



Elegance and Simplicity: Jane Austen and Wedgwood

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2009 MARKED TWO IMPORTANT ANNIVERSARIES: the two-hundred-fiftieth year of operation for the company started by Josiah Wedgwood in 1759, and two hundred years from the date that Jane Austen took up residence at Chawton cottage in Hampshire. Well before these milestones, the Austen and Wedgwood heritage-keepers bowed civilly to one another. Pieces from Edward Knight's Wedgwood dinner set occupy a central spot in the dining room at Chawton cottage, while at the Wedgwood factory/museum campus in Barlaston, Jane Austen's account of her visit with Edward and his daughter Fanny to Wedgwood's London showroom decorates one wall of the tearoom in large letters. Jane Austen had a less proprietary interest in Edward's purple- and gold-painted china than might be supposed—but she was acquainted with an enormous range of Wedgwood products from her earliest days. Her knowledge of Wedgwood and the ways in which it was promoted and sold, as well as the importance of tableware to social standing, are revealed in both her personal correspondence and her novels.

Edward Knight's Wedgwood china is important to us because it has survived, and because we know Jane Austen must have used it during her visits to her brother's home. However, it probably was not particularly significant to her, and it is unlikely that she had much to do with its selection. Her terse reporting of the event—"We then went to Wedgwoods where my B^r & Fanny chose a Dinner Set.—I beleave the pattern is a small Lozenge in purple, be-



Detail of Edward Knight's dinnerware pattern with hand-painted purple lozenges, gold accents, and the Knight crest.

tween Lines of narrow Gold;—& it is to have the Crest”— does not suggest participation; the cautious “I beleive” distances her from the action (16 September 1813). Fanny was twenty years old at the time and since her mother’s death had been, like Elizabeth Elliot in *Persuasion*, “doing the honours, and laying down the domestic law” (6-7) at Godmersham; perhaps, too, at that age she had already begun to consider her aunt “very much below par as to good Society and its ways” (Honan 118). She and her father chose a dinner set to complement their grand homes and reinforce their social standing. Each piece was ornamented with the Knight crest, to which Jane had no claim.

In the mid-eighteenth century, wealthy Britons could buy porcelain of a very high standard from China, from the Sèvres factory in France or Meissen in Germany, or from the first English porcelain factories, such as Chelsea and Bow. Continental and English makers imitated Chinese designs or reflected the rococo taste, producing elaborately shaped vessels decorated with hand-painting and extensive gilding. Pottery of various types, usually locally made and far removed from porcelain in design and quality, supplied the needs of the less wealthy, along with pewter and wooden vessels for humbler tables.

In the early 1760s, Josiah Wedgwood perfected, through rigorous experimentation, a cream-colored earthenware (now usually called creamware) that was “durable and compact . . . , richly glossed, undergoing every vicissitude of heat and cold uninjured, combining the desiderata of elegance and cheapness” (Warner 167). While creamware production represented a significant technological advance, perhaps a greater accomplishment was Wedgwood’s ability to influence public taste: the simplicity of his creamware¹ patterns made porcelain seem to some observers “hideous and tawdry” by comparison (Warner 167).

Wedgwood capitalized on opportunities to put his products before the gaze of society figures and trend-setters. Queen Charlotte, other members of the Royal Family, and Catherine the Great of Russia commissioned special dinner services from him, and he attached notable names to his standard wares, such as flowerpots named for the Duchess of Devonshire (McKendrick et al 112). In a line that could as easily have come from the pen of Jane Austen, Wedgwood observed that “Fashion is infinitely superior to merit . . . , and it is plain from a thousand instances, that if you have a favorite child you wish the public to fondle & take notice of, you have only to make choice of proper sponsors [i.e., godparents]” (qtd. in Meteyard 378).

