

1775



*marking
the bicentenary
of the birth
of Jane Austen
on 16 December 1775*

*Kent County Council
Kent Education Committee
County Library*

THE AUSTENS IN KENT

Although Jane Austen was born in Steventon and died in Winchester she came of a family which had its roots deep in Kentish soil.

The Austens were a Wealden family. By the reign of James I they were established at Horsmonden where John Austen held the estate of Broadford, near the crossing of the River Teise. His son Francis added to this Grovehurst, another house in the northern part of the parish. These Austens were engaged in the cloth trade which brought prosperity to Cranbrook and transformed the Wealden villages.

Francis Austen's son John inherited Broadford. He outlived his son and the grandson, another John, succeeded him. This John Austen had several brothers, two of whom, Thomas and William, sought a livelihood in Tonbridge. (Their mother had been Elizabeth Weller of that town). Both brothers were in medicine, Thomas as apothecary and William as physician. The latter had a single son by his first wife, christened George. The mother died soon afterwards and the father by the time George was six, and George came under the guardianship of his uncle Francis, a Sevenoaks lawyer, who sent him to Tonbridge School and on to Oxford. George later taught at Tonbridge for four years and might have remained a school-master but for the opportunity to read Theology at Oxford. He did very well there and also made an advantageous marriage to Cassandra Leigh. When he completed his degree, his uncle Francis presented him to the living of Steventon in Hampshire. Consequently none of his eight children, of whom Jane was the seventh, was born in Kent. They kept in touch with the Kentish branch of the family, particularly those in Sevenoaks and Tonbridge.

The Austen connection with Kent was enormously strengthened through George's second son Edward. When he was a boy he had been invited to stay at Chawton, near Alton in Hampshire, a country house which belonged to wealthy cousins (descended from John Austen of Broadford in Queen Anne's reign). Edward made a good impression and when it became clear to the Knights of Chawton and Godmersham that they would have no heir, they adopted him. So began the most fruitful association between the novelist and county society in Kent.

The story of Godmersham is complicated by the habit which Georgian heirs had of changing their names. Thomas Broadnax of Ford (later Godmersham) Place adopted the name of May in deference to the wishes of a benefactor of that name, and for a similar reason he changed it again eleven years later to Knight. It was this worthy's son Thomas who took a fancy to Edward Austen. When he died he left Godmersham to his widow for life, but she surrendered the house to Edward in 1797 and retired to live in Canterbury. In 1812 he followed tradition by taking the name of Knight.

At Godmersham Edward (Austen) Knight lived the life of a country gentleman, very much the kind of life which Jane Austen took as her theme. He had close family and social connections with his neighbours in East Kent. When Jane stayed at Godmersham, which she did in 1798, 1799, 1802, 1805 and 1813, she was in a real sense living inside one of her own novels, and the letters she wrote from the house, mostly to her elder sister Cassandra, reflect her critical enjoyment of the experience.

These letters make delightful reading for their literary quality. For Kentish readers the interest is greatly increased by the many references to Godmersham and the neighbouring houses. The Austens and the Knights had a wide circle of acquaintances and they were always calling or being called upon.

Most important among neighbours were the Bridges of Goodnestone. Edward Austen married a daughter of the house, Elizabeth, fourth child of Sir Brook Bridges (Brook was a recurrent family name) and Jane was a frequent visitor to the great house as well as to the lesser house of Rowling. The Bridges were a large family, and by marriage they had connections in Leybourne, Bekesbourne, Sandling, Lenham and Wrotham. Elizabeth Austen's sister married George Moore, Rector of Wrotham, who was the son of the Archbishop of Canterbury.

Elizabeth (Austen) Knight died in 1808 when her eldest daughter Fanny Catherine was only eleven. Thereafter the orphan girl became a special favourite with her aunt Jane, and Fanny has a big part in the letters. She married Sir Edward Knatchbull, of Mersham Hatch, and was the mother of the first Lord Bradbourne who became a man of letters as well as a man of affairs. He followed his father into parliament and held office briefly, wrote some charming fairy tales for his children, and edited his great-aunt's letters. The Austens had earlier connections with the Knatchbolls and through them with the Hugessons of Provender, an ancient house near Sittingbourne. The Hugessons were buried in Lynsted Church and here too lies Jane Austen's niece.

The list of families named in the letters is almost a rollcall of the gentry of Kent in Regency times. It includes the Papillons of Acrise, Oxendens of Broome Park, Wildmans of Chilham Castle, Finch-Hattons of Eastwell, Plumtres of Fredville, Tokes of Godinton, Cages of Millgate, Faggs of Mystole (almost the nearest neighbours to Godmersham), Milles of Nackington, Lushingtons of Norton Court, Hammonds of St. Albans Court (now the College of Education at Nonington) and Brydges of Wootton.

