Sharing Space in the Early Modern World, 1450-1750, a two-day interdisciplinary conference, 24th/ 25th of June 2016, History Faculty (University of Oxford), organisers: Róisín Watson, Lucy Rayfield, Martin Christ

In the last thirty years space has been recognised as an important analytical tool for the study of history. Most space in the early modern world was shared in some way – shared between different ethnic groups, genders, social statuses. Space could also be shared between different practical functions and sensory stimuli. These sites of contact were spaces in which ideologies and religious beliefs were tempered by practical considerations. While there has been significant research on space, this conference focused specifically on the negotiations involved in using and regulating shared spaces: What did it mean to share a space with other people, objects, and even animals? How did this impact the function of the space and its meaning? How did this affect group identities?

The conference considered shared spaces from a number of different angles – sacred spaces shared by multiple confessions, the spatial interactions between native communities and foreigners in the New World, ships as sites of shared knowledge, as well as the encounters of different groups at courts or in taverns. Whether these spaces were experienced separately or simultaneously by different groups, their meaning was defined not just by their use, but by the religion, class, gender or ethnicity of those that experienced them. Their meanings were often in a state of flux. Abstract notions of space might be defined by cartographers or explorers of the new world, but, in a local context, it was defined by those who used shared spaces. Its meanings were actively constructed and manipulated by those that used them so that understandings of space were culturally conditioned.

Not only did groups define space, but space defined group identities. This was explored by the keynote speaker, David Luebke (University of Oregon), who examined strategies for confessional coexistence in Westphalia, Germany. The conference brought together scholars working in theology, history, art history, English literature and modern and medieval languages for fruitful conversations. Thanks to the generous support of the Society for the Study of French History, we were able to support post-graduate and early career researchers working on early-modern France. These included explorations of French poetry and the notion of shared beds in Parisian court cases.