

A Ramble Through Austen Country

Hampshire: Discovering the 19th Century World of Portsmouth Artist R.H.C. Ubsdell.

By Chris Brindle.

Ashbourne, Chapel Lane, West Bergholt, Colchester, Essex: Brindle Enterprises Ltd., 2012.

Volume 1: Portsmouth & South Hampshire. 148 pp. Hardcover. \$22.50; Volume 2: Southampton & North Hampshire. 143 pp. Hardcover. \$22.50

Review by Jeffrey Nigro.

Bath (in Somerset) may house the Jane Austen Centre, and it has become a convenient meeting point for Austen lovers from all over the world; but Hampshire was Jane Austen's "home county," the part of England in which she resided for most of her all-too-brief life. Within the borders of Hampshire lie places whose very names resonate for anyone familiar with Austen's biography: Steventon, Deane, Ashe, Portsmouth, Southampton, Chawton. This handsomely produced two-volume set gives the reader a tour of the county of Hampshire as it looked a mere generation after Jane Austen's death, seen through the work of a little-known artist, Richard Henry Clement Ubsdell (1812–1887).

The son of a pub waiter, Ubsdell trained as a painter of miniatures, the very technique Austen used as an analogy to describe her own work in her often-quoted "little bit of Ivory" remark. Then as now, opportunities for a jobbing regional artist could be scarce, a situation particularly problematic for someone with a growing family; Ubsdell and his wife had four children by 1839. In almost desperate need of work and cash, he traveled throughout Hampshire during the 1840s, executing portraits and topographical views, mostly in watercolor, for local clients. Subsequently, he would exhibit at the Royal Academy, embrace the new medium of photography, and even serve on the Portsmouth city council.

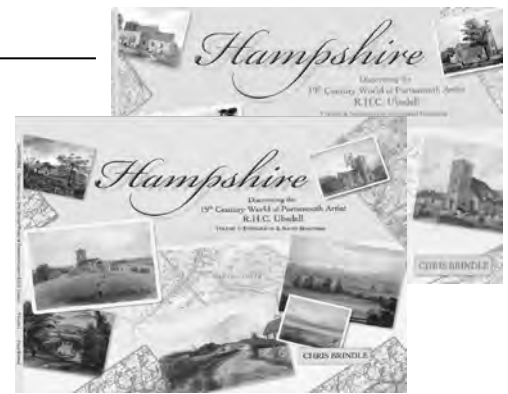
Author Chris Brindle is Ubsdell's great-great-great grandson. His goals are to reintroduce his ancestor's work

to a modern audience, and to allow visitors to Hampshire to experience the county through Ubsdell's images. The oblong format of the volumes may be awkward for some book shelves, and they would be a little unwieldy as on-the-spot guidebooks. However, these well-researched and profusely illustrated volumes give the reader the delightful sensation of perusing a much-loved family album recounting a leisurely ramble through what Brindle himself labels "Austen Country."

Each volume opens with two maps of the entire county: a nineteenth century print version, as complex as a woven tapestry, and a streamlined modern version for easy orientation. Towns, views, churches, and other important buildings get a few pages each, with full color (if often rather small) reproductions of Ubsdell's watercolors, alongside photographs and other comparative visual material. But this is no mere picture book: it contains much engagingly presented historical information as well as some helpful "then and now" comparisons of different sites. This book is part of a welcome trend in art history of the past twenty years or so. Scholars are finally taking seriously the British tradition of topographical and architectural watercolors, long dismissed as artistically retrograde, with more than a whiff of middle class amateurism about it (see, for example, E.F. Benson's affectionate satirizing of this phenomenon in his brilliant Mapp and Lucia novels).

Ubsdell's watercolors seem to be exquisitely rendered without being fussy, with just enough atmospheric effects to create a poetic mood. He is particularly masterly at representing buildings, which he can invest with a quiet dignity. Even in reproduction his sensitivity to the nuanced tones of old brickwork is evident, especially in his renderings of churches, which form the vast majority of the images.

Above all, it is Ubsdell's representations of people and places connected to Jane Austen that will be of particular interest



to Austen lovers. Portraits, both painted and photographed, of Jane's brothers Francis (Frank) and Charles Austen can be attributed to Ubsdell. A miniature of Charles is now at Jane Austen's House Museum; unfortunately, the present whereabouts of the painting of Frank is unknown. Ubsdell also executed a miniature of Austen's niece and fellow novelist Anna Lefroy (1845, private collection). Anna is depicted with a gentle smile, with a hint of slyness to it—she seems to have inherited something of her aunt's wry sense of humor.

Disappointingly, it appears that Ubsdell did not do any watercolors of either St. Nicholas church at Steventon or Deane, although Brindle reproduces Anna Lefroy's 1818 sketch of the latter, and an anonymous watercolor (c. 1859) of the former. Steventon Rectory had already been pulled down by Ubsdell's time, and he did not do any watercolors of Chawton House or Cottage. Of course, Jane Austen was not yet the cult figure she is today, although Brindle does include a lovely section entitled "The Road to Chawton Cottage."

This book was published for the bicentenary of Ubsdell's birth, and it is still timely as we celebrate the 200th anniversary of the publication of *Mansfield Park*, in which, as we know, Portsmouth plays an important role. Chris Brindle is to be commended for reintroducing the precise yet sensitive work of his forgotten ancestor to a twenty-first century audience.

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