muir. *Britain and the Defeat of Napoleon: 1807-1815.* Yale UP, 1996. (Contains extensive bibliography).

Jac Weller. *Wellington in the Peninsula.* reprint. 1999.

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