

It is Christmas Eve, 1764. The eccentric, socialite, letter writer, antiquary and man of letters, Horace Walpole, publishes, with the London-based publisher Thomas Lowndes, 500 copies of a slim little novel, entitled *The Castle of Otranto, A Story*. Before we start to talk about this enormously influential text, it's important, I think, to consider its author – even though, as we shall see, the first edition of the text was published pseudonymously, that is, without any overt reference to the figure of Horace Walpole. On the screen, you'll see a slide outlining a few salient aspects of Horace Walpole's life.

### **Horace Walpole: Key Facts**

- Born in London on 24 September 1717 to Catherine Shorter and Sir Robert Walpole, Britain's first 'Prime Minister'
- 1727–1734: Walpole goes to Eton, and strikes up a number of important friendships
- 1735–1739: Walpole goes to King's College, Cambridge, but never graduates with a degree
- 1739–1741: Walpole and Thomas Gray on the Grand Tour in Europe
- 1742: Retirement of Sir Robert Walpole from politics, and his retreat to Houghton Hall
- 1745: Death of Sir Robert Walpole, and Horace's plentiful inheritance
- 1747: Walpole publishes *Aedes Walpoliana*, and takes up the lease of 'Chopp'd Straw Hall', Twickenham.
- 1749: the process of 'Gothicizing' Chopp'd Straw Hall / Strawberry Hill commences, assisted by the 'Strawberry Committee' comprising John Chute, Richard Bentley and Walpole himself.
- 1757: Walpole establishes a private printing press at Strawberry Hill

Horace Walpole was born in Arlington Street, London, on 24 September 1717, the third son of Catherine Shorter and Sir Robert Walpole. Sir Robert Walpole, Horace's father, was one of the most prominent and powerful Whig politicians of his time, and would subsequently serve in the office of what we now term 'Prime Minister' from 1721 to 1742. Already, you can see, from Walpole's illustrious parentage, that he derives from noble stock. In 1727, at the age of nine-and-a-half, Walpole, like many privileged and talented young gentleman of his age, went to Eton College, where he established enduring friendships with, among others, Thomas Gray – who would mature into that enormously influential poet of the so-called Graveyard School of the 1740s – George Montagu – a friend with whom he would correspond throughout his life – and William Cole, another life-long friend and correspondent. In 1734, Walpole leaves Eton, and begins to take up letter-writing with his old school friends, particularly Gray and a man named Richard West. Letter-writing would turn out to be a life-long passion for Walpole, and his extant collection of letters, now available in a fully searchable text online from Yale University, runs to some 48 volumes. You can search online for this

rich resource in your own time. In 1735, Walpole entered Kings College, Cambridge, where he was reunited with his friend Gray, and although Walpole would remain at Cambridge until 1739, he never actually graduated with a degree. Instead, in March of 1739, Walpole and his friend Gray set off on a Grand Tour of Europe, a veritable rite-of-passage for any gentleman of Walpole's breeding in the eighteenth century. Together, Walpole and Gray travel through France and Italy until, in 1741, they have a mysterious but serious falling out over reasons that are still unknown today; Gray returns to England, and, in September of 1741, so does Walpole. The two men would only be reconciled with one another in 1745. Meanwhile, during his 2 /12-year absence from England, Walpole was elected to Parliament for the Borough of Carlington in Cornwall, and would, from this moment onwards, serve in Parliament (though never terribly effectively) for various boroughs until 1768. Following increasing opposition to his mode of government, Horace's father, Sir Robert Walpole, resigned as prime minister in 1742, and retired to his country seat at Houghton Hall, Norfolk, having been given the title of Earl of Orford. Walpole was a keen supporter of his father's political career, and seems to have reacted very severely to his father's political 'assassination'. In 1745, Walpole's father would die, leaving his son in possession of a comfortable legacy in the form of a £2000 annuity and various crown patents and sinecures. In a word, Walpole would never have to work for a living. 1747 seems to have been a very significant year for Walpole, for not only did he publish in this year *Aedes Walpoliana* – literally translated as 'the house of Walpole', a description of his father's enormous art collection at Houghton Hall – but he also, in this year, took on the lease of a little house, Chopp'd Straw Hall, from the wife of a prominent London toy-maker, one Mrs Chenevix, in Twickenham, London, a rural Thames-side retreat with strong literary associations. Alexander Pope, for instance, had lived in a villa nearby. In 1749, Horace Walpole famously announced his intention to his friend Horace Mann that he was 'going to build a little Gothic castle at Strawberry Hill' – the name 'Strawberry Hill' coming from the original name for Chopp'd Straw Hall that he found on the house's original title-deeds. On the screen, you'll see an image of Strawberry Hill as it appears today