By the time of Jane’s birth, Wedgwood tableware had become commonplace in British homes and was exported in huge quantities. Among Wedgwood’s early customers were relatives and connections of the Austen family.² Thomas B. M. Knight, who appointed George Austen to the Steventon living, bought Wedgwood tableware initially in the 1760s,³ and letters he wrote in the 1770s refer to additional purchases made for both Godmersham Park and for Chawton House. His son, Thomas Knight, who with his wife adopted Edward Austen, selected a blue-edged pattern for his Wedgwood tableware in the 1780s; periodic requests for replacement pieces mention such items as muffin-plate covers, a fish drainer, a deep corner dish and cover, and sauce boat spoons. Sir Brooke Bridges of Goodnestone Park, Edward’s father-in-law, was another customer, as were Mrs. Austen’s relations Lord Leigh of Stoneleigh Abbey and his sister Mrs. Leigh (who inherited a life interest in Stoneleigh after her brother’s death). As she visited these and other homes, Jane Austen would have eaten many meals from Wedgwood dishes.

Desire for Wedgwood tableware, and its accessibility, spread quickly down the social scale. Maria Edgeworth, whose father knew Josiah Wedgwood through their membership in the Lunar Society, wrote that Wedgwood “not only produced what pleased persons of taste but what was useful to all classes” (18). A historian stated in 1816, “The remembrance of wooden platters and the bright ranges of pewter dishes and plates are almost getting past the knowledge of the present generation, and earthenware in its improved state has since been in every dwelling” (Tuckett 147). There were other manufacturers, but because Wedgwood led the industry in adopting new technologies and transportation options, developing modern factory practices, and designing marketing strategies for specific consumer groups, his products dominated the market. Indeed, the word “Wedgwood” became a generic term for English earthenware (Tuckett 149).

Jane Austen's parents started married life on the slenderest of means, as suggested by the family story that Mrs. Austen had but one gown to wear for the first two years, but when their fortunes improved, a Wedgwood dinner set was among their purchases (it was auctioned when the Austens moved from Steventon to Bath). They likely also possessed some of the multitudinous "useful wares" that Wedgwood produced, such as pen trays, inkwells, food molds, and chamberpots. When shopping, the Austens would have seen apothecary jars, oyster barrels, scale weights, and other articles, all made of Wedgwood creamware—"every shop, house, and cottage is full of it," wrote Josiah Wedgwood in 1778 (Wedgwood 221).

Thus Jane Austen grew up seeing Wedgwood products all around her. The fact that the word "Wedgwood" does not appear in her novels can be attributed to Wedgwood's pervasiveness, along with Austen's characteristic lack of description of physical artifacts. Rather than guessing which of her characters might dine from Wedgwood plates, it is easier to identify one that probably does not: Lady Catherine de Bourgh. Austen describes Mr. Darcy's taste by comparing it favorably to Lady Catherine's: the decoration of Pemberley "was neither gaudy nor uselessly fine; with less of splendor, and more real elegance, than the furniture of Rosings" (*PP* 246). Josiah Wedgwood described his preferred style, even for his most expensive wares, as "elegance and simplicity," deriding the "Frippery" of vessels "cover'd over with ornament" (qtd. in Dolan 208).

A similar comparison between Austen's text and the vocabulary used to describe Wedgwood can be applied to the "breakfast set" passage in *Northanger Abbey*:

The elegance of the breakfast set forced itself on Catherine's notice when they were seated at table; and, luckily, it had been the General's choice. He was enchanted by her approbation of his taste, confessed it to be neat and simple, thought it right to encourage the manufacture of his country; and for his part, to his uncritical palate, the tea was as well flavoured from the clay of Staffordshire, as from that of Dresden or Sêve. But this was quite an old set, purchased two years ago. The manufacture was much improved since that time; he had seen some beautiful specimens when last in town, and had he not been perfectly without vanity of that kind, might have been tempted to order a new set. (175)

A plausible case can be made that Austen is referring to Wedgwood in this passage, based on the similarity between General Tilney's speech and the content and phrasing of well-known eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century



Wedgwood creamware tureen, part of a dinner set purchased by Edward Knight in 1813, on display at Jane Austen's House Museum.

