

JANE AUSTEN AND GODMERSHAM

By S. GRAHAM BRADE-BIRKS



GODMERSHAM:
THE PAROCHIAL CHURCH COUNCIL
1938

Price: Sixpence

We are gratefully indebted to Dr. R. W. Chapman for permission to reproduce the illustrations which appear here from his edition of Jane Austen's letters.



Drawing by Cassandra Austen (1804). Its position in the Lefroy MS. suggests that it is a portrait of Jane Austen.

JANE AUSTEN AND GODMERSHAM.

BY

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Vicar of Godmersham.

Jane Austen and Godmersham.

The association of Jane Austen the novelist (1775-1817) with Godmersham is of course explained by the fact that her brother Edward was the owner of Godmersham Park. Edward Austen was born in 1768 and in 1812 on the death of Mrs. Catherine Knight, widow of Thomas Knight, the former owner of Godmersham Park, he took the name of Knight.

In Jane Austen's letters* there is frequent mention both of Godmersham itself and of local people, and thirteen of the known letters were actually written from Godmersham (Nos. 45, August 24th, 1805; 51-54; 84-91, the last being dated November 6th, 1813). And though we know that names and places in the novels are fictitious, one cannot but feel that certain features in the description in "Pride and Prejudice" of Mr. Collins' parsonage fit Godmersham Vicarage well. Mr. Collins himself says: "The garden in which stands my humble abode, is separated only by a lane from Rosings Park, her ladyship's residence," and on the occasion of Elizabeth's first visit to it, there is mention of the "garden sloping" (*up* at Godmersham) "to the road, the house standing in it, the green pales and the laurel hedge." The "carriage stopped at the small gate, which led by a short gravel walk to the house" (as it did at Godmersham in Jane Austen's day). The garden "was large and well laid out" with "walk and cross walk."

There were also "two meadows." "He could number the fields in every direction, and could tell how many trees there were in the most distant clump. But of all the views which his garden, or which the country, or the kingdom could boast, none were to be compared with the prospect of Rosings, afforded by an opening in the trees that bordered the park nearly opposite the front of his house." Jane Austen, of course, knew the Vicarage and its situation well. "In the morn'", she says on September 23rd, 1813, "we returned Mrs. Sherer's visit" (she was the Vicar's wife). "I like Mr. S. very much."

From the recollection in old age of Marianne, the third daughter of Edward Knight, we have this passage quoted in 1930 by Mr. R. Brimley Johnson in "Jane Austen":

"I remember that when Aunt Jane came to us at Godmersham she used to bring the MS. of whatever novel she was writing with her, and would shut herself up with my elder sisters in one of the bedrooms to read them aloud. I and the younger ones used to hear peals of laughter through the door, and thought it very hard that we should be shut out from what was so delightful.

I also remember how Aunt Jane would sit quietly working beside the fire in the library, saying nothing for a good while, and then would suddenly burst out laughing, jump up and run across the room to a table where pens and paper were lying, write something down, and then come back to the fire and go on quietly working as before."

It was to the family of Jane Austen's brother at Godmersham that Susanna Sackree was the devoted nurse. On the north-east buttress of the Chancel of our Church is a marble tablet bearing the following inscription, re-lettered in the summer of 1933:—

* References are to Dr. R. W. Chapman's edition Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1932.

MEMORY OF

SUSANNA SACKREE,

THE FAITHFUL SERVANT AND FRIEND

FOR NEARLY 60 YEARS.

OF EDWARD KNIGHT ESQUIRE, OF GODMERSHAM
PARK.AND THE BELOVED NURSE OF ALL HIS CHILDREN.
SHE DIED DEEPLY LAMENTED, ON THE 2^D OF MARCH,
A.D. 1851.

IN THE NINETIETH YEAR OF HER AGE.

AT HER OWN DESIRE THE FOLLOWING INSCRIPTION
IS PLACED ON HER TOMBSTONE.

It would appear from the sentence "My little Brothers were very well when Mama heard from Sackree," which occurs in a letter from Fanny Catherine Austen ("Fag" as she signs herself) written in June, 1799 to her aunt Cassandra from Bath that Susanna Sackree had the care of the children at Godmersham then. "My little Brothers" were Edward Austen's sons.

