

## Jane Austen's Houses in Fact and Fiction

NIGEL NICOLSON  
Cranbrook, England

In all Jane Austen's novels the only reference to the United States is a remark overheard by Fanny Price at Mansfield Park. Tom Bertram says to the vicar, "It's a strange business this in America, Dr. Grant." We are not told what the strange business was, but scholars have deduced that it was President Madison's rupture of trade with England. But to me an even stranger business is the enormous success of your Society. Our more modest efforts in England to celebrate our greatest novelist is like comparing Barton Cottage to Pemberley. However, we are now making strenuous efforts to raise the level of our membership and activities to yours, and we thank you for your stimulus and example.

In publishing a book earlier this year, called rather tamely *The World of Jane Austen*, my purpose, apart from giving myself a great deal of fun under the disguise of work, was twofold – to make a record in text and pictures, much as Constance Hill did nearly a hundred years ago, of the surviving houses which Jane Austen knew by residence or visits, and to consider her novels as a product of her visual experience. In particular I asked the question whether she based any of her fictional houses on actual ones, a question to which I can give an immediate answer to avoid disappointing you later: No.

Some of her houses have long disappeared or been altered beyond recognition. Our greatest loss is Steventon Rectory where she was born and spent the first 25 years of her life, and only one of the houses in London where she stayed with her brother Henry has survived in any recognizable form, 10 Henrietta Street. The Austen house in Southampton has gone, and so have a few houses she knew well in Hampshire and Kent, like Manydown and Bifrons. But the majority still exist, notably the two houses in Chawton, all five houses in Bath, and Goodnestone and Godmersham in Kent. For the rest we know what they looked like from contemporary prints and paintings, and what is perhaps even more important, their settings, for the countryside has scarcely altered from her day to our own. If she could wander round her familiar neighbourhoods, the greatest difference she would notice is the state of the roads, in her time almost impassable in winter.

I am not one of those who believe that environment greatly influences character, and that a building can in some way retain the personalities of those who have inhabited it in the past. One cannot argue that the houses which Jane Austen knew best "reflect" her nature, or that in entering one of them today one "feels" her presence. In truth, her family's houses are generally unlike her sunny nature. Steventon Rectory was so ramshackle that it was pulled down, apparently to nobody's regret, a few years after Jane's death, while Chawton Cottage was, and is, just plain ugly. One must look again at these two houses with the idea of learning from them the scale and the standard of the Austens' homelife, and the circumstances in which Jane

created her novels. Both houses were very cramped. It is true that at Steventon there were two sitting-rooms, a kitchen, and a study for George Austen on the ground floor, and eight bedrooms and three attic rooms above them, but one has to people the Rectory with as many as fifteen inhabitants at a time, counting seven children, the lodging students and the servants. Jane and Cassandra shared a bedroom, and they had a dressing-room next door large enough to contain a pianoforte, but only their father had any privacy. This does not seem to have concerned Jane. She could write anywhere. And writing was simply one of the many occupations with which this unusually happy and united family amused itself. It was largely an outdoor life they led – hunting for the boys, acting their own plays in the barn, walking, riding, and dancing at Basingstoke and in neighbours' houses. When they moved to Bath in 1801, they lodged for four years at 4 Sydney Place, a house on four floors and a basement, commodious compared to Steventon because there were only four of them and two servants, but given this extra space for writing, Jane, for reasons that deserve further investigation, wrote only the first chapters of *The Watsons*. We know the Southampton house only from a single illustration, which shows it reasonably large, but there too she wrote nothing of consequence. Finally, there was Chawton Cottage, where she issued three of her novels in their finished form, wrote *Emma*, *Persuasion* and *Mansfield Park*, and began *Sanditon*, all works of superlative quality which owed nothing to the circumstances of their composition, for Chawton was small, ungainly, and must have echoed like a tambourine to the noise of passing carriages and the servants cooking and cleaning under Mrs. Austen's vociferous directions.

