

# A Chawton House Idyll

By Kathryn L. Libin, Vassar College

A month in the village of Chawton; twenty-eight peaceful nights in the Old Stables at Chawton Great House; twenty rich and productive days spent in the reading room of Chawton House Library; so might one measure the time in July 2010 as I settled down to work as JASNA's International Visitor. But the extraordinary sense of joy that I experienced in being there was beyond measure. Each morning began with a burst of birdsong from the garden outside my window and the sound of Shire horses clopping by, *en route* from their stalls to the pastures. Each evening ended with a quiet walk through the grounds, or a bit of music on the piano in the drawing room.

The library was for me the heart of the adventure. Part of my time was

spent with nine bound volumes of printed and manuscript music that had belonged



to the Austen and Knight families, and which preserve the collective musical taste, judgment, practice, and accomplishment of three generations. I was intrigued by the variety of musical hands to be found in the manuscript volumes: a bold and confident notation that appears to have belonged to Mrs. Cassandra Leigh Austen; a flowing, experienced hand that belonged to Elizabeth Bridges Austen; and the careful, rather painstaking hand of Jane Austen herself. Occasionally, childish hands appear, as well as little drawings and doodlings and even a totting up of figures for music lessons in the years 1782 and 1783. One day, I recognized a piece marked "unidentified" in an old inventory of the collection. "Look at this, Jacqui," I said to the librarian. "I think you'll know what it is." Pointing to the opening bars, I started to hum *God Save the King*. We laughed; so much for "unidentified."

Another strand of my research involved tracing 18th-century attitudes toward music through the library's splendid collection of treatises on female education and conduct. Situating Jane Austen's writing within this arena of lively and often raucous debate will deepen our understanding of her musical heroines.

When I emerged from the library at the end of each day, there remained congenial pastimes, not the least of which was sharing kitchen discussions with the Chawton House Library fellows, also in residence at the Old Stables. There was time for long rambles through the countryside, my favorite of which involved crossing fields, cutting through woods, clambering up and down stiles and along footpaths, to Upper Farringdon. I could spend a pleasant hour just observing the inhabitants of a nearby pasture, and one evening watched as one of the Shire horses, in high good humor, dashed down a hill with apparently no other aim in view than to scatter the sheep at its base. Over the course of three weeks, I kept my eye on a nest of young sparrow hawks, tucked away high in the brickwork of the Old Stables; one intrepid hawklet actually flew straight through the open doors of the conservatory one afternoon before eventually landing on the brick wall of the garden. I got to know the town of Alton, two miles away, well, even venturing one Saturday afternoon upon the Watercress Line, an old-fashioned steam propelled train. I

also made time for some weekend excursions farther afield, making trips to Bath, to Mr. Handel's house in London, and to Gilbert White's wonderful house and gardens in Selborne.

It was a pleasure to participate in the annual meeting on July 17 of the Jane Austen Society, spread out in festive tents across the library lawn and culminating in an intimate Evensong service in St. Nicholas church. During the entire month, the library hummed with activity, full of scholars, visitors, and guests. Every one of us was treated with the same friendly attention and courtesy by a staff that is unmatched in its genuine hospitality and professionalism. I will forever be thankful to JASNA and to the Chawton House Library for the great gift of this experience. ❀

*Kathryn L. Libin, Associate Professor and Chair of the music department at Vassar College, is writing a book about Jane Austen and music. Further writing about her musical explorations in England last July may be found on her blog, A Musicologist Abroad. <http://blogs.vassar.edu/musicologistabroad/>*