

Jane Austen Society of North America

VANCOUVER REGION - NEWSLETTER NO. TWENTY-SEVEN - AUGUST 1989

A VISIT TO CHATHAM DOCKYARD

When Henry Crawford visited Fanny at Portsmouth, he was given a tour of the dockyard by her father. (Henry's uncle was an admiral and he had seen it all many times before, but it was a good way to see more of Fanny). Probably every visitor was shown around in this way, and one of the tourist attractions of Portsmouth today is a similar tour of the ramparts and dockyard.

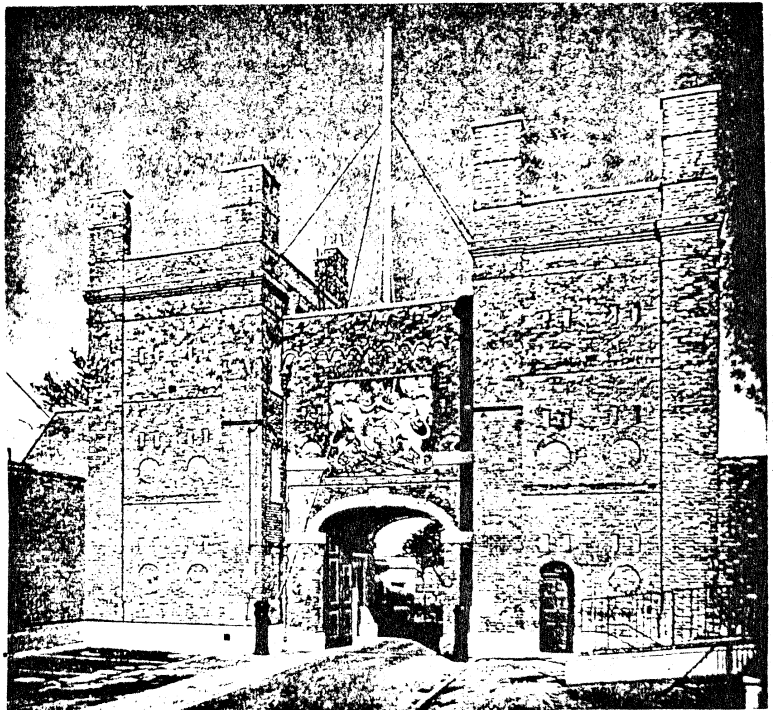
Portsmouth was the earliest dry-dock, built about 1496. By the time of Nelson, the three largest in Britain were Portsmouth, Plymouth and Chatham.

The most interesting dockyard to visit may be the one at Chatham on the Thames, closed by the Navy in 1984. Established by Henry VIII in the mid-16th c., Chatham Dockyard is being renovated for tourism and commercial use by the Chatham Historic Dockyard Trust. Although the cost of renovation of some of the old historic buildings, such as the five covered slipways, is prohibitive, many are being put to use again for the promotion of dockyard-related skills and businesses, as well as forming a "museum community".

Today the dockyard covers 80 acres, with half a mile of riverside frontage, and 47 listed buildings.

The Ropery is once again making rope on a commercial basis. In this huge, brick shed, clanking machines on rails twist the yarn into strands and the strands into rope, as they did when ropes were made here for the Victory, launched in 1765 and 40 years old at the time of Trafalgar. In the nearby Sail and Colour Loft, flags and sails are being made again for commercial use. A wood carver is carving replica figureheads, and new masts are being made in the Mast House, which hopefully will become a centre for mast-making skills for the tall-ships of the future.

The houses of the Officers' Terrace, built in 1730 for senior dockyard officials, are being turned into prestigious town houses, one being done up completely as in the past. The former dockyard church of 1810 is now used for concerts. The Admirals' Offices (1805) have been refurbished and let as offices. An interpretive centre for visitors, a museum and a shop are housed in the old Galvanising Shop and the Lead and Paint Mill. A "Wooden Walls" exhibit, illustrating naval life in the middle of the 18th century, will be displayed in the Mould Loft, with artifacts



The Main Gate, with arms of George III.

from HMS Invincible, sunk off Portsmouth in 1758. A later exhibition, "Ironclads", is being prepared in the Smithery, which was built in 1808 to forge anchors and other ironwork.

