



Jane Austen beside the Seaside: Devonshire and Wales 1801–1803

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IF WE ARE TO BELIEVE the family biographers, one of the most dramatic moments of Jane Austen's life struck in December 1800 when she "fainted away" at the announcement that the family was to leave Steventon and make a new home in Bath. This was a sudden decision and arrived at by Mr. and Mrs. Austen on their own without consulting either of "the Girls," as Mr. Austen called them (Lefroy 157). Whether this side of things was clumsily handled is not for us to judge, but the decision itself was timely, and the move to Bath was not a step in the dark. Mr. and Mrs. Austen had stayed there several times before, already enjoyed an *entrée* to Bath society through their own circle of relations and friends there, and were confident that the city, with its spa and an abundance of doctors, was the right place for their retirement. Neither enjoyed good health. According to Anna Lefroy, the decision was made for the sake of Mrs. Austen's health, while Frank Austen judged that at sixty-nine Mr. Austen "felt too incapacitated from age and increasing infirmities to discharge his parochial duties in a manner satisfactory to himself" (Southam 175). Beyond this explanation lies the possibility of an ulterior motive. In moving to Bath—the country's liveliest marriage market—the Austens could be hoping that their daughters might at last find suitable partners before they became rooted in spinsterhood. At twenty-eight, Cassandra seemed to have chosen that course already and Jane, at twenty-five, was dangerously close to it.

The arrangements for departure were soon made. James Austen was to take on the curacy of the parish, and in anticipation of Bath's higher cost of living, Mr. Austen aimed to raise his parish income, including the tithes, to around six hundred pounds a year. Edward, Frank, and Charles paid farewell visits to their old home, and in May 1801 the Austen family left the Rectory for good. In Bath, they were welcomed by Mrs. Austen's brother and sister-in-law, the Leigh-Perrots at No.1 The Paragon; assisted in their house-hunting by the Leigh-Perrots and Edward Austen, they were able to sign a lease on 4 Sydney Place a matter of days before leaving for Sidmouth in early June.

This immediate transfer from Bath to Sidmouth might seem puzzling but reveals the Austens as part of a larger cultural migration. Cowper, the poet-moralist of the age, was contemptuous of sea-bathing, ridiculing this fashionable pursuit in "Retirement" (1787): formerly, the "prudent grandmamas" and "modern belles" flocked to the inland spas,

But now alike, gay widow, virgin, wife
 Ingenious to diversify dull life,
 In coaches, chaises, caravans and hoys,
 Fly to the coast for daily, nightly joys,
 And impatient of dry land, agree

With one consent to rush into the sea. (1:284)

The promptitude of their arrival in Bath and their rapid departure for Sidmouth might seem to place the Austen family amongst the rushers to the sea.

The idea of visiting the West Country was not altogether new. In 1800, the Austens had already been making plans for such a visit the following summer, known between Jane and Cassandra as "the Dawlish scheme." Then, in late October or early November 1800, quite out of the blue an invitation arrived from Richard Buller, one of Mr. Austen's former pupils, now vicar of Colyton and occupying a large Tudor vicarage with ample accommodation for the Austen family. Once a prosperous mediaeval wool town, Colyton was set inland just north of the road linking Lyme Regis and Sidmouth, and it would provide the Austens with a convenient point of departure for any further travel westwards along the Devon coast. Jane reported to Cassandra, who was staying at Godmersham with brother Edward, that Buller "is very pressing in his invitation" and that "my father is very much inclined to go there next Summer.—It is a circumstance that may considerably assist the Dawlish scheme" (8 November 1800). Writing again early in January, Jane advised Cassandra, still at Godmersham, of a change in plan: "Sidmouth is now talked of as our Summer abode" and went on to ask her to "get all the information therefore

about it that you can from M^{rs} C. Cage,” recently in the West Country (9 January 1801). Later that month, Jane was able to write to Cassandra of an invitation from another quarter, their cousin Edward Cooper, the Rector of Hamstall Ridware in Staffordshire. Cooper “is so kind as to want us all to come to Hamstall this summer, instead of going to the sea, but we are not so kind as to mean to do it. The summer after, if you please, Mr. Cooper, but for the present we greatly prefer the sea to all our relations” (25 January 1801).

As to that larger change, the family move from Steventon to Bath, that crisis had passed. Jane felt able to reassure Cassandra that the blow had lightened, that with the prospect of fresh scenes the old ties were loosening; and, in the final lines, she neatly side-stepped any betrayal of emotion in a mock injunction to silence:

I get more & more reconciled to the idea of our removal. We have lived long enough in this Neighbourhood, the Basingstoke Balls are certainly on the decline, there is something interesting in the bustle of going away, & the prospect of spending future summers by the Sea or in Wales is very delightful.—For a time we shall now possess many of the advantages which I have often thought of with Envy in the wives of Sailors or Soldiers.—It must not be generally known however that I am not sacrificing a great deal in quitting the Country—or I can expect to inspire no tenderness, no interest in those we leave behind. (4 January 1801)



