



## The Probable Location of “Longbourn” in Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*

KENNETH SMITH

Dr. Kenneth Smith is Senior Lecturer in Criminology in the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Buckinghamshire Chilterns University College, High Wycombe, UK. His most recent publications include an essay on e-democracy (*Sociological Review* 2004) and “Marx’s Revenge” (*Journal of Classical Sociology* 2004).

IS IT POSSIBLE TO IDENTIFY the exact location of the village of “Longbourn,” the residence of the Bennet family, in Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*? I think it probably is. No doubt out of consideration for any person who might have been living near any actual place that she named, Austen herself is careful to keep Longbourn’s precise location a secret (all those coy references in *Pride and Prejudice* to “the town of—in Hertfordshire”). However, we might note that Austen is not *always* so scrupulous. For example, she not only tells us that the Gardiner family, the Bennets’ cousins, live in the City of London, but *exactly* where they live in the City, in Gracechurch Street. Austen *also* tells us exactly how far Gracechurch Street is from the village of Longbourn, and thereby provides us with one of the major clues that we have to the probable location of Longbourn.

*Pride and Prejudice* is a work of fiction, of course, and the Bennet family no more *actually* lived at Longbourn than Sherlock Holmes lived at 221b Baker Street. Nevertheless, it is well known that Austen was very particular indeed about many other aspects of her work (for example, in the chronology of her novels, with exactly the right number of weeks passing to allow *Pride and Prejudice* to progress fifteen months from the autumn of one year to the Christmas of the next), and it therefore seems quite likely that she did indeed have some actual location in mind for the setting of Longbourn, even if this might have been a place with which she herself was relatively unacquainted.<sup>1</sup>

In *Pride and Prejudice* (Chapter 3) we are told that the village of Longbourn is in the county of Hertfordshire. This much then is not in dispute: if Longbourn actually existed at all, then it is undoubtedly in Hertfordshire. We are also told (Chapter 5) that the nearest town to Longbourn is called “Meryton” (a clearly fictitious name: Austen might just as well have called it “Toytown” and had done with it, and in fact there is no such place name in the whole of England or Wales<sup>2</sup>), and that Meryton is “a small market town,” but one which is sufficiently important to have once had a mayor, none other than Sir William Lucas himself, the Bennets’ near neighbor. Sir William’s house, Lucas Lodge, is said to be “within a short walk of Longbourn” and Lucas Lodge itself is also said to be only “about a mile” from the town of Meryton (18). While the village of Longbourn itself—and Austen seems really *very* exact about this—is said to be “only one mile from Meryton” (28). Meryton then, if it exists at all, must be a small town of some importance in the county of Hertfordshire and, if we could locate it, it would seem that we would not be more than one mile from locating the village of Longbourn itself.

From other comments that Austen makes it would also seem that Lucas Lodge is not on the way from Longbourn to Meryton—one does not pass Lucas Lodge to get to Meryton—but that both are in slightly different, though a similar, direction from the town. We *do* know, however, from the muddy walk that Elizabeth takes to visit her sister Jane, that Netherfield Park, Mr. Bingley’s rented home, is on the other side of Meryton and “only three miles” (32) from Longbourn since Elizabeth’s sisters, Catherine and Lydia, accompany her the first mile of her walk into town and she then goes on the remaining two miles to Netherfield Park by herself.

We also have a number of *indirect* clues as to whether it is Longbourn or Netherfield Park that is to the north or south of Meryton from what we are told in the novel about whether it is necessary for travelers coming directly from London to first pass through Meryton before they get to Longbourn, or whether one comes to Longbourn first from London before passing through Meryton to get to Netherfield Park. For example, at one point in the novel, when Lydia and Wickham come to visit Longbourn after their marriage in London and on their way to Newcastle, Lydia says the following:

“[D]o the people hereabouts know that I am married to-day? I was afraid they might not; and we overtook William Goulding in his curricle, so I was determined he should know it, and so I let