There are glimpses of the devoted nurse in Jane Austen's letters, she is mentioned in August, 1805 and her visit to London in June, 1808 is the subject of the following to Cassandra: "I told Sackree that you desired to be remembered to her, which pleased her; and she sends her duty, and wishes you to know that she has been into the great world. She went on to town after taking William to Eltham, and, as well as myself, saw the ladies go to Court on the 4th. She had the advantage indeed of me in being in the Palace." Again in January, 1809 she is mentioned, and in February, 1813 there is concern for her in an illness that she had. In September, 1813 there is mention made of "Sackree's sister" and the nurse herself is again referred to in October, 1813 and in June, 1814.

Jane Austen, writing from Godmersham Park, September 25th, 1813, to her brother, then Captain Francis William Austen (afterwards K.C.B. and Admiral of the Fleet), says: "My dearest Frank, . . . The Clerk is as much like you as ever, I am always glad to see him on that account." The Parish Clerk at Godmersham in those days was John Hogben, and his grave is on the Western side of our Churchyard, to the left of the path leading from the lych gate to the Church porch. Several other family graves are close at hand.

The inscription on the Parish Clerk's headstone is as follows:—

In Memory of

JOHN HOGBEN,

late of this Parish,

who died Jany. 13th, 1841,

aged 69 years.

There is a small stone at the foot of the grave inscribed J.H. 1841.

In three letters Daniel, coachman at Godmersham, is mentioned, in 1798, 1805 and 1808, but no surname appears unless indeed Daniel be the surname.

In 1798 Daniel Boys was a householder mentioned in the Churchwardens' Accounts, the only Daniel in the list, and the same is true of the accounts for 1805 and 1808. Daniel Boys of Trimworth, Godmersham, was buried at Godmersham on December 22nd, 1835, aged 73.

In her letter from Godmersham of 20th. June 1808 Jane Austen says "a party set off for Buckwell to see the Pond dragged." She was not of the party. Buckwell is in the parish of Boughton Aluph. I have some interesting information about the dragging of the pond from Mr. T. Theobalds, now of Canterbury, whose father, Hope Theobalds, became tenant of Buckwell in 1867 where he remained until 1876. During this tenancy Lord St. Vincent rented Godmersham Park together with the sporting rights of the estate which included the fish in the ponds at Buckwell. There were two ponds an upper and a lower, and in the stream between them trout were raised. In the early summer Lord St. Vincent and a few other gentlemen generally turned up for a few hours when the upper pond was being dragged by his gamekeepers. The trout were placed in the river at Godmersham while the coarse fish, mainly pike and tench were given to the poor.

Of course, in the letters, there are many references to the House at Godmersham Park and these will be found indexed by Dr. R. W. Chapman, who also, in a note, quotes from Caroline Austen's unpublished *Reminiscences*: "I remember the Godmersham visit well in many little points, and I don't think I was very happy there in a strange house. I recollect the model of a ship in a passage and my cousins' rabbits out of doors, in or near a long walk of high trees. I have been told it was the lime-stone path. I never visited the place again."



EDWARD KNIGHT (1768—1852), owner of Godmersham Park; brother of Jane Austen (see Monument and Memorial East Window at Godmersham).

From a miniature by Sir William Ross.

As Dr. Chapman says: "There is no mistaking the 'long walk of high trees'—a very narrow avenue of very tall limes in the 'wilderness.'" 'Limestone path' looks like an error; there can be little doubt that 'lime path' (meaning the trees) was intended. This Caroline Austen was Jane Austen's niece being the daughter of the Rev. James Austen.

Of Caroline's visit, above-mentioned, Jane Austen writes from Godmersham, June 30th, 1808: "I beleive the little girl will be glad to go home;—her Cousins are too much for her."

From the letters much information about the life of Edward Austen and his family at Godmersham can be gleaned.

Writing from Godmersham in August, 1805, after a visit to Eastwell (to the Finch-Hattons) at which, after tea, they "had a cribbage Table," Jane Austen records that it "was considerably past eleven before we were at home." "Yesterday," she says in the same letter, "was a very quiet day with us; my noisiest efforts were writing to Frank, & playing at Battledore & Shuttlecock with William; he and I have practiced together two mornings, & improve a little; we have frequently kept it up *three* times, & once or twice *six*." Frank, of course, is Jane's brother, William her nephew, six years old at the time. The same day "The two Edwards went to Canterbury in the chair, & found M^{rs}. Knight as you found her I suppose the day before, chearful but weak." The two Edwards are Jane's brother, the owner of Godmersham Park, and his eldest son, then a boy of fourteen. Mrs. Knight is the widow of Thomas Knight, the former owner of Godmersham Park, who had died in 1794; she lived until 1812.