From Pepys' time, when there was a full-scale Italian garden with formal beds and elaborate water displays, the gardens at the dockyard have made it a delightful place to live, and they too are being restored to use.

We don't know where William Price's Thrush was built or refitted, or Captain Wentworth's Asp or Laconia, but a visit to Chatham Boatyard would give a very good idea of what went on when ships like these were being prepared for sea, or undergoing repairs after a "touch with the Great Nation" during the French Wars.

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VANCOUVER PUBLIC LIBRARY: "THE LIBRARY OF THE FUTURE"

Like us all, the Vancouver Public Library is growing old. But unlike its readers, the library can be rejuvenated and start afresh, and planning has begun.

Here are some statistics: ours is the third largest library system in Canada. 5,000 people a day use the Main Branch. 1.5 million phone enquiries a year (450 per hour) are answered. 400,000 people are registered members. 5 million books circulate each year.

A series of public meetings has been held for discussions about what the library of the future should be like - what should be the interaction between the Main Library and its branches? What services should be planned for or expanded: for children, for seniors, for the handicapped? public meeting rooms? video and audio lending services? home access by computer link? extended use of electronic technology? and so on.

As a group of readers, JASNA Vancouver must be concerned with the plans for the new library system. Write or phone (665-3551) to offer suggestions or submit your ideas about what you want from your library. You can't curl up in front of the fireplace with a computer, nor sit with it in the shade on a hot summer day - if books are important to you, say so.

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ESSAY PRIZE WINNER

The English Department of Simon Fraser University reports that this year's winner of our local Jane Austen Essay prize was Rodger Cove, 9903 - 126th St., Surrey, B.C. His essay was entitled: "Focalization in Austen's Pride and Prejudice" and his professor considered it "...short but well written and informed by current literary theory". Cove discusses JA's narrative techniques in which she manipulates the reader's knowledge of characters by varying the points of view of narrator and characters.

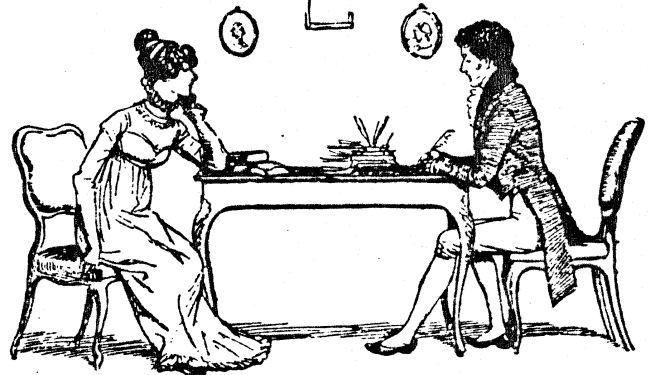
Rodger Cove has been invited to attend our September meeting, and I hope he will read and discuss his paper with members then.

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"You write uncommonly fast"

C.E. Brock



Hugh Thomson



"No, no; stay where you are"

Hugh Thomson



"No, no; stay where you are. You are charmingly grouped."

C.E. Brock

A FEW LAST (?) WORDS ON THOSE ENGAGEMENTS - by Keiko Parker

I am as opposed as anyone to a "con game", but I strongly differ from the view expressed by Dianne Kerr in the May 1989 issue of our Newsletter that Mr. Knightley and Emma were playing such a game. Of my belief on this point, I have already written in Newsletter No. 20 (November, 1987).

I now feel I should introduce some further points. Firstly, consider the genre of literature to which Emma belongs. There are categories such as comedy, tragedy, romance and history. (I will not invoke the finely-drawn classifications of Polonius in Hamlet!) I think there is little doubt that Emma is essentially a comedy. Jane Austen meant it to be a comedy; should we not read it as such? Concerning the fifth paragraph in Dianne's article, Emma not only stood to be made a fool of - she made a fool of herself! And that is part of the comedy.