Because of the large families and the need to marry within a relatively narrow social circle there was much intermarriage, and this brought still tighter the ties of family. There were Austen cousins all over Kent, and family christian names, including Cassandra, cropped up regularly in almost every generation.

It would be a matter of pride anyway that the finest of English women novelists had close family connections with Kent. Her first-hand experience of the county was moreover an important element in her work. When she wrote of Mansfield Park, its ritual of social intercourse and the complex patterns of courtship, Godmersham Park may not have been far from her mind.

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A NOTE ON THE NOVELS OF JANE AUSTEN

Sense and Sensibility was the first of Jane Austen's novels to appear in print, published in three volumes by Thomas Egerton in 1811. In July, 1813, the authoress reported to her brother, Francis, that the first edition, which had brought her £140, was exhausted, and a new edition was brought out the same year.

1813 also saw the publication of Pride and Prejudice which, according to Cassandra Austen, was based on an earlier work, "First Impressions", rejected by the Publisher Cadells in 1797. The price of the work was eighteen shillings, and the author sold the copyright to Egerton for £110. The number of copies printed is not known, but a second edition appeared within the same year and a third in 1817, this time in two instead of three volumes, with the chapters renumbered. Neither of these editions shows any sign of revision by the author, although the third does introduce a large number of slight verbal changes.

Mansfield Park, written between 1811 and 1814 was brought out by Egerton in May, 1814. Only a small number of copies was printed and these were badly printed, poorly punctuated and contained many verbal errors. Nevertheless, it sold out within six months, but remained out of print for more than a year, during which Jane Austen wrote Emma.

The final version of Emma was completed by March, 1815, and John Murray, the publisher, offered £450 for the copyright of the new novel and Mansfield Park, whose second edition he was prepared to publish. Emma actually appeared in December, 1815, despite the fact that the date on the title page is 1816, after a delay which the publisher blamed on his printer and the printer on his paper supplier. It was the last of her novels to be published in the author's lifetime and was dedicated, at his own request, to the Prince Regent. The second edition of Mansfield Park, with corrections by the authoress, came out in 1816.

Northanger Abbey was the first of the six novels to be accepted for publication and the last, simultaneously with Persuasion to appear. Richard Crosby paid £10 for it in 1803, but it was never published, and in 1816 the manuscript was redeemed by the author. It did not see publication until the year after Jane Austen's death, when John Murray brought out a four-volume edition of Northanger Abbey and Persuasion, with a "biographical notice" of the author by her brother, Henry.

Persuasion was the last complete novel which Jane Austen wrote, begun at some time in 1815 and finished, insofar as it ever was finished, in July 1816. In March, 1817 she estimated that it might be ready for publication with "a twelve month" but as she died three months later, it is probable that Persuasion never reached a state which would have satisfied her completely.

After the posthumous publication of Northanger Abbey and Persuasion in 1818, there was no further printing of any of the novels until 1833. In 1832, Henry and Cassandra Austen accepted an offer from Richard Bentley of £250 for the five novels in their control and referred him to Egerton's executors for the rights to Pride and Prejudice. Bentley's collected edition, in five volumes, first came out in 1833 and was reissued six times between 1833 and 1886, a sixth volume, comprising J. E. Austen-Leigh's "memoir" of his aunt, being added to the sequence in 1879.

A ten-volume edition of the novels, edited by Richard Brimley Johnson and illustrated by William Cubitt Cooke, was published by Dent in 1892. There were several other editions in the 1890's and in 1912 an edition of Pride and Prejudice by Katharine M. Metcalfe which included notes and an introduction

In 1923, there appeared "The Novels of Jane Austen", with the text based on a collation of the early editions by R. W. Chapman, a five-volume edition, printed on large paper and limited to 1,000 sets. It was the first attempt to establish an authentic text by examination of all the editions in which Jane Austen had a hand, and included indexes, with notes on the textual variants. Illustrations were mainly from contemporary sources, showing fashions and views. In 1926, the edition was reprinted on smaller paper with minor corrections, and, with occasional revisions, has since been regarded as the standard edition.

The first of Jane Austen's novels to be published in America was Emma, which appeared there in 1816 under the auspices of Harper and Brothers of New York, who reprinted it from the London editions. The rest of the novels were first published there in 1832-3 by Carey and Lea of Philadelphia.

Various artists have attempted to illustrate the novels. In one of the great ages of British book-illustration there were two notable editions with drawings by Hugh Thomson (1897) and in colour by C. E. Brock (1908). Among later interpretations those by Maximilien Vox in the Thirties and by Robert Austin shortly after the war have their admirers. By far the most important and delightful of recent editions is that published by the Folio Society in 1975 with exquisite wood engravings by Joan Hassall. Miss Hassall wrote an article in the Folio Society's journal for Summer 1975 in which she described her approach to the work and her reaction to the achievements of her predecessors.