Still in the same letter, Jane says: "In the evening we took a quiet walk round the Farm, with George & Henry to animate us by their races & merriment." Of the two nephews, George was nine and Henry eight.

"Dr. Wilmot," who was to be consulted at this time about Edward (Little Edw^d) was an Ashford medical practitioner.

Jane Austen employs "G^m" as an abbreviation for "Godmersham," as for example in a letter from Southampton in February, 1807: "You must have had more snow at G^m, than we had here."

At Godmersham on Wednesday, 15th June, 1808 she writes: "It has struck ten; I must go to breakfast." In the same letter the following

day she adds: "Yesterday passed quite *à la* Godmersham: the gentlemen rode about Edward's farm, and returned in time to saunter along Bentigh with us; and after dinner we visited the Temple Plantations, which, to be sure, is a Chevalier Bayard of a plantation. James and Mary are much struck with the beauty of the place"; and again the following day she writes: "I am now just returned from Eggerton; Louisa and I walked together and found Miss Maria at home. Her sister we met on our way back. *She* had been to pay her compliments to Mrs. Inman, whose chaise was seen to cross the park while we were at dinner yesterday."

Bentigh (or Bentye, as it is spelt on a map copied from one believed to date from 1715) seems to be the place now called "The Wilderness," where the "long walk of high trees" mentioned by Caroline Austen is. The "Temple Plantations" must be Temple Wood on the rising ground seen from the house in a somewhat north easterly direction and on the opposite side of the River Stour.

At Eggerton in the parish of Godmersham lived Miss Elizabeth Knight, a weak-minded sister of Mr. Thomas Knight; she was in the care of Miss Cuthbert and her sister, Miss Maria Cuthbert. We do not know who Mrs. Inman was; it almost seems from the references to her in the letters that she lived in 1808 at Godmersham and had her own carriage. She died in 1815 and was buried at Godmersham 20th September. Her name, abode and age are given as Rebecca Inman, Ashford, 77 years. Mr. Sherer officiated. It has been stated that she was a clergyman's widow. Her gravestone is in the centre passage of the Nave with this inscription: "Here are deposited the remains of Rebecca Inman, who died September 10th, 1815, aged 77 years." The floor of the Nave was raised six inches in 1865-6 and this stone with others was covered in.

To Cassandra she says on one occasion: "You are recommended to bring away some flower-seeds from Godmersham, particularly Mignonette seed," and from Godmersham she writes to Cassandra in a letter dated Monday, 20th June, 1808: "Edward began cutting Stfoin on saturday & I hope is likely to have favourable weather;—the crop is good." To us at Godmersham these are entertaining examples of her interest in gardening and farming.

Of her brother she writes on Sunday, 26th June, 1808: "James does Duty at Godmersham today." This was during the incumbency of

Francis Whitfield: it is of him that she writes from Southampton on Sunday, 16th October in the same year on the occasion of the death at Godmersham of Elizabeth Austen, her brother Edward's wife: "To-morrow will be a dreadful day for you all. Mr. Whitfield's will be a severe duty. Glad shall I be to hear that it is over." The entry in the parish register is as follows: "Austen Elisabeth Wife of Edward Austen Esq^r was buried Oct^r 17th . . . Af: Recd." (The last two words refer, of course, to the affidavit that the body was buried in woollen only.)

Among the diversions of the family were two games Brag and Speculation; it is of these that Jane Austen thus writes to her sister, then at Godmersham on 17th January, 1809:—

"I have just recieved some verses in an unknown hand, and am desired to forward them to my nephew Edw^d at Godmersham.