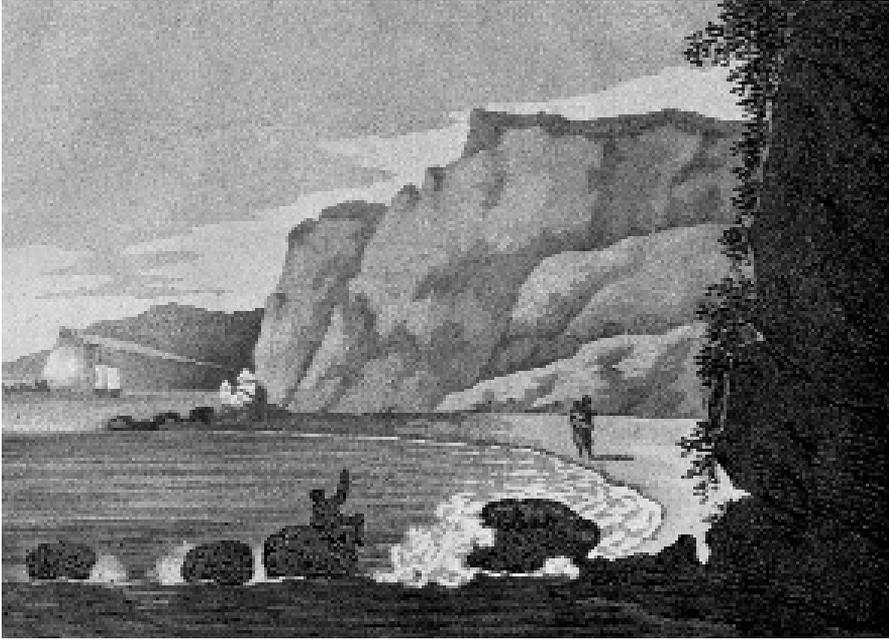
There are, of course, gaps in our primary source, Jane Austen’s letters. Unfortunately for our “seaside” account, such an instance arises here, a gap of over three years, from the end of May 1801 until mid-September 1804, a dire loss, since it extends across the very time when the Austens were at their most active as seaside visitors. Nor, to fill the gap, however inadequately, is there any other contemporary record we can turn to. We know the bare facts: that during this period the Austens visited Sidmouth in 1801, and very possibly Barmouth and Tenby on the Welsh coast, all this between mid-June and late mid-August; Dawlish and Teignmouth in 1802; and probably in 1803 the first of two visits to Lyme Regis. Beyond these years and locations, we have virtually no details of the family’s resort comings and goings, of the society they encountered, of new acquaintanceships made and old friendships renewed, of the seaside pursuits they followed. As Deirdre Le Faye, the chronicler of the

Austen world, has put it, Jane's "movements" during these lost years "can only be deduced by hints and glimpses found in other sources" (135).

One such glimpse comes from an entry in Mary Lloyd's diary for 14 August 1802, noting that Mr. and Mrs. Austen, with Charles, together one assumes with Jane and Cassandra, had arrived at Steventon from Wales that very day. (Mary Lloyd's diary was subsequently lost. "At some time early in the twentieth century the Austen-Leighs copied out this information" [Le Faye 303–04, n. 23].) Another glimpse of this same journey comes in a much later recollection that Anna Lefroy sent in 1862 to James Edward Austen-Leigh, at that time probably early in the task of gathering information for the *Memoir*: "She was once, I think, at Tenby—and once they went as far north as Barmouth. I would give a good deal, that is, as much as I could afford, for a sketch which Aunt Cassandra made of her in one of their expeditions—sitting down out of doors on a hot day, with her bonnet strings untied" (8 August 1862). Cassandra's sketch, giving us a back and left-hand side view of Jane Austen on a summer's day, is reproduced in Le Faye's *Jane Austen: A Family Record* (281). There is some confusion here since the sketch is signed CEA on the back, with the date 1804, the year the Austens passed the summer at Lyme Regis.

Other slivers of information, valuable as gold dust, come down to us through family tradition. Notable among these is the suggestion made in the *Temple Bar Magazine* in 1879 by a great niece, Fanny Caroline Lefroy, that either before or after the 1804 visit to Lyme, the Austens also stayed at Teignmouth in lodgings bearing the rather grand name of "Great Bella Vista." Since Teignmouth and Dawlish are neighboring resorts, only four miles apart, it seems likely that this visit took place in 1802. Great Bella Vista, once a hotel, now a block of apartments, its face lifted several times, remains standing on the Teignmouth Promenade to this day, its view of the sea uninterrupted since the original building went up in about 1800.

Rare hints also occur in Jane Austen's letters of a later period. In the summer of 1814, her novel-writing niece Anna sent sections of her current work, which involved Dawlish, to her aunt for criticism and guidance. Answering Anna's questions, Jane Austen wrote that she was "not sensible of any Blunders about Dawlish. The Library was particularly pitiful & wretched 12 years ago, & not likely to have anybody's publication," a comment that is the best confirmation we are ever likely to get of 1802 as the year of the family's Dawlish visit. Jane Austen also pointed out in a further section of Anne's story that "Lyme will not do. Lyme is towards 40 miles distance from Dawlish & would not be talked of there.—I have put Starcross indeed." (Starcross was a



Mouth of the Teign, by James Malton after Frances Keenan, from *A Select Collection of Views in the County of Devon; Including Some Antiquities* (1800). © Trustees of the British Museum.

small resort four miles north of Dawlish.) “—If you prefer *Exeter*, that must be always safe.” Exactitude of distance arose again: “They must be *two* days going from Dawlish to Bath; They are nearly 100 miles apart.” Finally, in a postscript, Jane Austen directed her niece’s attention to mistakes in her account of the area: “Twice you have put Dorsetshire for Devonshire. I have altered it.—M^r Griffin must have lived in Devonshire; Dawlish is half way down the County.—” (10–18 August 1814). Jane Austen reads with the eye of a precisionist and calls for correctness and exactitude. Yet the topography she sets out here extends further than the linear tracing of distances and durations of travel; it becomes a topography of social culture, dependant on her own personal knowledge, from which she is able to say that Lyme Regis “would not be talked of” in Dawlish, whereas it would be in Starcross or Exeter.

Unfortunately, there is no circumstantial evidence of Jane’s “nameless and dateless” West Country romance, no hints or allusions we can detect in her correspondence, and we have to rely upon accounts handed down in the family.

