

Three authors wrote similar books at different times. Each traced, with three different purposes, most of the same streets and footpaths that Jane Austen had walked. Her letters and novels were their guides. The first book published in 1902, is a pilgrimage through "Austen-land", the 1991 publication is a series of walking tours and the most recent published in 2006 searched for the essence of Jane Austen in the obvious places. The authors follow Jane Austen from her homes in Steventon to Bath, Southampton and Chawton and to places she visited: homes of family members, the seaside, Devon, Lyme and London.

***Jane Austen, Her Homes and Her Friends* by Constance Hill, printed 1902**

In 1901, with the aid of fingerposts, a map and family letters, the author, Constance Hill, and her sister, Eileen G. Hill, travelled by country chaise and horses to places Jane had lived and visited one hundred years earlier. Constance Hill's probing research was thorough. Her unwavering methods and personal charm stood her well in place of the Internet and a GPS. Many of the sites had remained unchanged and as yet, no motorways cut through the peaceful countryside. Over 50 sketches by Eileen G. Hill recorded authentic details that Jane would have seen and many of the details no longer exist.

Their chance encounters with well-informed and connected people, combined with Jane Austen's own words and that of her family, including Mary Russell Mitford's extensive descriptions, bring us in close proximity to Jane Austen. An old inhabitant directed the sisters to a flattened mound where a large barn had once stood across from the rectory, the barn where the Austens had performed plays. This old man, who had heard the stories of the Austen family, was the son of Jane's goddaughter, "Nanny" Littlewart, and the great-grandson of James Austen's coachman Littlewart. Was this the same Littlewart family where the Austen children were billeted after being weaned, where Jane's handicapped brother George lived all his life?

It is remarkable that the Hill sisters were able to visit many of the homes of Jane's friends and neighbours – less remarkable that the buildings existed, and more so that they gained permission to view so many of the interiors. Persistent inquiries at an inn in Basingstoke rewarded them with admittance to the former Assembly Rooms, owned at the time by a horse-trader and used as a hayloft. The innkeeper's wife led them to the back of the inn and up wooden steps into a room of broken panes, cobwebs and piles of hay. The author writes that they were "*kindly welcomed*" at the Great House (Chawton) by the son of Edward Austen-Knight. The Oak Room, especially associated with Jane Austen, remained as it was a hundred years ago. At Godmersham "*by the kind permission of the present owner*", they "*sat in the rooms where Jane sat...*" and looked out at the same park with its grazing deer as Jane had.

The Hill sisters had rented rooms at Bay Cottage and ascertained that, by its close location to the Cobb and Jane Austen's description, the Cottage had stood in for the home of Captain Harville. From Mrs. Dean's house where the Austens lodged, Jane Austen would have looked down at its "*quaint sea-girt situation*" and thought it to be a suitable choice for the home of a captain and his family. The author was quite certain that the Persuasion party stayed at the Royal Lion because of the approach that made it possible to see the arrival of Mr. Elliot's curricule from its windows.

Miss Ellen Hill's final drawing is of a woman, likely her sister Constance, in Winchester Abbey standing over Jane Austen's grave.

***In the Steps of Jane Austen, Walking Tours of Austen's England* by Anne-Marie Edwards, printed 1991**

In her collection of walking tours through Austen's England, Edwards examined every site she had reason to believe Jane Austen had visited. She introduced history, pertinent passages from the six novels and Austen's letters into her descriptions. At every chapter's end, a map of a walking tour with explicit directions situates the important landmarks and gives an estimated time, distance and level of difficulty of each route. Ample black and white photos accompany descriptions of each location – countryside around Steventon, including one of its double hedgerows, views from Box Hill in Surrey and Beechan Hill in Bath, etc.

According to the author, Jane would have covered approximately four miles of "*very easy walking*" to collect the family mail at the Wheatsheaf Inn. In bad weather, she would have worn pattens, "*clog-like overshoes, raised several inches above the ground with iron rings beneath the wooden soles*". A reader, who followed the tours, recommended "*A pair of sturdy walking shoes, a walking stick and a rain jacket along with Edward's book...*"

and gave warning to verify the instructions, as other sources of information “*revealed several inadequacies*”. Since the book’s publication in 1991, some things would have changed.

