

JASNA *News*

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE JANE AUSTEN SOCIETY OF NORTH AMERICA

Volume 17 No. 2

Jane Austen Society of North America

Summer 2001

Commemorating Jane Austen's Churches

By Sue Bain

The JASNA Austen England Tour in June 1999 bestowed upon its privileged pilgrims an unequalled experience, thanks to the unique talents of Mary Lou White and the profound knowledge of Elizabeth Proudman as well as the wonderful insight of Austen aficionados in England. In 10 days, the tour group journeyed to view Austen-related churches, houses, vistas, original letters and memorabilia, cities, countryside, seaside, and more. During this tour, the very essence of what still exists of Austen could be viewed, described, savored, and appreciated. For many, it was the first contact made with the churches that were dear to Austen's heart.

These medieval churches and the projects concerning them oftentimes require assistance. On a rainy June 29th in Bath, Michael Davis, owner of 4 Sydney Place, where the Austens lived after moving from Steventon, related his concern. In conjunction with the Jane Austen Society, he had been working several years to relocate and rededicate the Reverend George Austen's gravestone at St. Swithin's Church, and desperately needed funds to complete this project. Upon their return, two of the tour members approached their organizations (JASNA and JASA), and through the gracious contributions of the respective members, the rededication was accomplished in October 2000.

The churches that Austen knew and loved were largely ministered to by her family and friends, because as Irene Collins indicates, "By the end of the [18th] Century, approximately 60% of all graduates, mainly from the Arts faculties, went into the Church," which was a rather solid choice for those sons not graced with first-born status. The churches themselves are, in large part, small and unadorned with their ancient walls denoting 12th or 13th Century heritage. The article on churches that begins on page 4 highlights those churches that were a major part of Austen's life.

As a bit of trivia, even though Austen uses the word *churches* over 45 times in her novels, there is only one contemporaneous church that she mentions by name. Do you know which church it is and in what novel it can be found?

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JANE AUSTEN'S CHURCHES

Even though Jane Austen does not describe the characters in her novels in the act of worshipping, in *Mansfield Park* Fanny Price proclaims "A whole family assembling regularly for the purpose of prayer is fine!" We know that for Jane Austen and her family, regular church worship was a way of life, and that many of her family members were of the ministry. Although Austen can most readily be envisioned worshipping at St. Nicholas' Church, Steventon, having been born into that parish of which her father was rector, she is, in fact, also associated with a number of other churches. To commemorate Austen in the churches in which she is known to have worshipped, a brief description of many of them follows.

St. Nicholas' Church in Steventon, Hampshire is located a stone's throw from the field in which the Austen rectory, in which Jane was born, once stood. The church served as Austen's principal place of worship until her mid-twenties, when her family moved to Bath in 1801 and her brother James assumed the curacy. Mention of a church at Steventon dates

back to the 12th Century. An ancient yew tree estimated to be about 900 years old and with a girth of over 20 feet stands guard over the small, simple structure. The most significant changes to the church have been the addition of a steeple in Victorian times and the moving of the doorway from the south wall to its present position under the steeple. Its stonework was obtained from Binstead in the Isle of Wight. Wall paintings of medieval origin may be seen to the right of the chancel arch, and flintwork denoting the work of the Normans is also in evidence. Memorial tablets to the Reverend James Austen, his two wives, and some of his relations are in the chancel; their graves are located in the northeast corner of the churchyard. If one wishes to peruse the Internet, outer and inner views of the church, as well as additional information on Jane Austen, are available at <http://www.harts.gov.uk/austen/stevent.htm>.

Another church of significance to Austen is the Church of the Holy Cross, located in Goodnestone, Kent. Jane's brother Edward married Elizabeth Bridges in 1791, when Jane was 16, and the newly-married couple resided near Elizabeth's father's estate, Goodnestone Park, where frequent visits from Jane and Cassandra ensued. The church itself is of late 12th Century origin. It is a small, typically Kentish church with a high tower, wonderfully medieval in appearance. There is some present hope of restoring the main worship area to that which existed in Austen's time. This would entail bringing the northeast corner of the church, which has some lovely old stained glass, into use as a chapel. This church adjoins the remarkable gardens of Lady Fitzwalter at Goodnestone Park. A history and diagram of the church and its connections to Austen can be seen at <http://www.godmersham.com/index.htm>