I believe, therefore, that we must look beyond the houses which Jane Austen could call her own to discover how she came to know so much about architecture and different levels of society. Hers was in no sense a scholarly approach. She never used terms familiar to us, like Jacobean, Renaissance, Palladian or Regency, but by deft hints she distinguished the periods sufficiently for us to recognise them, and furnished them appropriately. She never in her novels makes a mistake of date or scale. She noticed and remembered architectural features, and worked them into her books as appropriate settings for her characters. When we read these novels today, and wander round the country which they describe, it is simple to identify the sources of her visual inspiration. In Hampshire we find houses like Deane, Ashe House and Ashe Park, Oakley Hall and Ibthorpe near Newbury where she was a frequent visitor, all of them in different ways ideal types of the small Georgian house, cherry-pink against the encircling green, which became models for the middle-class houses that belonged to the Bennets and the Woodhouses. Then there was an upper level within reach of Steventon, grander houses to which the Austens were invited because they were attractive and their company enjoyable, houses like Lord Bolton's at Hackwood, Lord Portsmouth's Hurstbourne Park (since destroyed), the Vyne which is now one of the most treasured possessions of the National Trust, and Laverstoke which Jane knew when it was in course of construction. Another group encircled her brother's lovely house in Kent, Godmersham,

houses like Chilham Castle, Godinton and Mersham-le-Hatch, all of which survive intact, and particularly Goodnestone and its neighbour Rowling, where undoubtedly she composed parts of her early books, for she would carry her work with her on month-long visits.

Jane Austen did not allow herself to be carried away by the grandeur of these mansions. She was in no sense a snob. She never boasted to her family of the distinction of her new acquaintance, never stood in awe of their rich porticos and furnishing, nor of the family portraits which hung like a second set of occupants on the walls. It was therefore with surprise that I recently came across a lecture which my father, Harold Nicolson, gave to the Jane Austen Society in 1956, where, after dealing with much sympathy and humour with her letters, he added: "Her novels, it will generally be agreed, are almost inconceivably snobbish." He seems to have based this judgement on the passage in *Emma* where Emma discourages Harriet from marrying Robert Martin, saying, "A young farmer is the very last sort of person to raise my curiosity. The yeomanry are precisely the order of people with whom I feel I can have nothing to do." She is identifying lack of education with vulgarity. But this is the young Emma before Mr. Knightley mended her opinions and manners: it is not Jane Austen speaking with Emma's voice. I know that to abuse Emma in a gathering such as this is likely to arouse the same degree of indignation as if I spoke ill of Princess Diana in Bourne-mouth. All the same, the purpose of the novel is surely to show the transformation of the heroine from a delightful, irresponsible minx into an enchanting, sensible woman. She starts, but does not end, as a snob. In the last chapter she allows Harriet to marry Robert. But, further, a writer who could identify, describe and brilliantly ridicule such snobs as Lady Catherine, Mrs. Norris, Sir Walter Elliot, Mrs. Bennet, Mrs. Elton and all the Bertrams except Edmund, could not possibly be a snob herself.

It is true that she thought money important. You should inherit it if possible, or marry it if you do not (all her heroines marry rich men), but there is no suggestion that you should make it. She also had a very fine concept of the gentleman. When I was commissioned in 1940 into the Grenadier Guards, a rather posh regiment, the Colonel warned me, "Of course, we'll expect you to behave like a gentleman," and being uncertain how a gentleman should behave, I asked for a further definition. "A gentleman," the Colonel replied, wittily and truthfully, "is a man in whose presence a woman feels herself to be a lady." Does that not precisely describe Mr. Knightley? His courtesy (which does not prevent him from scolding Emma), his grace of intellect and manner, his fine bearing, humour and competence, makes him an anti-snob, and those are precisely the qualities that Jane Austen most admired. He is the sort of person, as well as the originals of her grotesque characters, whom she met in the grander houses which she frequented. She returned unimpressed, socially or architecturally, just as she disdained literary salons or smoke-filled rooms.

The late Duke of Wellington, himself an architect, maintained that Jane Austen "cared nothing for the visual arts." It is true that she rarely described to Cassandra the pleasure that she had taken in a house or room. I remember

only one such passage, when she writes after a visit to Ashe Park, "To sit in silence over a good fire and in a well-proportioned room is a luxurious sensation." Never does she comment on the beauty of a church or cathedral. The Gothic meant little to her. Nor does she seem to have noticed paintings or sculpture with any particular delight, though Henry would always take her round the London galleries. On the other hand she observed more than she gave herself credit for. She cannot describe a house or a cottage without endowing it with a personality. She described small houses with considerable care. Hunsford Parsonage, for example, was "rather small, but well-built and convenient, and everything was fitted up and arranged with neatness and consistency" (one thinks of *Ibthorpe*); or *Randalls*, "Two living rooms each side of a middle passage with facing doors"; or *Barton Cottage*, "A narrow passage led directly through the house into the garden behind. On each side of the entrance was a sitting-room, about sixteen feet square, and beyond them were the offices and the stairs. Four bedrooms and two garrets formed the rest of the house. It had not been built many years and was in good repair." And in my book I quote this description of *Rosings*, a much grander house, as it was first exhibited by Mr. Collins to the *Lucases* and *Elizabeth Bennet*:

As the weather was fine, they had a pleasant walk of about half a mile across the park. . . . Elizabeth saw much to be pleased with, though she could not be in such raptures as Mr. Collins expected the scene to inspire, and was but slightly affected by his enumeration of the windows in front of the house, and his relation of what the glazing altogether had originally cost Sir Lewis de Bourgh.