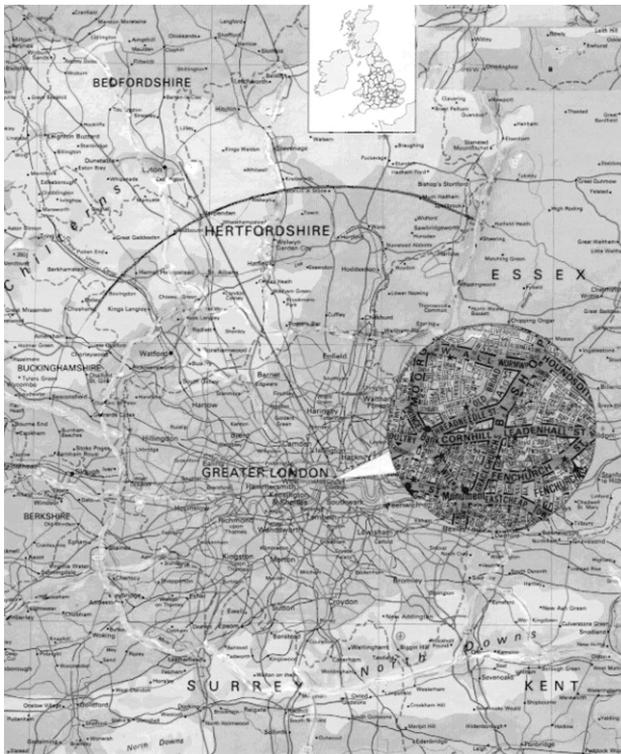
down the side glass next to him, and took off my glove, and let my hand just rest upon the window frame, so that he might see the ring, and then bowed and smiled like anything.” (316)

Had Lydia and Wickham’s coach first passed through Meryton to get to Longbourn this behaviour by Lydia would have been unnecessary since, Lydia being Lydia, she might well have stopped off on her way through the town to visit her Aunt Phillips (and would certainly have called out from the carriage window to her aunt if the carriage had not stopped) and then, in this way, all the town would have already known of her marriage. This passage therefore strongly suggests that one comes to Longbourn from London *before* one comes to Meryton, and since Hertfordshire is to the north/northwest of London, Longbourn must therefore be somewhere to the south/southeast of the town, but whether Longbourn is one mile to the *direct* south, southeast, or perhaps even the southwest of Meryton we do not as yet know.

11

We therefore already know really quite a lot about Meryton and the surrounding area, but what of its exact location? In order to locate an object on any two-dimensional plane such as a map, it is necessary to know at least two and, if possible, three pieces of information. Such a process is called triangulation and was used during the Second World War to locate spies making radio transmissions.<sup>3</sup> Two separate readings of a radio signal would be plotted, and where the plots intersected would be the location of the transmission. Now it just so happens that we do know quite a lot about the exact location of Longbourn but just not *quite* enough to give us the degree of absolute certainty we require; we have two very strong pieces of evidence, but just not quite the third. Let me explain.

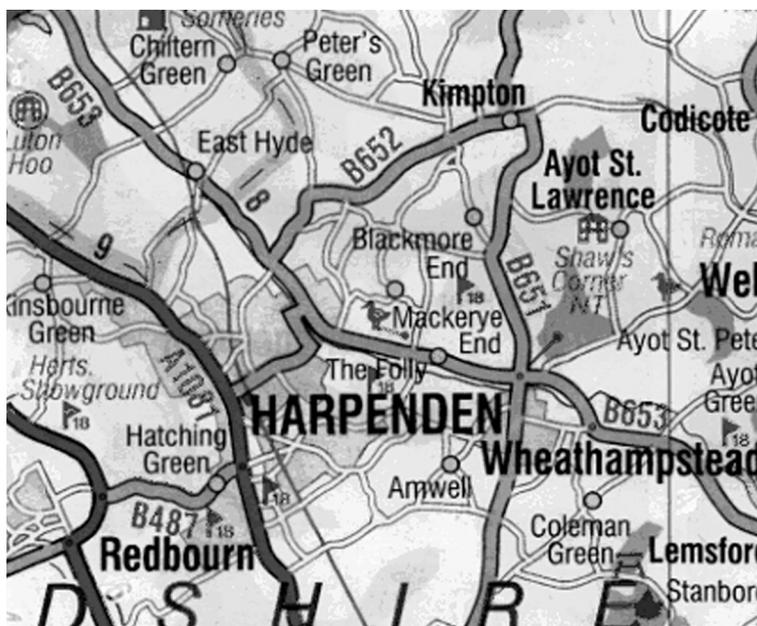
The first and most important fact we know is given to us in Volume II, Chapter 4 when Elizabeth travels from either Longbourn or Lucas Lodge—Austen does not say which—to Kent with Sir William Lucas and his second daughter Maria to visit Sir William’s oldest daughter and Elizabeth’s good friend Charlotte Collins. In order that Elizabeth can visit her sister Jane, the whole party are to stay one night with Elizabeth’s aunt and uncle in Gracechurch Street in the City of London. The journey is therefore made in two parts, first from Hertfordshire to Gracechurch Street and then from Gracechurch Street to Kent, and Austen tells us *exactly* how far Longbourn and / or Lucas Lodge are from Gracechurch Street. It is a journey, she says, of “only twenty-four miles” (152); not twenty-five, and not twenty-three, but *exactly* twenty-four miles. Now, if we suppose that Lucas Lodge / Longbourn