In addition to the church at Goodnestone, Jane's brother Edward was instrumental in introducing her to the Church of St. Lawrence the Martyr, Godmersham. Edward inherited the Godmersham estate in 1797 from his generous adoptive mother, Catherine Knatchbull Knight. Jane and Cassandra were to spend extended visits, usually separately, at Godmersham, where

they worshipped regularly at St. Lawrence. The church's earliest parts are thought to be late Saxon, extended and enhanced shortly after the Norman Conquest. Examples of every period of medieval architecture can be seen with windows located in the nave and chancel, which show evidence of the Norman, Early English, Decorated, and Perpendicular styles. The nave roof was built in the 15th Century and presently needs major renovation. Memorials to Edward Knight and his wife, Elizabeth, are situated on the north wall of the nave and in the beautiful east window of the chancel. Another memorial, commissioned by JASNA, commemorates Susanna Sackree, the nurse who was instrumental in raising Edward's 11 children after his wife's untimely death.

Jane Austen less frequently worshipped at the Holy Trinity with St. Andrew Church, Ashe. Jane's beloved friend, Mrs. Anne Lefroy, was the wife of the rector, I. P. George Lefroy. From members' contributions, the JASNA Board approved a plaque, which is now in the process of



Exterior of the Church of the Holy Cross, Goodnestone, a typical Kentish church with a high tower and wonderfully medieval appearance.



Exterior view of the Church of St. Lawrence the Martyr, Godmersham, from the east showing the roof valley in need of major repair.

JANE AUSTEN'S CHURCHES

being approved by diocesan authorities, to be placed on the west wall to commemorate the special bond that existed between Jane and Anne Lefroy. Graciously assisting in this project in England are Lefroy descendant Helen Lefroy, the Reverend Michael Kenning, and JAS member Vera Quin. The Ashe church is small and constructed of stone, with a shingle tower. It contains several stained glass windows, the largest on the east end, and a colorful sub-William Morris fresco at the west end. There are six memorial tablets to the Lefroy family. Anne Lefroy, her husband, as well as Anna and Ben Lefroy, Jane's niece and her husband, are all buried beneath the church floor.

St. Margaret's Church in Horsmonden, Kent, is the final resting place of many of Austen's forebears, including John Austen, who died in 1620. Elizabeth Weller Austen, Jane's great grandmother, who died in 1721 and who so ingeniously and single-handedly raised her seven children when spurned by her husband's family after his untimely death, is also buried there. In the churchyard there are many unresearched Austen graves, up to the date of 1930. Jane worshipped at this church when visiting her Kentish relations. The church itself dates back to the start of the 14th Century and its tower, one of the finest in Kent, was built in 1380. Unfortunately, because the tower is composed of Wealden sandstone, which is a lovely warm-colored stone but quite soft and fragile, the church is currently in need of major renovations.

When Austen visited her godfather, the Reverend Samuel Cooke, she worshipped at St. Nicolas (the "h" dropped in 1912) Church, Great Bookham, Surrey. Reverend Cooke, vicar from 1769 to 1820, was married to Jane's mother's cousin, and the two families were very close. Jane began *Emma* in January 1814, and in the following June she visited the Cookes. Bookham is seven miles by the old roads from Box Hill, and many scholars believe Highbury

to be patterned on Great Bookham. St. Nicolas is probably the most ancient of the Austen affiliated churches, since it is mentioned in the Domesday Book, which was commissioned by William the Conqueror in 1085. Inner Saxon windows, later painted with patterns in perspective by the Normans, are still in evidence. The stonework from the tower, built in 1180, is intact. The well-maintained flint and shingle outer construction houses still-extant devotional structures and features dating back a millennium.

It is not known with certainty whether the Austens worshipped principally at St. Swithin's Church, Walcot, Bath, when they resided there or, as Irene Collins indicates, they attended the Octagon Church. We do know, however, that Jane's parents were married in the medieval church of St. Swithin's on April 26, 1764 and that George Austen was buried in the crypt of the rebuilt (1779-90) church when he died on January 21, 1805. St. Swithin's was the last Georgian church to be built in Bath. In addition to the Reverend George Austen, the novelist Frances Burney is buried there. The Jane Austen Societies of Great Britain, North America, and Australia were instrumental in the relocation and rededication of the Reverend Austen's gravestone, an initiative completed in October 2000. It may now be viewed by all passers-by in the north garden of the church, as it is currently mounted on an angled plinth with an adjacent plaque explaining the connections between the Austen family and the church. Interestingly, in all of her novels, the only time Austen mentions an actual contemporaneous church is in *Northanger Abbey*, when John Thorpe refers to the distance to "Walcot Church" as he boasts of the swiftness of his horses to Catherine Morland.

