



Digging into Jane Austen's World

By Carol Chernega

During my work last summer as the International Visitor (IVP), I learned about some of the issues facing the Jane Austen Society of Great Britain: members who don't pay their dues on time; visitors who fall and sustain injuries, raising fears of lawsuits; the Alton bypass which might take traffic away from Chawton Cottage.

And these were just the issues the Society faced back in 1950! My summer started off on a bad note—I arrived on the day of the London bombings. After that sobering experience, there could only be highlights ahead. While helping to set up for the JAS AGM on the lawn of the Chawton Library, I met two of Austen's brothers' descendants, Richard Knight and Patrick Stokes. I attended the AGM and met a few of the 800 attendees. And I shared a cozy pub dinner with JASNA President Joan K. Ray.

At the AGM, I also met JAS secretary Maggie Lane Jameson, who gave me my first job of the summer: transcribing the minutes of the meetings from the early days of the Jane Austen Society. Handwritten from 1949 to 1975, the minutes were a bit of a strain on the eyes. But as time went on, I became familiar with the nuances of Secretary Elizabeth Jenkins' handwriting and the work went faster. I discovered fascinating tidbits, such as the reason the Society chose July for the British AGM—that was the month Jane, her mother, and Cassandra moved into Chawton Cottage. I felt as though I'd lost friends when the minutes announced the death of founding members Dorothy Darnell and Colonel Satterthwaite.

I worked one day a week for the Chawton Library. Since I'm a gardener in real life, Library Director Graeme Cottam asked me to research plants that would have been used in Jane Austen's time. Working from old landscaping books in the Chawton Library, (one of which was inscribed 'Marianne Knight'), I learned how and why landscape trends developed in the 18th and 19th Century. My report included references in Austen's novels to specific fruits, vegetables, and flowers.

My third project for the Society was working one day a week with the gardener at Jane Austen's House. Gardener Celia Simpson is an expert in the history of plants, and she uses only plants in the garden that would have been known in Austen's time. As we pruned roses and weeded out invasive weeds, Celia advised me on my ongoing research. My research confirmed that Jane really knew her strawberries when she named specific varieties in *Emma*.

The remainder of my time was spent visiting English writers' homes and gardens for my personal project. My theme is that the inspiration for their work came from their home and landscape. I found this to be true whether I was walking through Agatha Christie's boathouse (the inspiration for the scene of the murder in *Dead Man's Folly*) or walking on the Yorkshire moors, where the recently installed book sculptures flung over the ground representing the "Literary Landscape," epitomized my theme perfectly.

Before leaving Jane Austen's garden, I planted a perennial flower called Geum that I'd bought at Agatha Christie's garden. Knowing I'd left behind a living reminder of my work helps me feel connected to Jane in a small, but meaningful, way. The experiences and friendships I nurtured last summer will live in my memory forever.

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