As for Mr. Woodhouse and Harriet Smith "who stood to be made fools of", I wonder if that is such a bad thing? Is there a comedy by Shakespeare, Sheridan, or Wilde in which someone is not held up to ridicule? Dianne refers to "the danger of devastating the social process". I suggest that this, too, is the very source of comedy. If the novel in question were a tragedy, we might ponder the darker implications of upsetting the accepted social order. Since it is a comedy, we laugh at it.

Jane Austen's novels "gleam and shine through time", as Dianne states, but they do so because of their truthfulness of description (as observed by Scott), their humour, their satire, and their unique style; but surely not because of their "impeccable system of morality".

The quotation from the end of Chapter 11 of Persuasion that Dianne quotes may be as applicable to Emma as to Anne herself, but one must remember that Jane Austen wrote Emma and Persuasion in very different ways. Emma is nearly always at the centre of the action, whereas Anne is very often an observer. Thus Emma is not given to quiet reflection in the manner of Anne. When Emma did reflect on the development of events (as shown in Vol. 3, Chapters 11 and 12), "it darted through her, with the speed of an arrow, that Mr. Knightley must marry no one but herself!" Note how humour and comedy run riot here. If we do not recognize the essential difference between these two novels (both favourites of mine), we fail Jane Austen, not the other way around.

Later, Dianne states that the predictable reaction from Mr. Woodhouse is in no way altered by time. I suggest that it is. If Emma and Mr. Knightley had applied to Mr. Woodhouse immediately after their walk in the garden, the reaction by Mr. Woodhouse would quite possibly have been a fainting fit or stunned silence. But the startling incident of Mrs. Weston's poultry pen being raided, made Mr. Woodhouse realize that the addition of an able-bodied man to his household would not be a bad idea. Time (and circumstances) had altered his thinking.

If I may repeat myself, Mr. Knightley and Emma were not playing "the same wicked game" as Frank Churchill and Jane Fairfax. As readers, we must differentiate among the subtle and varied colours that Jane Austen used on her canvas to portray people and events. She did not paint in black and white.

Rather than presenting us with a "gospel" as Dianne put it, I believe that Jane Austen gave us "revelations" of the most human kind.

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[This is positively the last word on Secret Engagements! Pick another topic!]

MORE THAN OUR SHARE?

It is interesting to note that of the fourteen semi-finalists in the JASNA Literary Competition for 1989 (a competition open to undergraduate students all over North America), two were second year students at UBC: Lorraine Copland and Alberto Rubio. A third semi-finalist was a first-year student at the University of Alberta, Yin Liu. Such a high proportion of near winners (the final winner has not yet been announced) suggests a high standard of teaching, of which we should be very proud. Our congratulations to these three Canadian students. It sounds as if Jane Austen is still in good hands.

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COURTSHIP AND CHIVALRY

I recently came across two delightful cartoons by Rowlandson, a contemporary of Jane Austen, entitled Courtship and Matrimony. Both show an elegantly dressed lady, with a ruffled skirt and plumed, wide-brimmed hat, and a gentleman, equally elegantly dressed in knee-breeches, tail-coat and perfectly tied cravat.

In the first, Courtship, the gentleman is helping the lady over a gate in the path; in Marriage, he is whistling on his dogs while behind him his lady is with difficulty clambering over the gate by herself.

It reminded me of a similar incident in Persuasion: out walking, Charles Musgrove offers his arms to Anne and his wife, Mary. But when Mary displeases him, he drops her arm "almost every moment to cut off the heads of some nettles in the hedge with his switch; and when Mary began to complain of it...he dropped the arms of both."

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CHAWTON GREAT HOUSE

Chawton House is about to be sold. Admirers of Jane Austen everywhere will realize the implications, at once obvious and ominous.

Chawton House is the Great House owned by Jane Austen's brother Edward Knight. This is where she found quiet and privacy to write, away from the domestic distractions of "joints of mutton and doses of rhubarb". This is where she could participate in the life of an active, happy group of nieces and nephews, especially the eldest, Fanny, who was "almost another sister". This is where she could experience a life of comfort and ease in the elegant surroundings of an English country house.