Map 1: London in relation to Hertfordshire, detail City showing Gracechurch Street

are to the south, southeast, or southwest of Meryton, and since we already know they are both just about a mile or so away from this town itself (Longbourn exactly one mile and Lucas Lodge slightly less), then Meryton must be almost exactly twenty-five miles, not just from the City of London generally, but specifically from Gracechurch Street.

Is there then a small market town in Hertfordshire within a radius of exactly twenty-five miles from Gracechurch Street in the City of London? (see Map 1: London). The answer to this question is no; there is no principal market town *exactly* twenty-five miles from Gracechurch Street, but there is one town, *and only one*, that is exactly twenty-four miles from Gracechurch Street, and that is the town of HARPENDEN in Hertfordshire, five miles or so to the northwest of Hatfield. If, then, Harpenden *is* Meryton, Longbourn / Lucas Lodge *cannot* be to the south of the town in a direct line to London or they would only be twenty-three miles from London. However, there is another possibility: *if* Harpenden is Meryton, Longbourn might just be one



Map 2: Modern-day Harpenden showing Redbourn and Kimpton

mile to the northeast of Harpenden or one mile to the southwest *on the same line of circumference from Gracechurch Street as the town of Harpenden itself*; that is to say, still twenty-four miles from Gracechurch Street but also one mile to the northeast or southwest of the town.

Since we have already established that anyone travelling from London to Longbourn comes to Longbourn before passing through the town of Meryton, this strongly suggests that Longbourn is to the southwest of Harpenden / Meryton rather than to the northeast. And it just so happens that exactly *two* miles (but not one!) to the southwest of Harpenden [see Map 2: Harpenden] is a village called, not Longbourn, but REDBOURN. Since the name “Redbourn” is so similar to the name “Longbourn,” the suggestion I wish to make here is that, if Harpenden *is* Meryton, then it may well be the case that it was the name of the village of Redbourn that inspired Austen to invent the fictitious name “Longbourn” for another village one mile from Meryton/Harpenden.

Apart from the distance of Harpenden from London and the possibly coincidental similarity between the names of Longbourn and Redbourn, there is



Map 3: 19th-century map showing Kimpton in relation to Harpenden

also one other curious piece of information to suggest that Harpenden may well be Meryton and that Longbourn is a village somewhere to the southwest of Harpenden. Just to the northeast of Harpenden, and, in fact, just about where Netherfield Park must be if it were on the other side of Meryton from Longbourn, is a village called Kimpton. Now it is a curious thing that the living that Mr. Wickham is supposed to have been left by Mr. Darcy's father in *Pride and Prejudice*, but which Wickham gives up all claim to in exchange for £3,000, is called Kympton (spelt with a **y** rather than an **i**). There are no villages in England called Kympton, spelt with a **y**, but there are two and only two in the whole of England called Kimpton, spelt with an **i**, and one of these just *happens* to be this very village about three miles or so to the northeast of Harpenden. Now, of course, Wickham's Kympton is supposed to be in Der-

byshire, not Hertfordshire, but it is still a curious thing to find *this* Kimpton here, within only three miles of Harpenden, and only five miles or so away and on the other side of Harpenden from the village of Redbourn. Moreover, there was in Austen's time (now no longer in existence) a private estate called Kimpton Hall (see Map 3: Kimpton) between the present-day village of Kimpton and the town of Harpenden, and the park and woods of Kimpton Hall stretched southwest in the direction of Harpenden. Even today, the road from Harpenden to Kimpton is inconveniently indirect (forming a triangle with Wheathamsted), but if a person were to *walk* across the fields in a straight line from Harpenden to Kimpton Woods, as we are told Elizabeth Bennet does from Meryton to Netherfield Park, then the distance to the woods would not be much above *two* miles as the crow flies from Harpenden (see Map 2).