commentaries on Wedgwood. For example, General Tilney's china is "neat and simple" yet its "elegance" cannot be overlooked. Contemporary writers praised the "neatness and elegance" of Wedgwood ware (Pitt 202), its "simplicity and grace" (qtd. in Rev. of *Costume* 267). Several writers of the time used "Staffordshire" to signify Wedgwood⁴— "the other manufacturers being little better than mere imitators" (Young 255); Austen's phrase "the clay of Staffordshire" may be following this pattern. Austen's patriotic comparison of Staffordshire with Dresden (location of the Meissen factory) and Sève [Sèvres] echoes contemporary glorification of Wedgwood's "banish[ing] from the table" the productions "of Saxony, of France" (Warner 167).⁵

General Tilney establishes himself among the fashionable tourists who sightsee in the London china showrooms, among which Wedgwood's was famous, having played host to royal visits, by-ticket-only exhibits, crowds of carriages in the street, and "shoals" of ladies within (Smiles 137). Austen personally visited the Wedgwood showroom in London, and would also have known of Wedgwood's Bath showroom from her residence in that city.⁶

Taken together, these textual clues suggest that Austen may have had Wedgwood specifically in mind and intended her readers to recognize the reference. Why would this be? First, the cobbling together of common views shows us that there is nothing terribly original about the General's opinions—he simply says whatever is most likely to impress. And, even as General Tilney's goal is to convince Catherine of his wealth and taste, Austen's deeper goal is to show that his home, in its physical aspects, is nothing extraordinary; it is safe, conservative, correct, resolutely English, and maybe even a bit boring. In the early nineteenth century, Wedgwood—which was firmly established as a beacon of unexceptionable taste but lacked the spirit of innovation that characterized the company while its founder was alive—would have been an apt symbol for these ideas.

Two other mentions of tableware in the novels deserve attention. Although neither can even tentatively be associated with Wedgwood, both illustrate the importance of tableware as a marker of social status. For families on the economic margins, the ability to set a proper table was an important part of the ability to participate in society. In *Sense and Sensibility*, Mrs. John Dashwood would, if she could, withhold from the dispossessed Mrs. Dashwood and her daughters a set of china that is "[a] great deal too handsome" for their reduced habitation, and by extension, their reduced status; she expects them to entertain no company (13). In *Mansfield Park*, Susan Price hastily washes out a teacup one of the family had been using so that it can be offered to William's friend, Mr. Campbell (384).

Austen knew firsthand about the erosion of status and the challenge of putting up a good front on very limited means. In the spring of 1811, she was in London to correct the proofs of *Sense and Sensibility*. Sometime during this stay, she made a visit to the Wedgwood showroom to place an order. From the letter she later wrote to Cassandra describing the arrival of the crate from Wedgwood, it seems she was buying tableware to match pieces of an existing service in the possession of the ladies at Chawton cottage.

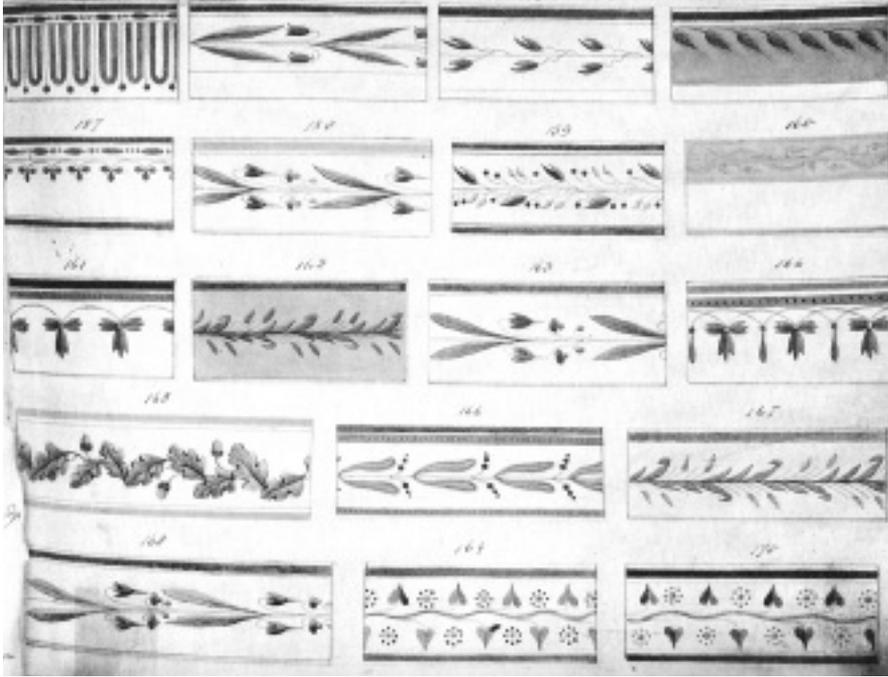
While Austen didn't describe her visit to the Wedgwood showroom, we have a good idea of what she would have seen. Josiah Wedgwood devoted con-