The Jane Austen Centre Appeal proposes to buy the house and establish a Jane Austen Study and Research Centre - a museum where Jane Austen admirers can view objects intimately associated with her and her family; a library where scholars can use books and other materials for their research; a display area with audio-visual materials describing the life of Jane Austen and her contemporaries - a centre for serious scholars and "Janeites" both, a focus for all who admire the works of Jane Austen and appreciate what they provide us: knowledge of the world she lived in, stimulus for our critical faculties, and pleasure in the company of, among many others, "as delightful a creature as ever appeared in print". If Chawton House is turned into some sort of commercial venture and lost to the world of Jane Austen, it would be tragic.

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BEFORE THE RAILWAYS - THE CANALS

The Great Age of Canal Building in Britain was from about 1760 to 1830, almost coinciding with Jane Austen's lifetime. She would have read of these important and exciting doings in the newspapers and known well many of the canals and towpaths, and the villages they passed through. The Basingstoke Canal, for instance, was opened in 1796. At this time Jane Austen was living at Steventon only seven miles away, and attending country house parties and balls in Basingstoke itself.

The Basingstoke Canal, the first of the agricultural canals, was built as a link of only 37 miles between the agricultural heart of Hampshire and the edge of London. Barges would carry agricultural produce to the city, and return with peat-ash or lime to fertilize the fields. The financial planning was ill-considered, however, and the canal was a commercial failure, near bankruptcy after only a year or two of operation. The end of the Napoleonic Wars and the subsequent safety of the coastal traffic routes, and the opening of the Kennet and Avon Canal to carry goods to the West Country, reduced its effectiveness still more.

But imagine the accounts in the Basingstoke newspapers, and the comments of the local squires - many of them probably investors in the company - on the fluctuating fortunes of their local canal!

The Kennet and Avon Canal, linking the river Avon at Bath to the river Kennet at Newbury, was completed in 1810, after Jane Austen and her family had left the spa city. But relatives and friends remained there, who would be full of news about what would turn into one of the foremost waterways in the south of England, over 86 miles long. Bath stone, the beautiful building material of so many of Bath's crescents and squares, was shipped along the canal to Reading and thence to London. Agricultural produce and coal helped make its success.

Many industrial canals, built to serve the collieries in the north, were opened from the 1770's to 1815. Enthusiasm ran high and investors, besides the expected merchants and gentry, included bakers, grocers, hosiers, a peruke-maker, a postillion, and other small tradesmen. Many fortunes were made, but also many canal companies found unexpected expenses so high they never paid a dividend. The boom years of the Napoleonic Wars were followed by a trade recession, and all too soon the coming of the railroads put an end to dreams of financial success.

During the period of canal expansion, however, the effect on merchants, land owners and farmers of the nearby areas must have been tremendous. Between 1792 and 1811, several schemes were proposed to link the old canal at Exeter with London, via various other canals and rivers, "so that barges of 50 tons burthen may be laden at Exeter, and proceed to London (a distance of upwards of 200 miles) without shifting their cargoes", but where these linking canals were built, they were of many different dimensions, and Exeter never became the great port it hoped to be.

Jane Austen may have been thinking of one of these schemes when she decided that Mrs. Dashwood's effects, when she moved to Barton (4 miles north of Exeter) would be



Token issued by John Pinkerton to the workmen on the Basingstoke Canal.

"sent around by water", but more likely they would go by the usual coastal route. There is no other reference to water transportation, and Jane Austen's plots make no use of the canals that were criss-crossing the countryside at this time.

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DOWN THE DRAIN

Speaking of canals, I remember an amusing incident that occurred in the Midlands about ten years ago. Workmen dredging one of the old 18th century canals pulled up a heavy iron chain along with the usual assortment of rusty iron debris. At the end of the chain was an enormous wooden plug, and the men watched in amazement as the water of the canal slowly gurgled down the resulting hole and into a nearby river, leaving stranded in the mud hundreds of flopping fish and a dozen or so vacationers' boats. A spokesman for the British Waterways Authority said that the canal had been opened in 1777, and all records lost in a subsequent fire, with the result that nobody knew that such a plug existed. A new plug was made, and the canal refilled, but the incident was the talk of the town for some time.