Overall, then, the loss of Jane Austen's letters over these three years is a saddening and largely unbridgeable gap. By way of replacement, the best we can do is turn to the surviving letter, to diaries of other visitors, and to contemporary guidebooks and tours in an attempt to convey at least some sense of what the Austens found in these resorts and how they are likely to have passed their time during visits lasting for several months. In particular, I have drawn extensively upon the observations of the one man entitled to be known as the "Mr. Devonshire" of this period—the Rev. John Swete, the great Devonian antiquary and topographer. Although his observations on the resorts were made a few years earlier, in the case of Sidmouth in 1795, and deeply subjective, they are clear, authoritative, and surprisingly attentive to the "resort" function and social culture of the many towns and villages he visited along the coast. Moreover, unlike the guidebook writers, Swete set out with no readership to please or inform. He was a wealthy man, and his observations, entitled "Picturesque Sketches of Devon," running to twenty volumes between 1789 and 1801, were written and illustrated for his own benefit as a personal record of the routes he had taken and the places he had visited on his extensive tours and excursions, made on horseback, in search of what was termed "picturesque beauty." Scenes imbued with this quality appeared ready-made for the artist, and the pursuit of them was a cult enthusiasm that went back twenty years to William Gilpin's discovery of picturesque beauty in the Lake District, Snowdonia and the Wye Valley, and other parts of Britain. Likewise, far from regarding his "sketches" as a private document, Swete allowed other followers of Gilpin, both writers and artists, to consult this enormous journal in their own quests.



It is no surprise that the Austens chose Devon resorts as their summer destinations. For Bath residents the road south was a well-trodden path. The city, surrounded by hills, sits in something of an amphitheatre, with a summer climate often sultry and uncomfortable. Thus the seaside resorts to the south beckoned, relatively close at hand. The first leg of the route most favored was the turnpike running directly from Bath to Exeter, a journey of seventy-five miles. Most travellers to resorts along the coast would then transfer to smaller coaches, more suited to the secondary roads. Including this second leg of the journey, Dawlish via Exeter was about ninety miles from Bath, Sidmouth via Exeter about ninety-five miles, both comfortably accessible by coach in two days. Yet while visitors from Bath were welcome for their free-spending ways,

they constituted only a small proportion of the resorts' seasonal population, and it was the inland gentry, the beneficiaries of the South West's wool prosperity, who provided the bulk of the visitors needed to secure the social and economic vitality of resort life—unquestionably a very potent mixture for the observant eye and finely-attuned ear of a social satirist of Jane Austen's gifts.

As important as this provincial element was to the economic success of South Devon resorts, they also found themselves the beneficiaries of a growing shift in medical opinion. The earliest resorts had been based on claims for the therapeutic value of sea water. Like spa water in the inland resorts, sea water was consumed in prescribed draughts or bathed in, or both, according to the patient's state of health and the ills to be cured. Although as early as the 1750s the occasional medical voice could be heard extolling the tonic value of sea air, it was not until the 1780s and '90s that this new call was taken up seriously and brought about a widespread change in medical thinking. The benefits offered by the water therapies were now seen to be matched by those provided by sea air and a coastal climate. Later, Jane Austen would reflect this shift in medical thinking. As to any rivalry between the therapies of sea bathing and sea air at Sanditon, Mr. Parker has a palliative middle way:

The Sea air & Sea Bathing together were nearly infallible, one or the other of them being a match for every Disorder, of the Stomach, the Lungs or the Blood. . . . If the Sea breeze failed, the Sea-Bath was the certain corrective;—& where Bathing disagreed, the Sea Breeze alone was evidently designed by Nature for the cure. (*MW* 373)

Wealthy patients with respiratory complaints, including asthma and tuberculosis, were recommended to winter in the south of France, where the air was warm and judged especially healthy. A large English colony formed at Montpellier, a center of learning famed for its medical skills and the quality of its air, with further colonies at Aix, Avignon, and Toulouse (Travis 27). But the storming of the Bastille, the Terror, and in 1793 the French declaration of war gradually drove Riviera patients back to England. Here, they found themselves welcomed with a homeland destination: South Devon as an English Riviera, its coastline offering an exceptionally mild climate and the riches of sea air. In 1791, Dr. Jebb, with all the authority he could muster as the King's Physician, was already pronouncing the "pureness and salubrity of the air at Exmouth equal to the south of France" (*Exeter Flying Post* 6 June 1791, qtd. in Travis 27).

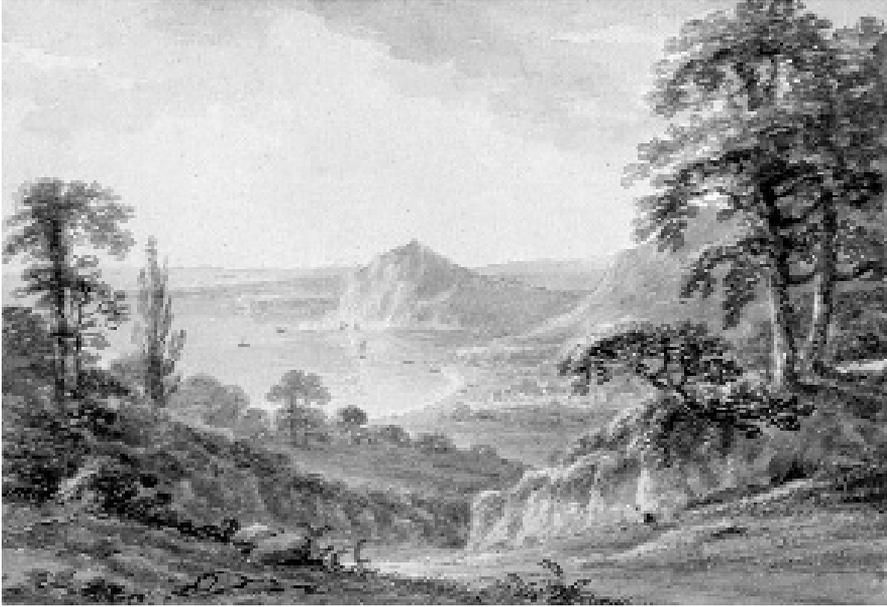
Two years later, Sidmouth came to the fore, being "very commonly recommended to invalids, particularly to those who are affected by consumptions;

as many of the faculty think this situation equal to the south of France,” observed the Devon historian Richard Polwhele in 1793 (2:233). In 1794, Robert Fraser reported to the Board of Agriculture that for those “afflicted with asthmatic and pulmonary complaints” doctors were recommending the resort “in preference to Lisbon” (9).

