



The History of Jane Austen's Writing Desk

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THE TWO-HUNDREDTH ANNIVERSARY of the start of Jane Austen's creative literary life in Chawton Cottage is July 2009, and October 2009 is the thirtieth anniversary of the founding of JASNA and the tenth anniversary of Jane Austen's writing desk being placed in the care of The British Library by Joan Austen-Leigh and her family.

Jane Austen wrote to her sister, Cassandra, on Wednesday, 24 October 1798, from the Bull and George at Dartford:

I should have begun my letter soon after our arrival but for a little adventure which prevented me. After we had been here a quarter of an hour it was discovered that my writing and dressing boxes had been by accident put into a chaise which was just packing off as we came in, and were driven away towards Gravesend in their way to the West Indies. No part of my property could have been such a prize before, for in my writing-box was all my worldly wealth, 7*l*. . . . Mr Nottley immediately despatched a man and horse after the chaise, and in half an hour's time I had the pleasure of being as rich as ever; they were got about two or three miles off.

The little portable writing box rescued by Mr. Nottley unfolds to reveal an elegant sloped mahogany writing desk with an inlaid-leather top. The desk, now a well-visited display at the Sir John Ritblat Gallery: Treasures of the British



Jane Austen's writing desk was placed in the care of the British Library on 29 October 1999 by Joan Austen-Leigh in order to provide pleasure and inspiration to future generations of writers and readers. Courtesy of the British Library.

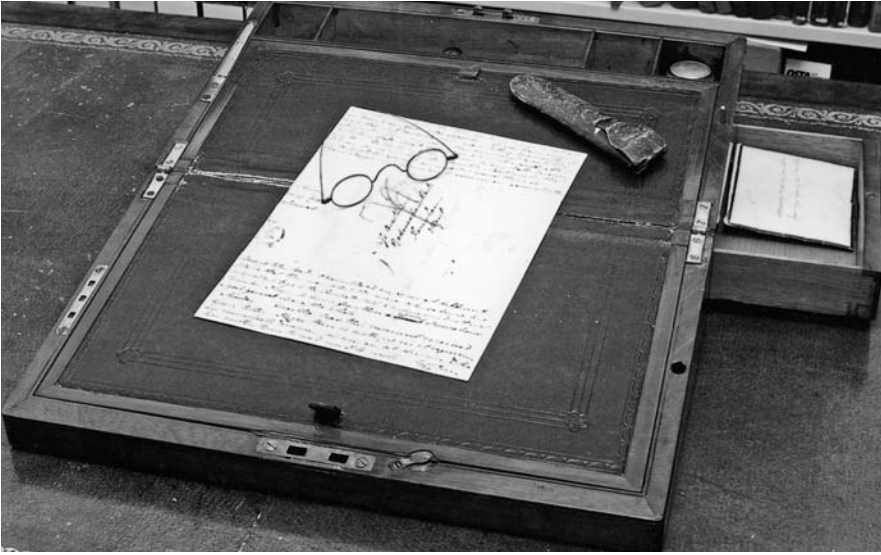


Jane Austen's writing desk, a cherished private heritage that is now a public treasure. Courtesy of the British Library.

Library, was purchased by Jane Austen's father, the Reverend George Austen, from Ring Brothers at Basingstoke in December 1794, in time for Jane Austen's birthday or her twentieth Christmas at Steventon. It was at Steventon Rectory that the foundations of Jane Austen's later fame were laid. There, in 1796, she began the first draft of a novel, completing it in just ten months. "[M]y own darling child" was later "lopt & cropt" at Chawton (29 January 1813) and published in 1813 as *Pride and Prejudice*.

It was at Chawton that Jane Austen created *Mansfield Park*, *Emma*, and *Persuasion*. The quiet literary life at Chawton Cottage is described by her nephew James Edward Austen-Leigh in his *Memoir*: "In that well-occupied female party, there must have been many precious hours of silence during which the pen was busy at the little mahogany writing-desk, while Fanny Price, or Emma Woodhouse, or Anne Elliott was growing into beauty and interest" (129).

The desk has had some of Jane Austen's letters and family things stored in it for generations, including the tooled leather album of James Edward



The writing desk, open to view. Courtesy of the British Library.

Austen-Leigh's hand-cut silhouettes, some with Emma Austen-Leigh's writing in the captions underneath. Jane Austen's desk is nicely fitted with a long drawer, a place for an inkwell, penknife, and quills, and a compartment that can be opened easily with space for correspondence, spectacles and string, manuscripts and sealing wax.

"This mahogany desk, which has done good service to the public, is now in the possession of my sister, Miss Austen" wrote James Edward Austen-Leigh (129). Jane Austen wrote about the importance of aunts, and fittingly her writing desk was passed from aunt to niece, from Jane to her sister Cassandra, and to her niece Caroline Austen, through the generations to the present day. When the writing desk went back briefly to Chawton in 2003 for a meeting of Janeites, after an absence from the cottage of well over a century, some of the people there to witness the occasion found at that moment a felt sense of homecoming.

WORKS CITED

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Austen-Leigh, James Edward. *A Memoir of Jane Austen*. London: Bentley, 1870.