"Alas! poor Brag, thou boastful Game!—
What now avails thine empty name?—
Where now thy more distinguish'd fame?—
My day is o'er, and Thine the same.—
For thou like me art thrown aside,
At Godmersham, this Christmas Tide;
And now across the Table wide,
Each Game save Brag or Spec: is tried."—
"Such is the mild Ejaculation,
Of tender hearted Speculation,"—

From part of a letter to her brother Frank written July 6th, 1813 it looks as though Godmersham Park had then been empty for some little time, for she says: "Mr. Scudamore, to whom my Brother referred, is very decided as to G^m not being fit to be inhabited at present;—he talks even of two months more being necessary to sweeten it, but if we have warm weather I dare say less will do.—My Brother will probably go down & sniff at it himself & receive his rents.—The rent-day has been postponed already."

Writing on 24th September, 1813 from Godmersham, Jane Austen says: "Apples are scarce in this Country; £1—5— a sack." In the same letter she says: "I am now alone in the Library I have this moment seen Mrs. Driver driven up to the Kitchen Door. I cannot close with a grander circumstance or greater wit." Mrs. Driver was the house-keeper.

The explanation of the novelist being able to see an arrival at the kitchen door of Godmersham Park from the library is to be found in the fact that the library was formerly a room on the north side of the house. This information I have from Mr. E. Lawson.

The following day she says in a letter to her brother Frank: "I have not been here these 4 years I expect to be here about two months."

Thursday, September 23rd, 1813 finds Jane Austen at Godmersham again and writing to her sister: "The Mr. Ks came a little before dinner on Monday, & Edwa went to the church with the two Seniors—but there is no Inscription yet drawn up." "The Mr. K's" were Charles and Wyndham Knatchbull and Wadham Knatchbull, the latter's son. The two seniors were brothers of Mrs. Catherine Knight, who had died in October, 1812, and one naturally imagines that the inscription referred to is that now to be found on the base of the memorial on the South wall of the Nave.

The whole memorial is a sarcophagus in white marble standing on a white marble base and surmounted by a broken column above which, in a wreath, is the Knight escutcheon; there is a background of grey veined marble. The inscription on the sarcophagus is as follows:—

"Sacred to the Memory of THOMAS KNIGHT, Esq^{re} of Godmersham Park, in this Parish; who departed this Life the 23^d Day of October, 1794, aged 58 Years. He was the only surviving Son of THOMAS KNIGHT Esq^{re} of the same Place, and last male Heir, of the antient Family of BROADNAX; which Name, his Father relinquished for that of MAY, in Compliance with the Will of Sir THOMAS MAY, of Rawmere, in the County of SUSSEX; and afterwards the Name of MAY, for that of KNIGHT, in Compliance with the Will of Mrs ELIZABETH KNIGHT, of Chawton, in the County of SOUTHAMPTON. He was twice elected to serve in Parliament; first for the Town and Port of New Romney, and afterwards for this COUNTY: upon his Retirement from public Life, he faithfully discharged the Duties of a Magistrate. His Love for his Country was eminently shewn by his Zeal and Activity, in the Service of the Public: his Love for his Neighbour, by the constant Exercise of his Liberality and Benevolence. His Widow CATHERINE, Daughter of WADHAM KNATCHBULL, L.L.D. Prebendary of DURHAM, in Testimony of her Love for an affectionate Husband, caused this Monument to be erected."

And on the base:—

"In the Family Vault are likewise deposited the Remains of CATHERINE, Widow of the above Thomas Knight Esq^{re} who died at her



ELIZABETH AUSTEN (née Bridges) (1773—1808), wife of Edward Austen (afterwards Knight), the brother of Jane Austen (see Monument and East Window at Godmersham.)

From a miniature by Richard Cosway.

House the *White Friars Canterbury*, 14th October 1812, aged 59 Years. A Lady endowed with every Virtue and amiable Quality, that cou'd adorn the human Mind: her Piety and Benevolence were exemplary: to the Poor, particularly in her Neighbourhood, her Charity was liberally extended, and long will they have Reason to deplore her Loss: Her Death was like her life, Pious and resigned. Reader! whoe'er thou art think on these things and 'Go and do thou likewise.'" Below is the inscription: *SHOUT, Holborn, LONDON, fecit.*

"The Mr. Ks" and their sister Catherine are also mentioned on another memorial of the south wall of Godmersham Church; it bears the following inscription:—

"Underneath this Tablet, are deposited the Remains of HARRIET KNATCHBULL, Daughter of CHARLES PARRY of Oakfield, *BERKS.*, Esqr. and Widow of the Revd. Dr. WADHAM KNATCHBULL, (third Son of Sir EDWARD KNATCHBULL, of Mersham Hatch, *BART.*), Prebendary of *DURHAM*, and Vicar of Chilham and Molash; she died 12th October, 1794; aged 83 Years; leaving two Sons, CHARLES, and WYNDHAM, and one Daughter, CATHERINE, (married to THOMAS KNIGHT, Esqr. of this Place) who caused this Monument to be erected, to the Memory of their beloved and most excellent Parent."