Was it on account of this “Riviera” association, repeated from guidebook to guidebook over the next few years, that the Austens chose the resorts of South Devon? Deirdre Le Faye suggests rather that it was “Mr. Austen’s age” —he was seventy at the time—“and Mrs. Austen’s continuing ill-health,” that is, “her usual feverish or bilious complaints” that “were the deciding factors for retirement” to Bath (128, 132). It may have been that these factors also influenced their choice of Devon resorts, with the Buller invitation serving to switch the priority from Dawlish to Sidmouth. The question arises since in taking Sidmouth as their summer destination, the Austens, possibly also influenced by Mrs. Cage, made a surprising choice: Sidmouth was by no means the quiet and inexpensive backwater we might expect a retired clergyman to select for himself and his family. Not so very surprising, however, if there was still the hope that your unmarried daughters might find partners. According to Swete, Sidmouth in 1795 was already “the gayest place of resort on the Devon coast, and every elegance, every luxury, every amusement is here to be met with—iced creams, Milliners shops, cards, billiards, plays, circulating libraries, attract notice in every part” (2:139).

An added and particular feature of Sidmouth’s “situation,” unshared by any other of the South Devon resorts, and invariably commented on in the guidebooks, was its protected setting at the end of the Vale of Sid, with hills rising to upwards of five hundred feet to both the east and west, the Honiton hills closing the valley to the north, and the town itself turned only towards the temperate south winds coming in from the sea. Another matter for widespread praise was the ease of exploring the Sidmouth countryside, with its abundance of footpaths and roads, and the proximity of local beauty spots and country houses and estates to be visited, and all this, of course, in addition to the wonders of the coastline. These diversions and pastimes amounted to an important consideration for visitors who might be following the normal regime of six weeks’ bathing, completed by ten o’clock in the morning, even more so for semi-residential patients wintering at Sidmouth.

The Austens were to remain there the rest of the summer, from early June until late September, a length of stay that suggests that they found themselves at ease in the town and its small but constantly changing soci-



A View of Sidmouth Bay and the Coast from Exmouth to Berry Head by Amos Green (1735–1807). © Trustees of the British Museum.

ety (Le Faye 135–36). How many visitors were there during the Austens' visit is not known, but it would be in the hundreds. Richard Polwhele observed, with some admiration, that in 1793 Sidmouth "is much frequented by people of fashion—near three hundred yearly: and there is a constant succession of company" (2:232). The 1801 census, taken in March, recorded a population of 1252, with 247 families occupying 229 inhabited houses, figures which include both outlying parishes as well as the town of Sidmouth itself.

Although Sidmouth was by no means the earliest resort along the South Devon coast, it carried a longer history than other towns and villages. As early as 1776 it was being referred to as "a watering place," a visitor observing "company resorting hither for the benefit of bathing and drinking the waters" (Curwen 1:204). Three years later, the town began to stage horse racing. A short stay by George III in 1781 gave a fillip to its social standing, and fashionable visitors from Exeter and further afield were soon asking for better access to the sea front, a need partly met in 1789 when a gravelled walk was laid down, forming an esplanade along which to take a promenade and push an invalid's

chair. By August 1791, there was a newly-built terrace where Fanny Burney stayed for a week, and her journal confirms that the most recent developments, together with its natural setting, made a good impression: "Sidmouth is built in a vale by the sea Coast, and the Terrace for Company is nearer to the Ocean than any I have elsewhere seen, & therefore both more pleasant & more commodious. The little Bay is of a most peaceful kind, & the sea was as calm & gentle as the Thames. I longed to Bathe, but I am in no state now to take Liberties with myself, &, having no advice at hand, I ran no risk" (26). The "Company" to which Fanny Burney refers would be that of the gentry staying in houses along the Terrace, either in rented rooms or, in the case of families such as the Austens, occupying an entire house. The bulk of these visitors would be families from the Exeter area, fewer from Bath, and only one or two, if any, from London, so high was the fare for the coach journey of 170 miles. There would also be several patients there for the sake of their health.

On the sea front, Fanny Burney would also have come across the enterprising stroke of a local doctor in opening a set of hot baths and cold showers, the first such establishment along the Devon coast. Drawing water directly from the sea, it catered for visitors unable, through age or infirmity, to struggle up and down the steep shingle beach or face the rigors of the incoming sea, the Channel water being notoriously cold. These and other advances, small as they may seem, had their effect, and in the summer of 1794 the famous naturalist William George Maton found Sidmouth "intensely hot; its low situation, a broad bed of pebbles, and the glare of the lofty red cliffs are like so many reverberators. It is much frequented, however, in the bathing season, and many families continue their residence even during the winter. The situation is certainly a very delightful one" (2:84).

The older part of Sidmouth, "the Town," a busy fishing port before the harbor silted up with sand and pebbles and usable now only by fishing smacks and small pleasure boats, Fanny Burney found less impressive: "There was nothing whatsoever to be seen in the Town, which is straggling & ill paved, but opens, in the upper part, to beautiful views. This county indeed is replete with such" (26).

At this time, Sidmouth was without purpose-built Assembly Rooms and relied instead upon the public facilities—an assembly-room and a card-room—provided by the London Inn, just off the sea front. Swete also explored the length of "the Mall, an artificial Walk on the beach, carried parallel with, and in front of the Sea—. . . a most admirable Promenade" (2:137), a feature essential to any resort, since this is where visitors would stroll morning and

evening, greeting their newly-made acquaintance and inspecting the fresh arrivals; in short, the promenade was the place to see and be seen. Further on was “a commodious tea-room” (Polwhele 2:232), “a shed, well constructed, with seats shelter’d from the Weather, but open to the prospect” (the sea itself), “and a handsome billiard Room seemingly well frequented.” Some way beyond this were “the Bathing Machines”—some for hire to ladies at 1/–, others for gentlemen at 1/6. Beyond them stood the fishermen’s cottages, their boats, their nets hanging on poles to dry, with cliffs behind “of a ruddy tint”—a stretch of what is known today as the Jurassic coastline with its fossil wonders.

