



*The church of St. Michael and All Angels, Hamstall Ridware, where Jane Austen's first cousin, the Rev. Edward Cooper, was rector from 1799 until his death in 1833.*

## Hamstall Ridware: A Neglected Austen Setting

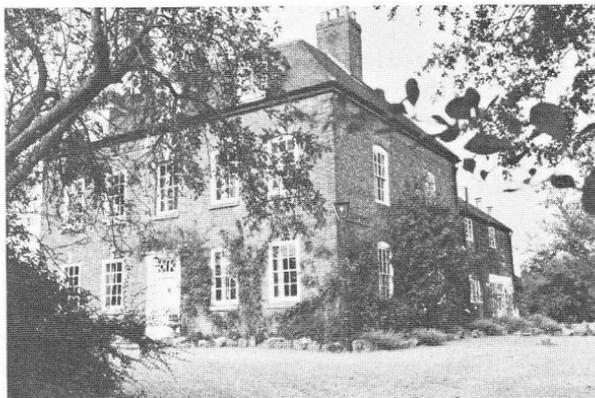
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In 1958 the Jane Austen scholar Elizabeth Jenkins saw, in the Rutland Arms Hotel in Bakewell, Derbyshire, a notice to the effect that, in 1811, Jane Austen stayed in a certain room there and made it the setting for the meeting between Elizabeth Bennet and Fitzwilliam Darcy in Chapter 44 of *Pride and Prejudice*. The second statement is certainly wrong—the meeting took place in an inn in “Lambton,” on the other side of Pemberley from Bakewell—as is the date 1811, though there may be an argument for an earlier date. At any rate, Miss Jenkins wrote (in *Collected Reports of the Jane Austen Society*, 1967, p. 289), “Taken aback by these statements, I telegraphed to the late R. W. Chapman to ask if there were any truth in them, and he replied: ‘No evidence that she was ever north of the Trent.’”

Whether or not Jane Austen ever stayed at the Rutland Arms—and, since the actual town of Bakewell is mentioned in the novel as being a short distance from Pemberley, that mansion has very serious claims to being identified with the great country seat of the Dukes of Devonshire, Chatsworth, which is the same distance from Bakewell as Pemberley is supposed to be—Chapman was mistaken in asserting that Jane Austen was never north of the River Trent, the traditional dividing line between south and north England. In August 1806 she was almost certainly north of it—if only a few miles.

Students of Jane Austen's biography will recall that in that month she, her mother, and her sister Cassandra visited the ancestral seat of her mother's family, the Leighs, at Stoneleigh Abbey, Warwickshire, to take part in a family conference concerning the future of the Leigh inheritance after the death, earlier that year, of the last member of the Stoneleigh branch of the



*The rectory of St. Michael's and All Angels, where Jane and Cassandra Austen and their mother were the guests of their relations, the Coopers, in August 1806.*

family, the Honourable Mary Leigh. Mrs. George Austen, Jane's mother (before her marriage Cassandra Leigh, of the Adlestrop branch), on August 13, wrote a long letter to her daughter-in-law in Steventon describing the magnificence of Stoneleigh. In the version of the letter quoted in W. and R. A. Austen-Leigh's *Jane Austen: Her Life and Letters* (1913; p. 197), she writes, "Tomorrow we depart." For some reason the phrase that follows, which is given in *Austen Papers, 1704-1856* (ed. R. A. Austen-Leigh; privately printed, 1942, p. 247), was omitted. The full statement there reads, "Tomorrow we depart, Hamstall is 38 miles from hence."

Hamstall Ridware, some ten miles north of Lichfield, is one of a number of small Staffordshire communities bearing the name "Ridware"—Pipe Ridware and Mavesyn (a corruption of the family name "Malvoisin") Ridware are the delightful names of some of them. Hamstall was an extensive manor of the Lords Leigh, purchased by them in 1601. They preferred, however, to live at Stoneleigh, a Cistercian abbey found in 1155, which, at the Dissolution, was granted by Henry VIII to his brother-in-law, Charles Brandon, Duke of Suffolk. It then came into the possession of Sir William Cavendish, ancestor of the Dukes of Devonshire, who sold it in 1561 to Sir Thomas Leigh, Lord Mayor of London. In the 1720's, Edward, third Lord Leigh, built the impressive baroque west range of the building, a façade for the old brick sixteenth-century and earlier buildings. Mrs. Austen's description in her letter of 1806 is an accurate account of it as it still is today, and the statement of the brochure given to visitors, that it is the original of Sotherton in *Mansfield Park*, is very plausible.

So in the eighteenth century the manor of Hamstall was leased to tenant farmers, with a proviso in the lease that whenever Lord and Lady Leigh chose to visit it, accommodation should be available for them. The Leighs also owned the advowson of the parish church of St. Michael and All Angels, a short walk from the manor house, Hamstall Hall. In 1799 a letter of Jane Austen's (Chapman No. 18) reports, "Yesterday came a letter to my mother from Edward Cooper [JA's first cousin] to announce, not the birth of a child, but of a living; for Mrs. Leigh [i.e., Mary Leigh of Stoneleigh] has begged his

acceptance of the Rectory of Hamstall-Ridware in Staffordshire, vacant by Mr. Johnson's death." She goes on in her inimitable acid vein, so often directed at her own relations:

We collect from his letter that he means to reside there, in which he shows his wisdom. Staffordshire is a good way off; so we shall see nothing more of them till, some fifteen years hence, the Miss Coopers are presented to us, fine, jolly, handsome, ignorant girls. The living is valued at £140 a year, but perhaps it may be improvable.