This process of medievalising and 'Gothicising' – the uncomfortable verb is Walpole's own – of Strawberry Hill, that is, converting it into a building with features of both medieval abbeys and castles, would continue until the latter part of the 1760s. Walpole undertook the work with the assistance of what he termed the 'Strawberry Committee', comprising John Chute, Richard Bentley and Horace himself. After 1762, Walpole also enlisted the work of other amateurs and professional architects in the process of 'Gothicizing' his home. Peter will be speaking more about Strawberry Hill, and Walpole's place in the revival of interest in Gothic architecture in the eighteenth century, in a later section of this MOOC. But for the moment, let's focus on a few more key episodes from Walpole's life before we get into discussing his most well-known

novel. In 1753, Walpole arranged for the publication of six of Gray's poems, including his great 'Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard', one of the reasons why Gothic critics, today, claim that Gothic fiction, as we know it, emerged out of the so-called Churchyard verse of writers such as Thomas Parnell, Robert Blair, Edward Young and Gray himself in the 1740s.

- 1758, Walpole published his own *A Catalogue of the Royal and Noble Authors of England* at the Strawberry Hill Press
- 1762–1780, 4 volumes of his *Anecdotes of Painting in England*
- 24 December 1764: the pseudonymous publication of *The Castle of Otranto, A Story*
- — 1765: publication of *The Castle of Otranto: A Gothic Story*, in which Walpole officially discloses his authorship of the text.
- 1768: the publication of *Historic Doubts on the Life and Reign of King Richard the Third*
- 1768: 50 copies of *The Mysterious Mother* printed at Strawberry Hill Press.
- 1774: the publication of the first edition of *A Description of the Villa of Horace Walpole, Youngest Son of Sir Robert Walpole Earl of Orford, at Strawberry-Hill, near Twickenham*.
- 1791: Horace Walpole becomes the fourth earl of Orford, an inherited title.
- Horace Walpole dies in Berkeley Square, London, in March 1797, aged 79
- 1798: *The Works of Horatio Walpole, Earl of Orford*, edited by Mary Berry, published in 5 volumes.

In 1757, Walpole would establish his own printing press at Strawberry Hill, at its time, the largest private printing press in the country. In 1758, Walpole published his own *A Catalogue of the Royal and Noble Authors of England* at the Strawberry Hill Press, and, between 1762 and 1780, 4 volumes of his *Anecdotes of Painting in England*, a study of England's history of art that also, as we shall see, had a number of important things to say about Gothic architecture. In 1764, Walpole wrote, and published towards the end of that year, *The Castle of Otranto, A Story*, and then issued a second edition of the text in April of 1765, in which, for the first time, he not only subtitled the text *A Gothic Story*, but also disclosed his own authorship of the piece. In 1768, Walpole published his revisionist history, *Historic Doubts on the Life and Reign of King Richard the Third*, a text that, in its determination to revise received conceptualisations of Richard as the tyrant king, would become very contentious. 1768 also saw the publication for another, extremely contentious publication: *The Mysterious Mother*, a Gothic tragedy – perhaps the first Gothic drama – treating the horrid theme of incest between a mother and her son, and then between the son and the daughter born of this incestuous coupling. Unperformed in its day, *The Mysterious Mother* was initially only circulated among a select group of Walpole's friends. In 1774, he publishes the first edition of *Description*

*of Strawberry Hill*, a detailed 'tour-guide' to his 'little Gothic castle' at Strawberry Hill – subsequent editions would later appear in subsequent years. In 1791, Walpole received the title of the fourth Earl of Orford. Horace Walpole continued to pen letters throughout his life, and his correspondence with various prominent figures of the age provides rich insight into the workings of eighteenth-century literary life and culture. He died quietly, attended by Mary and Agnes Berry, at his London home in Berkeley Square in March 1797, at the age of 79. One year later, Mary Berry edited and published the 5-volume collection, *The Works of Horatio Walpole, Earl of Orford*.