What Swete disliked about “resort” Sidmouth is sharply drawn in his moral satire, a “Poetical Sketch” he calls it, contrasting resort fashions and pastimes with the joys of the countryside:

Let Others Sidmouth spend with thee
 Their hours in vacant jollity
 And lounge from morn to closing eve
 The listless moments to deceive!
 Or, crowding while the Sunbeams play
 To Rooms with flattering Mirrors gay
 Parade in studied dress, and try
 In all Arts fooleries to vie!
 Or, tired with these, ere well begun
 To Whist, or Loo’s dear transports run. . . . (2:173)

If, then, Sidmouth was a resort of some sophistication, with its “iced creams” and its variety of shops and amusements, further westward along the pebbly beach it held superior attractions as a locus of the picturesque: “nothing more pleasing than the boats, oars, posts, and fishing tackle, and Nothing more enchanting, than the placid Sea whose waves, in gentle rippings, play’d on the shore” (2:137). Like Gilpin’s travels, Swete’s journeying was dedicated to the discovery of scenes romantic and painterly. Yet he was a man of the world—educated at Eton and Oxford—a man too of wealth with worldly interests. On his departure from the resort, along the Mall he noted, with an appreciative eye that carries us forward to the spirit of Mr. Parker’s Sanditon, “a handsome row of Buildings, that was raising in a field open to the Sea—A speculation of the Lord of the Manor Mr Jenkins—and there can be little doubt, from the excellence of the houses and their pleasant exposure but that the scheme will be successful” (2:139).



In the following year, 1802, the Austens confirmed their satisfaction with Devon as a summer destination by opting to return to their original choice, made back in 1800 and described at the time by Jane to Cassandra as “the Dawlish scheme.” This second visit also included a stay at Teignmouth, thirteen miles south of Exeter, with Dawlish a further five miles southwards along the same coastal road. What factors stood behind this choice we cannot be certain. But it would be reasonable to suppose that when “the Dawlish scheme” was first mooted, it was with the intention of lighting on a resort in keeping with the interests and finances of a recently-retired clergyman and his family; in the vocabulary of the time, a resort “private,” or for “retirement,” rather than “public” in the style of Sidmouth with its fashionable aspirations and stylishness. Although, in the event, “the Dawlish scheme” was delayed a year in favor of Sidmouth, Dawlish was surely the right destination for the Austens. Although this quieter resort afforded less of a sounding-board for the garrulous Mrs. Austen with her hypochondriac range of symptoms and complaints, we can guess that its slower pace suited the devout and scholarly Mr. Austen.

From its beginning in the 1770s, Dawlish “began to build a reputation as a small watering place catering especially for invalids” (Travis, “Rise” 136), a reputation aggressively championed by Dr. Hugh Downman, a well-known Exeter physician, in a long didactic poem entitled *Infancy: Or the Management of Children*. A cumulative work, growing from three to six books, it became extremely popular and by 1803 had reached a sixth edition considerably enlarged from its first appearance in 1771. Prepared to upset his fellow-citizens, Downman pointed to the ills of town life: “the crowded town . . . / Within that court of death, where every gale / Is tainted with pollution . . . / The unwholesome atmosphere, gravid with seeds / Of latent sickness,” this nightmare vision followed by a concise yet disturbing list of complaints and afflictions the town-dweller is exposed to. Downman’s antidote to these ills was Dawlish. The invalid was urged to turn seaward to meet “the refreshing breeze” and inhale “the briny spray” (Travis, *Rise* 10–11). Volume Four of *Infancy* ends with an apostrophe, formally addressing the resort:

O Dawlish! though unclassic be thy name,
By every muse unsung, should from thy tide,
To keen poetic eyes alone reveal’d,
From the cerulean bosom of the deep
(As Aphrodite rose of old) appear,

Health's blooming goddess, and benignant smile
 On her true votary! not Cythera's fane,
 Not Eryx, nor the laurell'd boughs which waved
 On Delos erst, Apollo's natal soil,
 However warm enthusiastic youth
 Dwelt on those seats enamour'd, shall to me
 Be half so dear. To thee will I consign
 Often the timid virgin, to thy pure
 Incircling waves; to thee will I consign
 The feeble matron, or the child on whom
 Thou may'st bestow a second happier birth
 From weakness unto strength. And should I view
 Unfetter'd, with the sound firm-judging mind,
 Imagination to return, arrayed
 In her once glowing vest, to thee my lyre
 Shall oft be tun'd, and to thy Nereides green
 Long, long unnoticed in their haunts retired.
 Nor will I cease to prize thy lovely strand,
 Thy towering cliffs, nor the small babbling brook,
 Whose shallow current laves thy thistled vale. (4:577–601)

For readers familiar with neoclassic poetic conventions, "O Dawlish!" was an immediate success, and these lines became a standard feature in the Dawlish section of guide-books. As Travis points out, John Swete went so far as to claim that Downman's commendation was responsible for the "transformation" of this little-known spot into a prosperous watering-place (*Rise* 11). Swete's actual words are worth quoting: "Wonderfull however, since the Doctors visit to it has been its transformation. What was then a fishing Hamlet, consisting of a few Cots, one or two of which had been fitted up for the occasional reception of an Invalid Stranger, is now converted into a town!" (Swete 2:173).

When the Austens arrived in the summer of 1802, they would have been reassured to find Dawlish protectively placed in a valley, surrounded on all sides by high ground save for eastwards facing the sea. Closest to the sea, along the foreshore, was a parade of lodging-houses; behind them, on higher ground, some family houses ready for renting. Further up the valley were two inns said to provide "superior accommodations," and more lodging-houses intermixed with the cottages of the old village; further back still, about a mile from the sea, separated, Swete reported, by "some intervening space of fields, and gardens," stood Dawlish's ancient church (2:176).

