

Some Reflections Of A Janeite

I CONFESS TO BEING A JANEITE! It may surprise some people who associate Rudyard Kipling with the British Raj and as a celebrator of Empire, that he should have been an ardent admirer of Jane Austen's novels. He was, however a very diverse genius, and in one of his short stories he invented the Janeites, and gave the story that title.

As a Janeite of the present day, I sometimes glance across to Fortfield Terrace when walking along the path beside the cricket ground, and imagine two figures slowly traversing the gravel walk, above what was then a grassy meadow gently sloping seaward from the terrace. They are deep in conversation; they pause to gaze over the tranquil summer sea, and then turn and look at each other. They are but wraiths of my imagination, but he is the man Jane loved. All we know about him is that there was deep interest on both sides, but no formal declaration. He went back to London and died not long after. Jane had other admirers in her early twenties, but he was the only one to whom she was seriously attracted. She must have written about this to her sister Cassandra, who was not one of the party at Sidmouth, but what she wrote none but Cassandra ever knew.



An early drawing by David Markham in 1845-46, of Fortfield Terrace and the Cricket Pavilion. © SVA

After Jane's death in 1817 at the age of 41, in accordance with Jane's expressed wish, Cassandra destroyed the letters she wrote about the Sidmouth encounter. In the years after Jane's death, with her reputation as a writer steadily growing, there were several publications of reminiscences by a niece and nephew, and later descendants, but the loyal Cassandra revealed nothing, save perhaps the known fact that the Sidmouth admirer had died in London not long after the encounter. When Jane and her parents visited Sidmouth, it seems to be accepted that they stayed at Fortfield Terrace, but all else is conjecture, and there has been plenty of that over the years, as Jane became one of the select band of writers whose work survives and becomes "classic".

Cassandra herself, in her early twenties, had been formally engaged to a young clergyman, who died in the West Indies when acting as chaplain on board a Navy ship. Her role became that of the useful spinster. Able to take charge of a household, particularly on visits to her brother Edward, who had been adopted in childhood by rich and childless relatives, and inherited landed estates in Kent and Hampshire, but remained one of the close-knit family of brothers and sisters. When grown-up Edward changed his name from Austen to Knight. Edward's wife, Elizabeth, died after the birth of her eleventh child. Death was all too frequently mentioned in Jane's published letters; deaths of female relatives and friends from child-bearing, deaths of both men and women from various illnesses. Jane's own long, last illness has never been definitely diagnosed, although modern medical experts have made conjectures from the scanty evidence available in her letters.

In 1801, Jane Austen's father decided to leave Steventon in Hampshire, where he was rector, and remove to Bath. He was seventy, and not in the best of health. He left the parish in charge of his eldest son, who was also in Holy Orders. Jane was at first dismayed; she did not care for Bath, which she knew well from visits to relatives there, and preferred country life. However, she gradually became reconciled to the move. "The prospect of spending future summers by the sea or in Wales is very delightful" she wrote to her sister. So far as I know, they never visited Wales, but during the four summers in Bath before her father died, they did stay in south coast resorts, Sidmouth being the first in 1801. It is interesting to note that although Jane writes about various places she knew in her novels, such as Bath, Lyme, Dawlish and the countryside around Exeter, Portsmouth etc., she only mentions Sidmouth once in *Persuasion* when Mr William Elliot arrives at the coaching inn in Lyme (now Lyme Regis), on his way from Sidmouth to London; the road to Bath and London from the west took a different route in those days.

After her father's death, his widow and her two daughters Jane and Cassandra, eventually left Bath for Southampton, then a pleasant little port. They liked it there, but were delighted when Edward made available to them the country dwelling on his Hampshire estate, later known as Chawton Cottage, but actually more spacious than what is generally regarded as a cottage. The years at Chawton were for Jane years of contentment and success as a writer. It is now in the sensitive hands of the Jane Austen Society, which runs it as "Jane Austen's House" in a very evocative way, or so I felt when I visited there.

These happy years were brought to an untimely end by her illness. Cassandra nursed her devotedly until the end. In March 1817 she writes "I am got tolerably well again, quite equal to walking about and enjoying the air. . . . I have a scheme, however, for accomplishing more, as the weather grows springlike. I mean to take to riding the Donkey. It will be more independent and less troublesome than the use of the carriage, and I shall be able to go about with Aunt Cassandra in her walks. . . ."

Sadly, by May she had become very ill indeed. She writes of the plan to remove to lodgings in Winchester, to enable her to be treated by a Mr. Lydford, a physician there. She wrote to her nephew from College Street, Winchester, where she was in lodgings with Cassandra, an account of the journey in the carriage of her brother James, on a wet day, with her brother Henry and nephew William, riding beside the carriage.

At the end of May she wrote "My attendant is encouraging, and talks of making me quite well", but this was the last known letter she was able to write, and in spite of her physician's optimism she grew steadily worse, and died on July 18, 1817. In those last weeks perhaps she thought of that long ago summer in Sidmouth, but wished her memories to remain a private possession. Cassandra, ever loyal and devoted to her sister's memory, respected her wishes. Jane's memorial in Winchester cathedral pays her fitting tribute.

In a letter she once wrote, in parody of Scott's Marmion, she states:

*I do not write for such dull elves
As have not a great deal of ingenuity themselves.*

One delights in her shafts of irony; her ability to create characters which come to life in a sentence. Matchmaking may be diverting enough, but she peoples her novels with characters none but she could have invented, people such as that shallow snob Mrs. Elton, with her sister's barouche-landau (today she would have had a 4 x 4); Miss Bates, unmatched in literature as a bore; the egregious Mr. Collins; Lady Bertram with her pug and yards of fringe-making, a high priestess of indolence; I am always happy to meet them again on the printed page. In *Persuasion* Jane Austen's last novel, and published after her death, Kipling put forward the notion in *The Janeites* that the character of Captain Wentworth, open, candid and forthright, yet considerate, was based on that of the man she once met at Sidmouth.

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