

2008 IVP: The Author Is In

By Sheryl Craig

I walked into the taxi station in Alton, England and, in my unmistakably American/Midwestern drawl, I requested a cab to take me to Jane Austen's house. The taxi controller paused, winked at the assembled cab drivers and delivered his line with a straight face: "Oh, I shouldn't bother, Luv. She's not in." The room exploded in laughter. When the noise died down, I managed a weak smile and the rather meek reply that I didn't expect she would be, but I wanted to go to Chawton anyway. Later that afternoon, I had my revenge.

After spending the day at Chawton Cottage, an experience that only another Janeite could fully appreciate, I popped my now obnoxiously perky self into the taxi office to announce, "You were wrong. She was in." The controller smiled and waved me away, but I was only partly in jest. Jane Austen wasn't exactly "in," but she wasn't entirely absent either. Whenever I went to Chawton Cottage, it always felt like Jane Austen had just stepped out, and the entire staff at Jane Austen's House Museum are devoted to maintaining that ambiance. It was truly an honor to assist them when I could.

Just down the road at Jane Austen's brother's house, now Chawton House Library, I was prepared to be impressed by the rare books collection, but I confess to being a bit overwhelmed when Librarian Sarah Parry assembled a collection of early editions of *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, *Cecilia*, *Elegant Extracts*, *Romance of the Forest* and *Fordyce's Sermons*. Given my research project, the library's collection of conduct books was of particular interest to me. The advice manuals that Librarian Jacqui Grainger brought into Reading Room 2 are not available in reprint, and I have yet to come across the same books in the United States. At the end of my four weeks, I was proud to be able to contribute my biography of poet Felicia Hemans to Chawton House Library's website.

When walking the path between Chawton Cottage and Chawton House Library, the same route so familiar to Jane Austen, I always felt how fortunate I was to be immersed in Jane Austen's beloved Hampshire, a world I entirely lost myself in while at the Hampshire Records Office in Winchester. I read through pages and pages of crime and punishment, celebrity scandals, politics, sports, economics, fashions, balls, advertisements, births, deaths and marriages in the weekly editions of *The Hampshire Chronicle* 1795-1817, the newspaper the Austens would have read.

My weeks in England were equally divided, two days at Chawton Cottage, two days at Chawton Library, and two days at the Hampshire Records Office. Sundays I reserved for day trips. My first foray was to The British Library in London to see Jane Austen's writing desk, spectacles, and the manuscript version of *Persuasion*. I can never grow tired of Bath, and the Musgrove sisters were not the only ones wild to see Lyme. I made pilgrimages to Steventon where Jane Austen was born, to the Winchester house where she died, and to Jane Austen's grave in Winchester Cathedral. I also attended the 2008 AGM of the Jane Austen Society and met actress Elizabeth Garvie (Elizabeth Bennet in the 1980 BBC *Pride and Prejudice*) when she visited Chawton Cottage. It was all Jane Austen, all of the time, and I am forever in debt to the Janeites on both sides of the Atlantic who provided me with so many wonderful opportunities to develop as an Austen scholar.

If you have a project that requires research or that would benefit greatly from access to primary source materials, I invite you to submit a proposal for the 2009 JASNA International Visitor Program. You will want to search Chawton House Library's on-line catalogue. In addition to *The Hampshire Chronicle*, the Hampshire County Records Office has a Knight Family Collection of papers and will soon be housing a collection of Jane Austen's letters. The Records Office has a website, and you can email them with inquiries. Also, if you are interested in museums and museum curacy or rare book collections, the Program is an excellent opportunity to observe museum and library professionals on the job at two top notch facilities. I encourage you to think about how the Cottage and Library can assist in your research but also, equally, about what you have to offer them in return. My only regret was that I couldn't do more for my gracious hosts.

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