

A Visit to Jane Austen’s Last Home

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As an American visitor to Jane Austen’s country, I was thrilled to visit inside the house at 8 College Street in Winchester, where Jane Austen lived for the final two months of her life.

Now called the “Jane Austen House,” No. 8 bears an oval plaque over the front door, designed and executed by Esmond Burton, and placed there in 1956. It reads: “In this house Jane Austen lived her last days and died 18 July 1817.” The plaque may be seen in the sketch by my colleague August deBerdt, shown below. In Jane Austen’s day, the house was owned by a Mrs. David about whom history seems mute. JA’s childhood friend, Elizabeth Bigg Heathcote (a sister of Harris Bigg Wither whose marriage proposal Jane Austen had once accepted and then rejected), procured the lodging for her.

Jane Austen wrote to her favorite nephew, James Edward Austen, “Our Lodgings are very comfortable. We have a neat little Draw^{er}-room with a Bow-window overlooking D^r Gabell’s garden” (Chapman 496, *Le Faye*, 342). In JA’s time, the bow window (more correctly an oriel as it does not extend to ground level) overlooked the street where a row of cottages stood. Today it looks over a low wall and an esplanade of green grass.

The three-story brick building is now owned by Winchester College and serves as a residence for faculty members; it is not open to the public. When I saw the house in the eighties and nineties it was painted a light yellow, then later white; the interior was painted pink.

That part of the house where the Austen sisters stayed features the room with the bow window, a larger sitting room, and at its rear a small room probably not part of the house in 1817.





The “neat little Draw^e-room” is small indeed, about 6' × 12' with a low ceiling, a built-in seat by the window, a narrow door in the adjoining wall, and next to it, a fireplace. The bow window with its sixteen panes and sidelights is the room's only window. A small framed picture of the house hangs on the wall. The built-in seat is a later addition; Ellen Hill does not show it in her illustration of the room made in 1901 and published in 1902 in *Jane Austen: Her Homes & Her Friends*, written by her sister, Constance Hill (259).

The second room, much larger, has a fireplace, wainscoting painted white above the chair rail, and at the rear, a small room furnished with a bed, probably not part of the house in 1817. Like the smaller room it appears very comfortable as it has plenty of light and is close enough to Winchester College for one to be aware of human activity.

At the back of the dwelling is a garden with a mixture of flowers and vegetables, probably not there in 1817.

While in the house Jane lived chiefly on the sofa, took her meals with Cassandra “in a rational way,” she wrote to her nephew, and could walk from one room to the other. She was able to leave the house only once, in May in a sedan-chair. On July 15 her condition worsened and on the 17th her physician, Mr. Lyford, gave her an anodyne. She died at 4:30 a.m. on July 18, 1817.

As I sat on the window seat, I recalled how on July 24, Cassandra, from the little bow window, watched her sister's funeral cortege

moving down the little street to the Close. She noted that everything was conducted with the greatest tranquility, and that had she not been determined to see the last "& therefore was upon the listen," she would not have known when her sister's body was removed from the house (Le Faye, 347).

On July 21 the *Hampshire Chronicle and Courier* ran a notice of her death: "Winchester, Saturday, July 19th. Died, yesterday, in College-street, Miss Jane Austen, youngest daughter of the late Rev. George Austen. . . ." On 22 July, 1817, the *Courier* ran a longer notice and made literary history: "DIED. On the 18th inst. at Winchester, Miss Jane Austen, youngest daughter of the late Rev. George Austen, Rector of Steventon, in Hampshire, and the Authoress of *Emma*, *Mansfield Park*, *Pride and Prejudice*, and *Sense and Sensibility*. Her manners were most gentle; her affections ardent; her candor was not to be surpassed, and she lived and died as became a humble Christian." The *Courier* thus made the first published admission that Jane Austen was an author (Gilson, 470).

In deleting the residence of No. 8 College Street and substituting Winchester, the *Courier* commenced the process of elevating Jane Austen from an unknown to a provincial writer to eventually the most beloved writer of all time.

WORKS CITED

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