

“A Month in the Country” : the IVP Experience

By Elaine Bander, Montréal

A month in the lovely Hampshire countryside, a cozy attic room in the Chawton House Stables (aka “the Old Manor”) on Edward Austen-Knight’s estate, the run of its elegant sitting rooms, its cozy nook, its lavishly-equipped kitchen and laundry room, and its sunny conservatory, daily access to the rich archive of the Chawton House Library, and the Jane Austen House Museum just a few steps along the old Winchester Road: Jane Austen heaven! Thanks to JASNA-New York’s International Visitor Program, that heaven was mine for four weeks in July 2011.

I arrived planning to read my way through texts that Fanny Price might have read, with or without Edmund’s direction, hoping to find material with which to compile a *Mansfield Park* common-place book in preparation for Montreal’s 2014 AGM. Guided by helpful CHL librarian Jacqui Grainger and by references in *Mansfield Park* and Austen’s letters, as well as the Knight Collection (Godmersham library) catalogue, I indeed discovered some fascinating sources that changed my thinking about *Mansfield Park*.

But daytime hours spent reading in the Elizabethan Great House were only part of the IVP experience. It was very, very special to belong, briefly, to the quiet life of the estate; waking to the clucking of the rescue hens who lived in the shade of the Stables; the whinnying of the Shire horses, our neighbours in the actual stables, who grazed in the adjacent paddock; the bleating of the Chawton sheep in the nearby fields; the constant cooing of the wood pigeons, and the occasional ringing of the church bells just across the drive.

During the day I sometimes shared a cup of tea with Jacqui and the staff. After the Library closed at 5 pm, I would walk into Alton for groceries or, even pleasanter, across meadows and fields and over stiles to Upper Farringdon, a picture-perfect village.

The Chawton community was so welcoming: Corrine Saint at her command centre in the office, her mum Trish Monger looking after us in the Stables (with Toby at her heels), Stephen

and Lindsay Lawrence coming down from the Dovecote, Paul Dearn keeping us supplied and repaired, and Dave Coffin letting me prune the roses in the walled garden. Angie and Mac McLaren, next door in the real stables, hosted a birthday party for Summer, the youngest of the Shires. One memorable Monday evening, at Sarah Parry’s invitation, I climbed the church bell tower to watch the weekly bell-ringing practice and was invited to pull a bell.

I also enjoyed the stimulating company of other visitors. During my first week, last year’s International Visitor Kathryn Siblin was at the Stables. Over my first ten days, two CHL Scholars were completing their month of research. Following a solitary week when I was Châtelaine of the Stables, four new scholars arrived. Several times during my stay Gillian Dow hosted special events, speakers, or seminars. Louise West, too, welcomed me at the JAHM, always a pleasure to visit with its new exhibits and its gardens in magnificent, mature bloom.

I spent one Friday afternoon helping set up 600 chairs in a marquee in preparation for JAS’s AGM. In JAS tradition, Saturday brought heavy rain, but the soggy AGM was fun, and Janet Todd was a stimulating speaker. The JASNA Tour arrived for the afternoon program bringing better weather and some familiar faces. The next day I heard an excellent talk by Kathryn Sutherland at the JAHM.

Of course, I walked frequently into Alton to shop or to visit its two tiny but interesting museums. I also rode the charming Watercress Line steam train from Alton to lovely Alresford. I had cream tea at Cassandra’s Cup. One day I ventured into

Winchester to have lunch with JAS Vice-Chair Elizabeth Proudman and her husband Anthony in their “second-oldest house in Winchester.” Elizabeth then took me to The Vyne where we spent a perfect afternoon walking over the house and grounds and talking about Jane Austen.

On my last weekend I walked four miles across the fields and hang-ers over Selborne Common and down the Zig-Zag Path, walking back again after tea at the Gilbert White House.

The greatest part of the IVP experience, however, was a month in the country to read and to think about *Mansfield Park* in the very rooms and lanes and fields that Jane Austen passed through when she was writing that great novel. ☘

