

Russian Visitors to the English Midlands

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Image: Russian Medallion to commemorate the erection of Peter the Great's statue in 1773. Peter the Great had spent five months in Britain in 1698 to learn about British shipbuilding techniques. Visits and commercial relationships were developed during the reign of Catherine the Great. The medal was struck during Catherine's reign and indicates a link between the two westernising monarchs. The image shows on one side, a large number of people transporting a huge rock whilst onlookers view the scene. The other side contains a bust of Catherine.

Image from: Birmingham Assay Office (605)

Summary

Britain had never been the main destination or place of pilgrimage for Russian travellers. Until the 18th century Russian-British contacts were more accidental than planned. By the mid-18th century Russian grandees were already widely travelled around Europe, doing their version of the Grand Tour. But their most usual destination was Italy and France, and particularly Paris, which was considered as the world capital of arts, fashion and fine taste. They visited cathedrals, galleries, ancient ruins, universities and academies, artists' studios, bought Renaissance and contemporary paintings, and classical or Italian marbles. This was the time when many of the great art collections in the estates and palaces of Russian noblemen were formed. The situation changed considerably in the second half of the 18th century, because of Catherine the Great's interest in British commerce, naval power and technological achievements. Russian students were sent to famous universities, to the Royal Academy of Arts, or to British shipyards, and more members of Russian nobility appeared in Britain. Russian travellers of that period are particularly notable because of their influence on Russian society.