As for bathing, this spot was well suited to the feeble and infirm since, according to a guide-book, there was a good supply of “well conducted” bathing machines, while the pebbly beach itself “descends gently into the sea, which is generally clear, and free from weed” (Hyett 12). At low tide, a narrow strand is revealed, “a scene of repose and tranquil beauty” contrasting with the “tumult and uproar” of the waves at the foot of the cliffs (Swete 4:113). From Dawlish, there were country houses to be visited while for those visitors more interested in nature and natural history, a fine collection of variegated pebbles could be garnered from the beach, under the cliffs prime mineralogical specimens could be found, and, inland, botanists were rewarded with some uncommon specimens of exotics. It was also an area, as Swete’s volumes testify, especially rich in scenes of picturesque beauty, whether of Dawlish itself, “sweetly situated in a valley environed by high grounds, and rendered uncommonly picturesque by the number of Villas which are seated around the fine old Gothic Church” (1:68), or the cliffs and caverns facing the sea. Swete also observed the mundane: that “[a]bout 20 years ago the price of the best Lodging House was not more [than] . . . half a guinea, but so fashionable is Dawlish in the present day, that, in the height of the Season, not a House of the least consequence is to be hired for less than two guineas pr week, and many of them rise to so high a sum as four or five” (2:173).

Of watering-place amenities, there were rather fewer than in the socially popular resorts, and we return to Jane Austen’s later complaint that the Dawlish library of 1802 was “particularly pitiful & wretched . . . & not likely to have anybody’s publication.” For an avid novel-reader, such as Jane Austen, this deficiency was sorely felt and disappointing since novels usually provided the core of a library’s stock. On the other hand, seaside libraries were not confined to books. They often provided room for readers to sit in comfort with a newspaper or periodical; they sold souvenirs, gifts and toys, trinkets and knick-knacks of all kinds; and in a resort such as Dawlish, whose purpose-built assembly-rooms—complete with a ballroom, billiard room, and reading room—did not arrive until 1811–12, the library would serve as a *rendezvous* for new arrivals, a place for the gentlemen to discuss the events of the day and for the ladies to shop.

Progress was slow in other directions as well. A good, gravel-walk promenade was not laid until 1803 (Travis 42–43), a notable deficiency since promenades were regarded as vital to a resort’s success, in the case of Dawlish as providing invalids with a fitting place to benefit from the sea air. Almost as important was a bath-house to meet the needs of the infirm and elderly for sea

water; one was not built until 1805. The state of the approach roads was poor. For a stage coach connection it had to wait until 1809 and a further three years for a regular connection; even this connection, however, was not direct since it involved leaving the Exeter-Plymouth mail coach at Chudleigh, then tracking over Haldon Hill to Dawlish.

These drawbacks appear, however, to have had no effect on visitor numbers. On 20 August 1795, the *Exeter Flying Post* reported the town “to be full of lodgers.” Whether these deficiencies affected the Austens is an unanswerable question. But the fact that the family went on to visit Teignmouth suggests that, at the very least, they were happy enough to make a complete change. Although only a few miles apart, in character and social composition, the two resorts could not be more different. Teignmouth was the haunt of “fashionables” for whom health, to quote Swete, “is your chieftest good,—without it irksome would be the Circles of the first taste and fashion[,] ennuyant would be Ranelagh, the Opera, or the Drawing room” (1:71). For the clientele of Teignmouth, good health was the means of keeping one’s place in society; and later in this same satirical outburst Swete equates good health with the preservation of beauty—concerns a far cry from the needs of Dawlish’s aged and infirm. It was a very different kind of visitor who occupied “the theatre of Health and recreation which is fixed on the beach at East Teignmouth” (Swete 1:72). A few years earlier, in October 1789, the *Exeter Flying Post* “reported in awed tones that in the courtyard of the Globe Inn . . . had been seen the unprecedented sight of ‘seven carriages with coronets’” (Travis, *Rise* 32). Among the aristocratic visitors in 1791 were the Dukes and Duchesses of Beaufort and Somerset and an assortment of Lords and Ladies.

When the Austens arrived in 1802—a coach ran from Exeter three times a week—Teignmouth was a well-established resort, its promenade kept in good repair and regularly enlarged since 1792, and a flourishing set of Assembly Rooms holding a prominent position on the sea front since 1796. In addition to a large and elegant room for balls and card parties, there were smaller rooms for reading and billiards. Farther along the promenade, pleasure boats and sedan chairs were available for hire. 1802 also saw the opening of a theatre with a popular double-bill, *The Heir at Law, a Musical Entertainment in Two Acts*, by the Manager of the Haymarket Theatre, George Colman the Younger, and first performed in 1797, followed by a farce, *Of Age Tomorrow* by Thomas Dibdin. Readers of *Mansfield Park* will remember Tom Bertram’s repeated insistence that for the house-party’s entertainment they stage *The Heir at Law* (131).

The Austens would have found other amenities and attractions in and around Teignmouth, some of these described by the antiquary and social reformer Martin Dunsford, an independently minded traveller (Sweet). Surveying the scene through his experienced eyes, they would have seen a beach “of fine sand” and “very convenient for the bathing machines.” The daily fish market was held there, affording “much amusement and entertainment,” and the banks of the River Teign were “beautifully variegated,” to be explored by sailing and riding parties. On the social side, too, one hopes that the Austens were able to share Dunsford’s rewarding experience. During the weeks he spent at the resort, Dunsford reports having been “much entertained with acquaintance and informations of new society; the great variety of company, which assembled every fine evening, walking on the promenade; morning visits to the fish market . . . ; excursions at sea; and rides in the vicinity” (103–06).