Below the inscription is the heraldic lozenge of the deceased, and the monument is engraved *SHOUT, LONDON, Fecit.*

At the beginning of Jane Austen's letter on 18th October, 1813, her niece Elizabeth Knight writes from Godmersham to her Aunt Cassandra: "I must tell you something about our poor people. I believe you know old Mary Croucher, she gets *maderer* and *maderer* every day. Aunt Jane has been to see her, but it was on one of her rational days. Poor Will Amos hopes your skewers are doing well; he has left his house in the poor Row, and lives in a barn at Builting. We asked him why he went away, and he said the fleas were so starved when he came back from Chawton that they all flew upon him and *eenermost* eat him up."

From the parish registers we learn that Mary Croucher was buried at Godmersham 11th September, 1814, aged 79 years, and William Amos on 11th February, 1819, aged 71 years. Mr. Sherer took the Service in each case.

Elizabeth Knight in the same letter (18th October, 1813) mentions Miss Clewes; she was

(*vide* Dr. R. W. Chapman) governess at Godmersham. Jane Austen, writing from Godmersham, Thursday, 21st October, 1813, says: "Edward is much concerned about his pond: he cannot now doubt the fact of its running out, which he was resolved to do as long as possible." On November 2nd, 1813, with her brother Edward she visited Canterbury Gaol which he "went to inspect . . . as a visiting Magistrate." Writing the following day, she says: "I did not mean to eat, but Mr. Johncock" (the butler, *vide* R.W.C.) "has brought in the Tray, so I must—I am all alone. Edward is gone into his Woods—At this present time I have five Tables, Eight & twenty Chairs & two fires all to myself." In November, 1815 her brother, Henry, had been ill; she was staying with him at Hans Place, London; on the 26th she writes: "A Hare & 4 Rabbits from Gm. yesterday, so that we are stocked for nearly a week."

There is a good deal of reference in the letters to Anne Sharp, stated by Dr. R. W. Chapman to have been governess at Godmersham and elsewhere, and one of the latest letters, written from Chawton, 22nd May, 1817, is addressed to her at Doncaster. It deals largely with Jane Austen's illness which was to end fatally at Winchester, 18 July, 1817.

From the short extracts from her letters we have been able to give and from the other notes that have been made it is abundantly clear that the great novelist entered with zest into the life of the circle she found in Godmersham and the country around it, it was life of the kind she pictures for us in her novels and many of the people she depicts for us there must have had their counterparts in this little country parish one hundred and twenty years ago.

In a letter to Cassandra, begun at Southampton on February 20th, 1807, Jane Austen says, "I am obliged to Fanny for the list of Mrs. Coleman's Children, whose names I had not however quite forgot; the new one I am sure will be Caroline." Dr. Chapman does not identify this Mrs. Coleman, but it seems that she must have been the wife of the occupier of Court Lodge, Godmersham. This house, called "Godmersham Priory" in the account written in one of the registers by the Rev. Walter Field, had also been called Godmersham Hall at an earlier date. From the account just mentioned we learn that this house, together with the great tithes of the parish which always went with it, were held by the Dean and Chapter of Canterbury till they were sold to Edward Knight in 1837 who still held them when Mr. Field wrote. They were purchased from the Knight family by John Cunliffe

