

## Jane Austen in Chawton

On 7 July this year the village of Chawton in Hampshire will celebrate the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Jane Austen's arrival there. Over the next eight years regular bicentennial anniversaries will mark the publication dates of her six famous novels (*Sense and Sensibility*, November 1811; *Pride and Prejudice*, January 1813; and so on). Chawton occupies a special place in Jane Austen's life. It would remain her settled home until the last few months when she travelled to Winchester seeking treatment for the illness from which she died in July 1817. Chawton saw the preparation for publication of her early attempts at novel writing and the composition of her later fiction. In family tradition, the village and the cottage became the longed for paradise in the country after the disruptive wilderness years spent in Bath and Southampton. Chawton represented a return to the gentle landscape and routines that nurtured Jane Austen's precocious early talent in the Hampshire village of Steventon, only twelve miles distant.



Letters, our only personal non-fictional sources, survive from twenty-one years of Jane Austen's life; fiction from much longer. One enigma for those interested in Jane Austen is that the stories in her writing are more visible to us than the story of her life. However, by discovering more about her life we can dispel much conjecture. The life of a novelist whets our curiosity: how she wrote; where her ideas may have come from; what her working methods may have been; how she prepared her manuscripts for the press. Frustratingly, these vital things are almost pure conjecture. But in Jane Austen's house in Chawton we find some clues to the life and habits of the writer.

What we know is that when Jane Austen arrived in Chawton, her final home, she was thirty-three years old. Together with her mother and sister Cassandra and the long-time family friend, Martha Lloyd, she took possession of a cottage, the gift of her brother Edward. That cottage is now the Jane Austen Memorial House Museum, which celebrates its 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary this year. Jane Austen's niece Caroline Austen remembered in later life the daily routine at Chawton: Aunt Jane's breakfast preparations, her early morning piano playing, and the stories she invented there about fairyland to entertain her little nieces.

Caroline's brother James Edward Austen-Leigh kept alive, in his important *Memoir of Jane Austen* (1870), vital information about his aunt's writing at Chawton: the small pieces of paper, easily hidden from prying eyes as she worked in the general space of the family sitting-room. Only at Chawton do the details of particular domestic spaces and daily chores assume substantial significance in our understanding of Jane Austen's own art of domestic spaces and daily rhythms.

When she arrived in Chawton Jane Austen was already a writer, having to her credit, at the very least, three manuscript volumes of juvenile writings; an epistolary novella *Lady Susan*; and three full-length novels in draft. These novels were all still to be published, and with unknown amounts of revision, as *Sense and Sensibility*, *Pride and Prejudice*, and *Northanger Abbey*. Chawton retains a special place in our understanding of Jane Austen because it was from here that she prepared for publication or wrote all six of the novels on which her reputation stands, travelling the fifty miles to London for extended visits to stay with her brother Henry to see them through the press. If not the crucible for her writing, Chawton provided time and space for its mature development; and as witnessed in *Emma*, her last lifetime publication, a template for the village community as the novelist's ideal laboratory. From the moment the Austen women moved into their final home at Chawton, life assumed a settled air of permanence, making the house and the village an equivalent in Jane Austen's life to what Dove Cottage and Grasmere were in the life of her longer-lived contemporary William Wordsworth.



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