It is entirely possible that the family party at Dawlish and Teignmouth included a fifth member, Charles Austen. Having served as a Lieutenant on HMS *Endymion*, Charles was paid off following the commencement of the Peace of Amiens in April 1802 and left free to follow his own plans. Now available to join his parents and sisters on their Devonshire visit, it may have been Charles who promoted the idea of moving on from Dawlish to Teignmouth. An attractive and high-spirited young man of twenty-two, like his sisters still unmarried, he would certainly have appreciated that the second resort, so much livelier than Dawlish, would offer better opportunities for romance.

A somewhat similar explanation may stand behind the Austens’ surprising decision, following their return to Bath, to extend their summer touring with an arduous journey into Wales, visiting the two resorts of Tenby and Barmouth, a round trip from Bath of no less than four hundred miles.

With Barmouth to the north as their ultimate destination, the choice of Tenby in the south as a stopping place en route made a great deal of sense, for if there was one resort in Wales not to be missed it was Tenby, rated by one experienced traveller, the mineralogist Edward Daniel Clarke, as “one of the most beautiful, most romantic, little spots perhaps in all Europe” (222). Its beauty was a gift of nature, the town standing high on a promontory encircled on three sides by the sea and with beaches of firm, smooth sand; and its romance was the legacy of history since over the years the town grew within and around ruins—the remains of walls, towers, and fortifications built and rebuilt



A View of Tenby, Looking toward the Castle, with the Welsh Coast in the Distance, by John 'Warwick' Smith (1787). © Trustees of the British Museum.

during tumultuous periods from Norman times onwards. Clarke again: "Tenbigh seems one continued heap of castellate ruins. You can hardly turn your eyes, but you behold some old wall, stair-case, or tower, belonging to a former fortification" (228). Now, according to Clarke, it had forged a new economy as a flourishing resort:

During the summer many genteel families reside here; it is an excellent bathing place, and the country around it is beautiful. The lodging houses are not built or fitted up in so elegant a style as those at Brighton, but they have the same aspect, towards the sea, and are situated upon a cliff of much greater grandeur. The views between Tenbigh and Pembroke are beyond any thing that can be expressed. The distance is only ten miles, and all the way the delightful prospect of the sea on one side and a magnificent Country on the other is without doubt far beyond any other landscape in South Wales. (228)

A few years later, Charles Norris, the great memorialist of the town, offered a more analytical view in the Preface to his remarkable *Etchings of Tenby* (1812):

Tenby . . . from having been an important Fortress, and a Port of considerable commercial consequence, had become, till rescued by its attractions for sea-bathing, and its other recommendations as summer residence, a poor neglected Fishing Town—totally unknown to the luxurious, and deserted by the enterprising. It is to this that we are indebted even for the few ancient Edifices which still remain; since nothing is so fatal to rich relics as opulence, and a consequent spirit of improvement. (ii)

Norris went on to spell out the specific attractions of the resort, the town and the neighbourhood:

in the last twenty, or twenty five, years . . . it has become a favourite resort in the summer to the fashionable and luxurious. To the painter, naturalist, and the antiquary, few places can be more productive of gratification.

The naturalist may employ himself in the collection of innumerable minute and wonderfully organised animals, with which every crevice in every rock is crowded and animated, . . . an unusual variety of beautiful shell, . . . the gayest and most beautifully coloured lichens, mosses, and other mature vegetables.

The antiquary will still meet with many mutilated inscriptions, and fragments of uncommon architecture. (17)

Finally, Norris expressed his views on destructive restoration. Reflecting on the wisdom of attempting to compete with the “older, larger, and better established” resorts, he questioned “whether the liberal and expensive improvements which are either completed or projected, will be successful” (18).

Although *Etchings* appeared eight or nine years after the Austens’ visit, Tenby’s salient features were also highlighted by many of the earlier travel writers whose tours and guides treating South Wales were available to the Austens in 1803. Like Norris, most of them provide some account of the resort’s natural attractions—which were to prove such a treasure house for Darwin—and the surviving remnants of the ancient walled and garrisoned town, the fascinating traces of its antiquity, a town rendered romantically Gothic by decay, depredation, and the hand of time. On this account we can hazard a guess at the kind of letters Jane Austen sent home to her close circle of friends, those she might address playfully, including the Lloyd sisters Mary and Martha, Eliza de Feuillide (now Henry Austen’s wife), and possibly her “own particular little brother” Charles (21–23 January 1799).

Departing from the delights and fascinations of Tenby, the journey the



Barmouth, Merionetshire by *William Daniell* (1814). © Trustees of the British Museum.

Austens then took northwards to Barmouth seems to be a curious step, if only because the best available guide-book—the two-volume *Tour round North Wales* (1800) by the Rev. William Bingley, “a noted writer on botany, topography, and popular zoology” (Courtney)—having referred so appreciatively to “the stupendous and picturesque scenery, to be found in North Wales,” went on to speak so scathingly of Barmouth:

Barmouth is placed in one of the most disagreeable situations that could possibly have been chosen for it, near the conflux of the river Maw, or Mawddach, whence it is called by the Welsh, Aber Maw, and from this Berthaw or, corruptedly, Barmouth. Some of the houses are built amongst the sand at the bottom, and others at different heights, up the side of a huge rock, which entirely protects the town on the east. Their situations are so singular, that it is really curious for a stranger to wind up along the narrow paths amongst the houses, where, on one side, he may, if he please, enter the door of a dwelling, or on the other, look down the chimney of the neighbourhood in front. The lower part of the town is almost choaked up with sand, which fills every passage, and in wet weather,

it is extremely dirty and unpleasant. The houses are the most irregular possible—in short, it appears to be such a place as nothing but the pleasures of society can render at all comfortable.

It is frequented during the summer season by many genteel families from Wales, and the west of England, as a sea bathing place. Mr. Robert Vaughan of Hengwrt, in his *Sketch of the History of Merionethshire*, seems to ascribe it's origin to persons frequenting the banks of the Mawddach, "by reason of the herb scurvy-grass, which grows there in great abundance."