When they ascended the steps to the hall, Maria's alarm was every moment increasing, and even Sir William did not look perfectly calm. Elizabeth's courage did not fail her. . . . From the entrance hall, of which Mr. Collins pointed out, with a rapturous air, the fine proportions and finished ornaments, they followed the servants through an ante-chamber, to the room where Lady Catherine, her daughter and Mrs. Jenkinson were sitting. Her ladyship, with great condescension, arose to receive them.

I know of no better illustration of the use Jane Austen made of landscape and architecture to manoeuvre her fictional people and reveal their characters. In turn we see *Rosings* through the eyes of Mr. Collins, Elizabeth, Maria, her father and Lady Catherine, and slowly the house itself takes shape – its site, the dazzling display of its many windows, the steps to the front door, and the series of rooms that gradually admit the visitor to the mistress's formidable presence. It is assumed that the reader will share Elizabeth's opinion of all this flummery, and, like her, refuse to be impressed.

In Bath and London, real buildings and actual street-names are employed to give the narratives authenticity, but in no case does Jane Austen translate a house which she has known into its fictional counterpart. She had no need to, and would have felt it an invasion of the owner's privacy to borrow his property for her purposes. "A large handsome stone building standing well on rising ground" could be anywhere in England. *Pemberley* does not have to be *Godmersham* or *Chatsworth*, nor *Rosings* *Chevening*. The nearest parallel is *Northanger Abbey* to *Stoneleigh*, but Jane did not see *Stoneleigh*

until 1806, three years after she had completed the final revision of *Northanger Abbey*, and she must have obtained her impression of a converted abbey from prints she saw at places like The Vyne or descriptions in Gothic novels, or, far more likely, from her imagination. Just as we, her readers, impose on her descriptions of houses and their interiors our own memory of such places that we have visited, so did she. She noticed buildings on her travels, subliminally, and would take a portico from here, a bay-window from there, to build imaginary houses which are as convincing as a house like Vizcaya near Miami which is similarly composed of architectural elements taken from various European houses.

Her taste, I believe, was for the simple elegance of Georgian architecture. She was born in the eighteenth century, David Cecil has said, and spiritually she remained there. Henry, in the note he appended to the two posthumous novels, tells us that she was early enamoured of the picturesque as described by Gilpin, but the delight she took in it cannot have lasted long. She mocked it in *Sense and Sensibility* and again in *Northanger Abbey*. More in keeping with her character was "the elegance, propriety and regularity of Mansfield Park" which Fanny Price compared to the disorder and squalor of her parents' house in Portsmouth. Houses, she considered, acquire the qualities of their owners. Sotherton is unloveable because it belongs to the absurd Mr. Rushmore. Donwell Abbey is delectable because Emma is about to become its chatelaine and she loves Mr. Knightley. Throughout all her descriptions of houses runs a strong note of patriotism. She had never been abroad, not even to Scotland, and she believed instinctively that no other country could equal the loveliness of England and its buildings. Looking out of Knightley's study window, she contemplates: "It was a sweet view – sweet to the eye and mind, English verdure, English culture, English comfort, seen under a sun bright without being oppressive." And who can forget how Elizabeth Bennet came to see Darcy in quite a different light when she first visited Pemberley. A man who had inherited such beauty, she felt, and cared for it, could not be evil. Jane Austen herself was half-consciously affected by what she knew and saw of the English style. Her description of Lyme Regis in *Persuasion* is redolent with it, and the burgeoning gaiety of Regency England is all there in *Sanditon*. But of all the many houses she knew there is one which predominantly influenced her attitude. That is Godmersham in Kent, where she spent many of her happiest days with her brother Edward, and wrote (we can legitimately surmise) many of her most sparkling passages. It is also one of those houses that survive to remind us of the beauty of England that she inherited and transmitted to us with such faultless grace.