The author believed Jane wrote directly from her experiences and gives a number of convincing arguments. For instance, the meticulous details in her novels could only have been written by someone familiar with the locality. Jane had also advised her niece, Anna Lefroy, to write about places that she knew. Furthermore, extended visits of two months would have allowed Jane “*to settle into the ways of the household and become acquainted with their friends and the neighbourhood*”, and make her privy to personal family stories. Who could omit these brilliant extracts from real life in telling a story of the imagination! Jane Austen, like Elizabeth Bennett, was a “*studier of character*”. Opportunities would also have been plentiful at Henry and Eliza’s homes in London, where acquaintances were most varied and included French émigrés. At Lady Bridges’ homes in Kent and at Chawton House, she would have met numerous visitors who often dropped by for 15 minutes, an evening and for longer stays.

Isabel Lefroy, grand-niece to Jane Austen, wrote of similarities between her mother, Anna, and Emma. Both were “*handsome, clever*” – possessing “*the power of having rather too much her own way, and a disposition to think a little too well of herself.*” Frank, Jane’s brother, is often compared to “*illustrious*” Captain Harville.

Oddly, Edwards’ believes little has changed in the last two centuries though her directions lead us under a railway and along the A30 and M3 to Steventon, all of which never existed before 1817. An iron pump on the site of the rectory had replaced the wooden one used by the Austens sometime after Constance Hill had seen it in 1901. London has expanded; many buildings associated with Jane have been pulled down.

***A Rambling Fancy, in the Footsteps of Jane Austen* by Caroline Sanderson, printed 2006**

Caroline Sanderson’s *A Rambling Fancy, in the footsteps of Jane Austen* is similar to Constance Hill’s account published a hundred years earlier. Ms. Sanderson limited her search to easily accessible places mentioned in Jane Austen’s letters. Stark reality of the present is juxtaposed on familiar scenes from her life and novels set in Bath, Lyme, London and Surrey... belching exhaust fumes from tour buses, pantomime triceratops lumbering through crowds visiting Lyme for the annual ArtsFest, listening in on a mobile phone conversation of a 21st century John Thorpe relating his binge drinking of the previous night and overhearing one girl tell a friend about an awkward proposal from her multi-pierced fiancé and his reaction to the rose petals she scattered on their bed that night.

Jane Austen was clever at choosing locations to suit her characters: “*a mere Smith*” in the Westgate Buildings and Sir Eliot in elevated Camden Place built on unstable land. Box Hill was an ideal English pastoral scene for a picnic in Emma and today, it still has the beautiful views, quiet footpaths on which to stroll away from crowds of holiday makers and commercial vendors. Jane Austen would have known about an eccentric Major Labelliere who requested to be buried upside down along one of these footpaths. “*Since the world was completely topsy-turvy, he reasoned, he was sure to be the right way up in the end.*”

In Steventon, Jane Austen’s birth place, the elms are gone and the 900-year old yew tree near St. Nicholas Church is admired. By the lectern in the church, “*hangs a blue banner with a black felt silhouette of Jane Austen, and someone has worked matching kneelers*”. A lime tree planted in 1813 by brother, James Austen and his son, James Edward, is still there. Near Deane House there is a sign warning, “*Extra Slow: Children and Dogs*”. Ashe Park is now home to the bottled mineral water of “*Well, Well, Well*”. Ms. Sanderson was fortunate to have a tour of Godmersham, much altered for its present use as an optician training college and closed to the public. The footpath through the estate, in which she contemplates Jane Austen’s thoughts to the same views, is available to anyone wishing to walk it. Ancestors of the deer Jane saw still roam the park.

Coincidentally, in searching out Jane Austen, the author followed a route through southern England (Winchester to Godmersham) that is similar to the route of the old Pilgrim’s Way. At the end of her pilgrimage she recognized that the essence of Jane Austen was not to be found in the places she lived, visited or wrote about. But, in recalling her words while standing in the physical locality where they were written, her “*words caught light, her characters lived on the page and I felt I knew her just a little.*”