The company must find it an uncomfortable place, for the inn (the Cors-y-gedol Arms) is at times, almost buried in sand, and a person cannot walk many yards from the door without being up to the ankles in it. Added to this, a strong westerly wind blowing it against the windows and into all the rooms, must render it horribly unpleasant, and were it not for the civility of the hospitable Mrs. Lewis, the place would fail in one of it's chief attractions. . . .

The lodging houses in the town, are many of them dirty and miserable places. There are at Barmouth, three bathing machines, but these are entirely appropriated to the use of the ladies, the gentlemen bathing on the open coast. The amusements seem to consist in going out in parties on the water, or in lounging on the sands or beach. The latter is one of the most delightful walks I ever beheld. The wide river Mawddach winds amongst the mountains, forming many and elegant promontories; these rise to great heights on each side, some clad with wood, and others exhibiting their naked rocks scantily covered with the purple heath. The summit of the lofty Cader Idris is seen to rise high above the other mountains in the back ground. Had the town been built here, scarcely half a mile from it's present situation, instead of one of the most unpleasant, it might have been made one of the most agreeable retirements in the kingdom. (1:432–35; also qtd. in *Monthly Review* 36 [Dec. 1801]: 385–88)

Another writer of tours, the Rev. John Evans, a botanist, found some aspects of Barmouth attractive. But on the beaches of fine sand the facilities for bathing were limited. Instead of mobile bathing machines, usually horse-drawn, those at Barmouth were stationary and unable to be shifted to take advantage of the tides and according to the physical condition of the bather, whether young or old, active or infirm: "neither with horses, as at Weymouth

and Brighton; nor with a winch and inclined plane, as at Cowes; but fixed on the sand at a certain distance within the reach of the tide, which renders it very inconvenient to the bathers" (Evans 110). Given the discomforts of Barmouth, it is difficult to suppose that even the image of "the hospitable Mrs. Lewis" would have been sufficiently attractive to bring such travellers as the Austens, experienced as they were with the ease and comfort of South Devon resorts, to brave the rigors of this Welsh town.

Yet once again, Charles Austen may have played a considerable part in influencing their decision, on this occasion in pursuit of health rather than romance. Amongst naval men Barmouth was famous for one thing, its scurvy-grass, an antiscorbutic herb, found in abundance along the banks of the River Mawddach and prized highly for its curative and protective powers. It was on this account that Barmouth came into existence as a resort for invalids. Whereas since the seventeenth century Elixirs of Scurvy Grass had been the great stock-in-trade of quack practitioners and suppliers throughout the land, here at Barmouth the herb could be eaten with confidence, unadulterated, as a fresh vegetable, taken as scurvy-grass ale, a popular tonic drink, or for the most serious cases, applied as an oil extract. As the Rev. Evans observes, Barmouth served a regional clientele, both the active and the invalid, from the Midlands counties of England: "Through the wetness of the season, few of the Shropshire and Hereford beauties had yet arrived; yet the place was expected soon to fill: this being the resort of the indolent and afflicted from the midland part of the kingdom, as Weymouth is for the western part" (120).

Scurvy was not solely a mariners' illness. Nevertheless, it was the prevailing and principal affliction of ships at sea, and in the Navy more sailors died from scurvy than were killed in action against the French. Caused by a lack of vitamin C, scurvy usually struck as early as only two months away at sea, its initial symptoms unmistakable: ulcers, swollen gums, and general lassitude, continuing to more serious and unpleasant conditions leading to death. Although a number of officers and ships' surgeons were convinced that citrus juices provided the answer, it took many years to convince the Admiralty, and it was not until 1795 that the command went out for lemon juice to be issued routinely to the entire Fleet. But intention fell short of performance. At first, the lemon juice was in such short supply that there was sufficient only to issue to ships in home waters, and then as a cure rather than a preventative. Only after 1800, with an increased supply, and pressure from the dictatorial Admiral Lord St. Vincent, was it made available for general issue.

There is nothing to suggest that Charles was afflicted with scurvy.

Nonetheless, constantly on active service at sea, Charles had every reason for taking precautions, and the visit to Barmouth would provide a singular opportunity for him to build up his resistance to the disease. In the absence of any other explanation, this healthy motive is at least a credible explanation for the onerous northern leg that the Austens added to their Welsh tour, with Charles as its promoter and beneficiary.



One would hope that the recital of these events, the little we know of them, would throw some light on the decision-making of the Austen family over this period. In the case of Charles, I have outlined the role he could have played in the move from Dawlish to Teignmouth and the visit to Barmouth. The prevailing image of Mr. Austen is of a devout scholar, a clergyman noted for his “mildness and gentleness of temper” (Catherine Hubback, qtd. in Le Faye 4). This, however, is not the whole man. During his time at Oxford, the Fellows of St. John’s put him forward to fill the post of Junior Proctor for 1759–60 to enforce the university regulations, particularly in the area of student discipline; and while in office he played a leading part in some abrasive university politicking (see L. Sutherland and Mitchell). This behavior does not suggest a man prepared to sit back, content to let others lead the way. At her worst, Mrs. Austen could be an irritating hypochondriac; at her best, a bundle of fierce energy, capable of expressing herself, James Edward Austen-Leigh’s *Memoir* records, “both in writing and in conversation, with epigrammatic force and point” (15): one cannot imagine that she held her tongue in the planning of these visits.

As for the two daughters, judging from Jane’s side of their correspondence, both were keen from the outset and complicit, if “scheme” implies complicity, in “the Dawlish scheme.” For their marriage prospects the outcome of the visits to Devonshire was disappointment. There is no hint whatsoever that Cassandra met any successor to Tom Fowle, her fiancé since late 1792, who had died of yellow fever off St. Domingo in 1797. When the news reached England, Jane observed of her sister that she “behaves with a degree of resolution & Propriety which no common mind could evince in so trying a situation” (Eliza de Feullide, qtd. in Le Faye 101). It was a principled resignation which Cassandra maintained for the remainder of her life, a life of bereaved spinsterdom; and a shadow of this pattern was to be repeated in Jane’s own loss.

NOTE

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