IV

Where then is Longbourn? It is almost certainly a small village, amounting perhaps to little more than a hamlet, exactly one mile to the south or southwest of Harpenden/Meryton. If to the southwest, it would have been nice (but perhaps just a little *too neat*?) if we could have drawn a straight line from Harpenden in the direction of Redbourn and found a village exactly one mile between these two towns, but in fact no such village exists today, nor does any such village seem to have existed in Austen's time (see Map 3). However, the *former* hamlet of HARPENDEN BURY, on the river Ver,<sup>4</sup> now a golf course, although *not* in a direct line from Redbourn to Harpenden, *is* approximately one mile to the west/southwest of Harpenden and therefore also about twenty-four miles to London. If, on the other hand, Longbourn is directly to the south of Harpenden, on the main road to London, then there were in Austen's day, and still are now, two houses—Limbrick Hall and Bamville House—which are almost exactly one mile to the south of Harpenden on the direct road to London (Bamville House is one mile and Limbrick Hall slightly nearer). Bamville House would therefore seem to be a perfect candidate for Longbourn and Limbrick Hall a suitable location for Lucas Lodge, but for two things: if Harpenden is twenty-four miles to the City of London, then Bamville House and Limbrick Hall, being one mile to the south of Harpenden, must be nearer twenty-three than twenty-four miles to Gracechurch Street, while if Bamville House is Longbourn, Kimpton Hall cannot be Netherfield Park since one does not need to go through Meryton/Harpenden to get to Kimpton/Netherfield Park from Bamville House (see Map 3).

There is one way round this problem. It may well be the case that when Austen said that the journey from Longbourn to Gracechurch Street was a

journey of only twenty-four miles, she meant the journey by road rather than as the crow flies. We obviously do not know the source of Austen's claim that Longbourn/Lucas Lodge were *exactly* twenty-four miles from Gracechurch Street. If Harpenden is rather more like twenty-five than twenty-four miles to the City of London, then Bamville House, being one mile south of Harpenden, may be nearer twenty-four than twenty-three miles *by road* to Gracechurch Street. One thing is certain, however: if Bamville House is Longbourn then Kimpton Hall *cannot* be Netherfield Park, but can at best only be the inspiration for the name of Wickham's living in Derbyshire. On the other hand, if Longbourn is Harpenden Bury, then no such difficulties arise and it is easy to imagine Elizabeth Bennet walking the three miles or so from Longbourn/Harpenden Bury through the town of Meryton/Harpenden, and then on across the muddy fields to the east of Harpenden towards Netherfield Park/Kimpton Hall (see Map 2).

Whatever the exact location of Longbourn, and always assuming that Jane Austen *did* have a specific location for Meryton in mind, there would seem to be a very good case for saying that Longbourn/Meryton/Netherfield must have been somewhere within the broad general area of Redbourn/Harpenden/Kimpton.

#### NOTES

1. A suggestion has been made that Austen had visited the nearby town of Hatfield in Hertfordshire, if not Redbourn or Harpenden. Rudolph Robert says that Austen refers to Fore Street in Hatfield: "the busy little street that runs up to my Lord Salisbury's house [Hatfield House], where the many coaches stop . . . at the Salisbury Arms." However, I have been unable to trace this quotation anywhere in Austen's writings.
2. A-Z Map of Great Britain, 2002 edition, index of place names 106-23.
3. Triangulation: navigation: "the fixing of an unknown point by making it one vertex of a triangle, the other two being known. Vertex: the point of intersection of two or more sides of a plane figure."
4. Harpenden Bury is on the river Ver, a minor stream at this point, and this, together with the name Redbourn, might just have given Austen the idea for the fictional name [Long]bourn since a "bourn" is an archaic British name for a small stream.

#### WORKS CITED

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| <p>Austen, Jane. <i>Pride and Prejudice</i>. Ed. R. W. Chapman. 3rd ed. Oxford: OUP, 1986.</p> <p>A-Z Map of Great Britain. Sevenoaks, Kent: Geographers' A-Z Map Company Ltd., 2002.</p> | <p>Bryant, A. Map of the County of Hertfordshire, published by Hertfordshire County Council (1820-21).</p> <p>Rudolph Robert. <i>Famous Authors in Hertfordshire</i>. Herts.: Letchworth Printers Ltd., n.d.</p> |
|---|--|