For the eight years prior to her death, Austen worshipped on a continual basis at St. Nicholas Church, Chawton. She must have been grateful to her brother Edward that, not unlike Steventon,



Photo by Vera Quin

Interior view of St. Andrew Church, Ashe showing west end with Lefroy tablets. A new JASNA memorial honoring Anne Lefroy may placed under the window to the right.



Exterior view of St. Margaret's Church, Horsmonden, showing newly-discovered Austen graves.

Continued on page 6.

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Photo by Harold Hopkins

Interior view of St. Nicolas Church, Great Bookham, north aisle, showing an ancient window above the pillar.

her parish church was such a very short distance from her home. The vicar, the Reverend John Papillon, was a distant cousin of the Knights and Jane and other family members were frequent visitors at the vicarage. Jane's favorite brother, Henry, was ordained deacon in December 1816 and appointed assistant curate at Chawton the following February, just months before Jane's death. Like many of the other Austen churches we have considered, St. Nicholas, Chawton, also has medieval roots, since there has been a church building on this site since the 13th Century. The nave and the wooden-sided belfry of the church were destroyed by fire in 1871, but have been rebuilt. Jane's mother and sister are both buried in the small graveyard to the right rear of the church.

For Austen's own final resting place, we turn to the great cathedral at Winchester. Built between 1079 and 1093 of limestone from the Isle of Wight, the Norman structure received a major Perpendicular (English Gothic Style) renovation in the late 15th Century. By far the most impressive of the churches we have examined, the cathedral's sheer size is stunning—the extremely long nave is accentuated by row upon row of ponderous piers and noble Gothic arches. One method of calculating its ground plan area measures over 53,000 square feet—large enough to contain all of the previous churches discussed thus far. This venerable cathedral may still contain relics of St. Swithin, the 9th Century Bishop of Winchester. In her last composition, written a scant three days before her death, Jane Austen has St. Swithin utter prescient words in a six stanza poem: "When once we are buried you think we are dead/ But behold me Immortal." Even though her tomb is in the north aisle of the nave of Winchester Cathedral, through the legacy of her writing, we continue to consider her "Immortal."

Finally, a brief listing of nine other churches more peripheral to Austen includes the following: the church at Deane, the second living of the Reverend George Austen, situated only a mile from Steventon; St. Lawrence, Reading, where Jane and Cassandra

worshipped when attending the Reading Ladies Boarding School from midsummer of 1785 to that of 1787; St. Peter's Church, Hurstbourne Tarrant, where Jane would worship when she visited the Lloyd sisters at Ibthorpe and where her brother, James, married Mary Lloyd in 1797; St. Andrews, Colyton, Devon, whose vicar, Richard Buller, was a former pupil of the Reverend George Austen, and who extended gracious invitations for family holidays; St. Mary Magdalen, Adlestrop, where Jane's mother's cousin, the Reverend Thomas Leigh, was rector; the chapel at Stoneleigh Abbey, another Leigh estate, which Mrs. Austen, Jane, and Cassandra visited in 1806; the church at Hamstall Ridware, Staffordshire, where the threesome stayed in 1806 with the Reverend Edward Cooper, another of Mrs. Austen's cousins; St. Peter and St. Paul, Tonbridge, Kent, the parish to which belonged the Reverend George Austen's wealthy solicitor uncle Francis Austen; and St. Paul's, Covent Garden, where Jane and Cassandra worshipped when they visited their brother Henry in nearby Henrietta Street in London.

This overview of Austen-related churches provides a glimpse into another facet of the rich legacy that is Jane Austen's. From simple English country church to large city church, from small village church to magnificent cathedral, Austen's deep love of her native land ("English verdure, English culture, English comfort"—*Emma*) is evident. For Austen lovers worldwide, the lure of these churches with their air of quiet serenity and historical significance brings us to another place and time more consonant with that of Jane Austen. The churches offer a warm welcome to all who visit. In gratitude, many of our members have generously contributed to these churches through the years.

Sue Bain is chair of the JASNA Church Committee, serving with Jean Long and Linda Kjeldgaard. She is especially appreciative to Elsa Solender for establishing this committee, for her wonderful support and guidance in its first year, and for suggesting this topic for an article.