In fact, the memorial tablet to Edward Cooper in St. Michael's, Hamstall, informs us that he also became rector of nearby Yoxall, which no doubt brought with it a desirable increase in the income needed to support his large family, whose size their cousin Jane sometimes mocked: in 1811 (Chapman No. 72) she begins a letter, "It was a mistake, my dear Cassandra, to talk of a tenth child at Hamstall. I had forgot there were but eight already."

Edward Cooper, born 1770, did indeed reside there until his death in 1833. He is buried in a transept of St. Michael's, together with his wife, Caroline Isabella, *née* Lybbe-Powys. The marble tablet above their vault records that he was "a faithful minister of Christ and endeared to all his parishioners. He discharged with unremitting toil the duties of his sacred office." (Anglican church-goers may be familiar with his hymn, "Father in Heaven whose love profound," written in 1805, and still found in modern hymnals.)

The tablet also records that he was the son of Jane, granddaughter of Theophilus Leigh of Adlestrop, Gloucestershire (whose wife, Mary Brydges, was the sister of the first Duke of Chandos). Jane Leigh was Mrs. Austen's only sister ("the beauty of the family," write the Austen-Leighs), who died prematurely in 1783 (Mrs. Austen lived for another forty-four years). The tablet was erected by the "eight surviving children" as a token of "grateful affection and respect to the memory of their deeply lamented and much beloved parents." Of the children of the Coopers, many are buried in the churchyard of St. Michael's in a family plot. It is interesting to note the persistence of the Leigh and Austen names—Jane Elizabeth Cooper, youngest daughter of Edward Cooper, who died January 8, 1882, in the 83rd year of her age, and Cassandra Louisa, his second daughter, who died December 24, 1880, in her 84th year. These Miss Coopers at least survived long beyond fifteen. There are also a number of small stones in the ground nearby, recording little members of the family who did not live long enough to warrant more elaborate memorials.

From the few references to Edward Cooper, in Jane Austen's letters, it is hard to say what her actual feelings towards her cousin were, given the persistent irony of her tone in so much of what she writes about her relations and other acquaintances. Clearly she finds him rather boring (as she did so many people). At the same time she would not have failed to respect him for the devotion to his duties as parish priest recorded on the tablet over his grave. In 1801 (Chapman No. 33) she writes, "Edward 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." Apparently it was not until five summers later that the Austen ladies accepted the invitation. But there were clearly good reasons for their eventually doing so. Mrs. Austen may well have wished to see the family of

her only sister. Moreover, it was through the connection with the Coopers that the young Austen brothers, Frank and Charles, won the entrée into the Royal Navy that was to furnish them with such successful careers, careers of which their sister Jane was so proud: it was Edward Cooper's brother-in-law, Admiral Sir Thomas Williams, who gave them important help in beginning those careers (*Life and Letters*, pp. 77-78).

I first visited Hamstall in 1980, driving down a narrow road leading west from Yoxall, and found a shabby, neglected set of farm buildings. In the 1920's and earlier, the Leighs had sold off much of the large estate. It was most pleasant, in September 1985, to find a very different scene. During the annual celebrations in Lichfield of Samuel Johnson's birthday, the gracious secretary of the Lichfield Johnson Society, Mary Salloway, and her husband, learning of my interest in Jane Austen, kindly drove me for an afternoon's visit to Hamstall. Four years ago the manorial property was bought by a young couple, Chris and Jennifer Hobbs, who have put an extraordinary amount of energy and perception into restoring it and transforming it into "the Ridware Arts Centre," which is bound to become a distinguished home for arts and crafts in the English Midlands. The old "Cow Byre," "Malt House," and other farm buildings have become workshops and showrooms for ceramics, weaving, painting, and other crafts. The Hobbses themselves occupy the old Manor House of the Leighs, Hamstall Hall. St. Michael and All Angels, Edward Cooper's church, is well cared for. The rectory, where Mrs. Austen, Jane, and Cassandra must have stayed in 1806 (along with numerous small Coopers)—a fine Georgian house—has been restored and is in private hands. Of the various places with Austen associations, it is one of the most interesting and most repaying of a visit by lovers of Jane Austen. It is *alive*, and becoming more so every day. It is fascinating to see an eighteenth-century manorial community in action, and visitors are warmly welcomed. By "neglected" in the title above, I mean merely neglected by aficionados of Jane Austen; certainly not—quite the contrary—by those who now look after it.

Incidentally, Hamstall, thirty-eight miles from Stoneleigh, is just about the same distance from Chatsworth—an easy day's drive in a fine carriage such as that no doubt in which the Reverend Thomas Leigh of Adlestrop was escorting his Austen relations. Try it some time, in a rented car, taking along a copy of *Pride and Prejudice*, and notice how closely the topography of the approach to Chatsworth from the south, along route B6012, corresponds to that of the approach to Pemberley. We have, of course, no evidence of what Jane Austen was doing between our last glimpse of her at Hamstall in August 1806, and when she next surfaces at Southampton in January 1807. But the Austen ladies were evidently mobile that summer, and intent on sight-seeing; at Stoneleigh they made expeditions to nearby Kenilworth and Warwick Castle. Also incidentally, Stoneleigh Abbey, which was seriously damaged in a fire some years ago, is now again open to the public on three days a week during the summer. It too is well worth a visit.

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