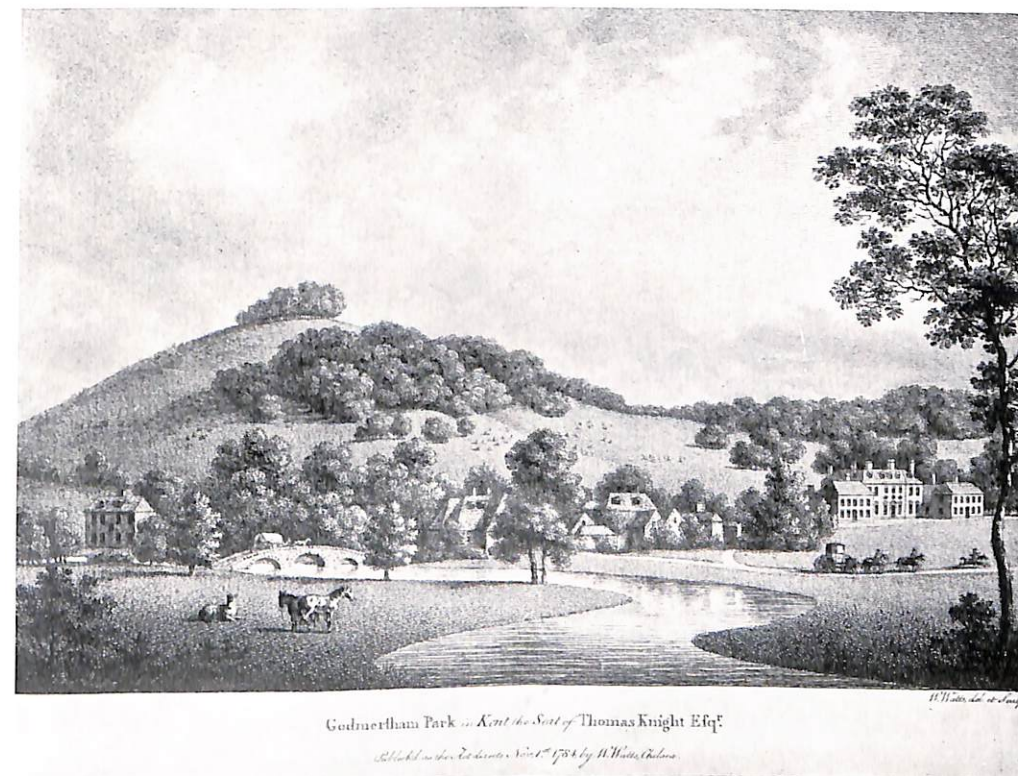
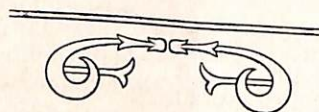
Kay in 1875. The occupier of the house from about 1830 to 1875 was J. F. Harvey. Jane Austen appears to have made a bad guess, for in the register we read "1807 Coleman Elizabeth daug^r of Richard & Mary Ann, bap^d. Jan: 14th." Richard Coleman seems to have given up his residence at Godmersham about 1830, and in 1832 we find the burial of Richard Coleman of Faversham at Godmersham on 13th Oct^r aged 55 years. This takes us back to 1777 when in the register we have this entry, "Coleman Richard Son of Richard and Sarah (of ye Court Lodge) baptized May 3^d."

In the eighteenth century there are numerous entries in the parish registers relating to the Coleman family. Richard, the father in 1777, seems likely to be the Richard, son of John and Anne Coleman of Bilting, baptized in 1737. In 1732, John, a son of John and Mary and in 1734 a daughter, Sarah, were baptized. In 1721, John, a son of Richard and Mary, was baptized and in 1731, Benjamin Coleman, yeoman, was buried

and in 1734, Sarah Coleman, widow. In 1736, when the Churchwardens' accounts begin, Richard Coleman and Thomas Williams were the Churchwardens. Richard Coleman with a rent of £108, paid 18s. in rates, while John Coleman with a rent of £46 paid 7s. 8d., but in 1699, the last year of the book of overseers' accounts, no member of the family is to be found in the list of rate-payers.

From all these records it would appear that the family came to Godmersham somewhere in the period covered by the years 1699 to 1721 inclusive.

In addition to the numerous references to Godmersham and its people in the letters there are of course many allusions to persons and localities in our neighbourhood; to the Bridges family at Goodnestone, to the Finch-Hattons at Eastwell, to the Faggs of Mystole (Chartham) and to people and places in Canterbury, Ashford, Wye, Chilham and Crundale.



Godmersham Park, 1784. Near the left end of the picture is the Vicarage, then the bridge built 1698, then the old Village at the present Park gates, and the Mansion with the road to Chilham in front of it.