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POTATOES

"These potatoes have as much the flavour of a moor park apricot, as the fruit from that tree". From Dr. Grant's argument with Mrs. Norris in Mansfield Park, we know that potatoes were served at Mrs. Grant's dinner party. A generation earlier, potatoes would not have been on the menu.

The knowledge and use of potatoes was part of herbal literature for centuries, but they were interesting as botanical specimens rather than as food. Drake was aware of potatoes in South America and used them as an important part of his ships' stores from 1577, in his voyage around the world. Sir Walter Raleigh, however, is usually credited with first bringing potatoes to England.

The potato was slow to gain acceptance in the diet of the common people. Many myths and prejudices arose against it. It was the first edible plant in Europe to be grown from tubers and not from seed - both the cultivation and the habits of the plant were strange to the unsophisticated population. It was commonly believed to "incite to Venus" and produce large families among those who ate it, an idea that did not die out completely until towards the end of the 19th century. The misshapen nodules of potatoes were likened to the deformed hands and feet of lepers, and for many years in certain areas potatoes were banned for fear they caused leprosy. When leprosy began to disappear in Europe, the potato was maligned as the cause of scrofula.

As late as 1813, the great naturalist Cuvier advocated the full use of the potato in France in spite of the fact that "old-fashioned doctors" still accused the food of causing fevers. In the Highlands of Scotland and in Ireland, definite objections were made to the potato because it was not mentioned in the Bible, and therefore was not a food designed by God for man. To avoid the evil associations, many ceremonies linked the planting of potatoes to Easter, the full moon, or the waning of the moon. In times of famine, the pressures of hunger gradually broke down such taboos.

The original potatoes which reached Europe were hybrids with a wide range

of variations, and from them were derived all the varieties we have today. The last quarter of the 18th century saw many new varieties: the Howard was introduced by the famous prison reformer in 1770. In the same year the Irish Apple was found to be a good "keeper". The Manly was common in 1776, the White Kidney around 1815, and the Ox Noble as early as 1787. The Ox Noble Inn at Manchester, built between 1804-8, is at the terminus of the Bridgewater Canal where potatoes were landed in such quantities that the wharf was known as the Potato Wharf for over a hundred years. The Lumper, of poor quality but good crops, was the potato of the poor, and the Cups was considered a luxury variety from 1806 onwards.

It was only in Jane Austen's lifetime that the potato assumed importance in the diet of the poor - and then only because of its cheapness, as a food for people whose wages were not sufficient to buy bread. Defoe, touring England in 1724, made no mention of potato crops. Gilbert White of Selborne began growing potatoes in 1758, but it was years before he could get the villagers to do the same. Mrs. Austen, in 1770, advised a tenant's wife at Steventon to plant potatoes in her garden, and was answered: "No, no, they are all very well for you gentry but they must be terribly costly to rear".

The year 1795 was one of crisis - a series of bad harvests left many people starving. One solution was to increase the use of the potato, as a food itself and in bread. This plan was unsuccessful and food riots were common. Although the labourers insisted on eating white bread, gradually potatoes became a part of their diet, and land where they could grow their own was set aside for them.

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SEPTEMBER MEETING - Dunbar Community Centre, 4747 Dunbar St. (at 31st Ave.)

The start of another season - don't miss the slide/lecture by Keiko Parker about the many different illustrators of JA's Pride and Prejudice. This will be a preview of her talk to be given at the conference in Santa Fé.

Note the change of place - we needed a room that could be well darkened. The Dunbar Community Centre has a good-sized room and kitchen facilities. As before, any volunteers for kitchen duties will be appreciated.

And don't forget the Summer Challenge: "What would they never say?"

All members and guests welcome. Saturday, September 23, 1989; 10:00 am.

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This Newsletter, the publication of the Vancouver Region of the Jane Austen Society of North America, comes out four times a year: February, May, August and November. All submissions on the subject of Jane Austen, her life, her works and her times, are welcome. Mail to the Editor: Eileen Sutherland, 4169 Lions Ave., North Vancouver, B.C. V7R 3S2.