

Wargrave Local History Society

Latest News - September 2016

Visit to Chawton



In July, members of the Wargrave Local History Society made their visit to a ‘place of history interest’ – this year to Chawton, near Alton, in Hampshire.

The day began at Chawton House Library (*above, left*). The history of the land where it stands can be traced back for at least 1,000 years. There had been a medieval house on the site. The property had been acquired by a local family, the Knights, in the middle 1500’s, and they had the present, Elizabethan, house built. It passed down through the Knight family, and then to Thomas Brodnax May Knight, who also owned a large estate at Godmersham, in Kent, and administered the two together. His son, also Thomas, inherited the estates in 1781, but he and his wife, Catherine did not have any children. They therefore made a distant (but not blood) family relation their legal heir. He was Edward, the 16 year old son of the Reverend George Austen, and he took over some of the management of the estates in 1794 when Thomas died, and then in 1797 Catherine handed over full management to him. Following the custom of the time, he then took the surname Knight

In 1826 the property passed to Edward’s son, also Edward, who made some additions to the building, and in turn Chawton House passed to his son, Montagu Knight. During his ownership, the house was extensively restored and modernised – the dining room, for example, had new style windows, and the wood panel over the fireplace bears the date 1895 – Montagu had it created to celebrate his silver wedding anniversary – although the dining table had belonged to Edward Austen himself.



The grounds of Chawton House Library, with Edward Austen's dining table (lower right)

Montagu Knight died in 1914, and the house then went into a long slow period of decline, until by 1987, when Richard Knight inherited the property some parts were in a poor state of repair. This was resolved by the granting of a lease to a new organisation – Chawton House Library – set up by an American, Sandy Lerner. She had long had an interest in Jane Austen, and decided to move her extensive library of books relating to women's writing into the house. The process of repairing and restoring the house took 10 years, but in 2003 it was able to open as a place for research and study into female authors and their work.

When the Reverend George Austen retired in 1801, he, his wife, and daughters Jane and Cassandra moved from the rectory at Steventon to live in Bath. This was not a happy time for Jane, and she stopped writing at this time. When George died in early 1805, his wife and daughters were left in a difficult situation



financially. Jane's brother, Edward, then offered them the use of a cottage free of rent for life – either on his estate at Godmersham, or at Chawton. Jane's mother favoured Godmersham, but Jane 'was a Hampshire girl', and so the 3 ladies, together with a friend, Martha Lloyd, moved to Chawton in 1809. Jane did much of her writing there, but eventually poor health led her to move to be near a doctor at Winchester. She died in 1817 – her mother and sister continuing to live in the cottage at Chawton. Subsequently the property had several other uses, but in 1948 was bought by Mr T Edward Carpenter, who set up the Jane Austen Memorial Trust. The Jane Austen Society paid for restoration of the cottage, which opened as the Jane

Austen House Museum in 1949 - and this was where – after lunch - the group spent the second part of their visit. The museum houses many objects relating to Jane Austen and her family – including the table where Jane did much of the work on her manuscripts, and other smaller personal items.

The gardens surrounding the museum are attractively set out, although less extensive than in Jane Austen's time. Her nephew, James Edward Austen-Leigh had written of it as having 'sufficient space for ladies exercise'. Jane Austen went to school in Reading, James Edward Austen-Leigh lived at Scarlett's at Kiln Green – his son, Arthur Henry, became vicar of Wargrave, the descendants of Jane Austen's publisher, John Murray, founded the Evelyn Home in Wargrave – so there were several connections to the Wargrave area making this visit of particular interest.

The programme of talks will resume on Tuesday, September 13th, when the subject will be *Wargravians and World War 1*, and then on Tuesday October 11th, Sue Hourigan, the conservationist at the Berkshire Record Office, will tell us about *The Preservation of Archive Records*, whilst on Tuesday, November 8th, Barbara Ratings will share some of her *Experiences as a Vicar's Wife from Germany*.

Our meetings start at 8 pm in the meeting room at the Old Pavilion on the Recreation Ground, Wargrave. See the Society's website www.wargravehistory.org.uk/ for more information.