siderable thought to the layout and function of his first showrooms, and an engraving shows that many of his original concepts were still in place in 1809 (Dolan, cover). On the walls were antique-style vases, arranged in imitation of the collections in the British Museum. Entire dinner and dessert services were laid out on tables. There were areas where ladies could socialize and side rooms where the most exclusive wares were shown to select customers. Among the items on open display were products to captivate female buyers, including watercolor sets, chatelaines, jewelry, and teawares. All these were deliberate tactics, in Wedgwood's words, "To amuse, & divert & please & astonish, nay & even ravish the Ladies" (qtd. in Smiles, 330).

And yet, Austen doesn't exactly sound ravished. Standing at the counter, unwrapping a plate to be matched and unfolding a list of the pieces required to meet the needs of four ladies and their few visitors, she may well have felt out of place. Her two references to visiting Wedgwood's showroom—"I have done all my commissions, except Wedgwood" (18 April 1811) and "my Br & Fanny chose a Dinner Set"—suggest no particular enthusiasm, a sharp contrast from her detailed and witty accounts of outings to Grafton House. This is not surprising. She was, after all, not the audience for whom the showroom was so carefully designed. The technological and commercial innovations that put Wedgwood tableware within the reach of the middle class are of great historical significance, but to Wedgwood himself, the almost-global proliferation of useful ware was principally a financial engine that made it possible to develop ornamental productions targeted at a rarefied clientele. It was these customers that the showroom was designed to entice, although, as Austen's visits exemplify, more ordinary business was also transacted there.

A happy mood prevailed on the day the Wedgwood crate was delivered to Chawton cottage. Austen wrote, "I had the pleasure of receiving, unpacking & approving our Wedgwood ware. It all came very safely, & upon the whole is a good match, tho' I think they might have allowed us rather larger leaves, especially in such a Year of fine foliage as this. One is apt to suppose that the Woods about Birmingham must be blighted" (6 June 1811).

Austen's enthusiasm is understandable; the arrival of something new at the cottage was always an event. The nature of Wedgwood would also have been a source of comfort: rather like a "useful gown, happy to go anywhere" or a straw bonnet that looks "very much like other peoples" (6 March 1814, 5 May 1801), Wedgwood tableware was universally acceptable, as likely to be seen in a grand house as in a cottage. For the Austen ladies, there would be no need to scramble to find enough teacups for their guests, or to imagine that



A page from Josiah Wedgwood's eighteenth-century pattern book showing borders for creamware. Dozens of botanical, classical, and geometric patterns were offered. Image reproduced by permission of the Wedgwood Museum Trust, Barlaston.

their wealthier relations were passing judgment on the arrangement of their table. Edward's Wedgwood dinner set might be decorated more elaborately than theirs, but the brand and the basic material were the same.

It may yet be possible to identify the exact pattern of the tableware Austen ordered in the spring of 1811, as well as that of the breakfast set Martha Lloyd purchased somewhat later.⁷ An identification of the Chawton cottage china pattern could provide additional insight into how Jane Austen saw her world. She was always attentive to the latest fashions in dress, even when she could not, or chose not to, follow them. If her order had been intended to fill out a set of dishes produced in Wedgwood's early years, then her joking comment about "rather larger leaves" may mean that she had bought new dishes without having a new pattern, much like Fanny Knight and her new cap (23 September 1813). In the early nineteenth century, decorations on tableware became progressively larger and more exuberant than in the last quarter of

the eighteenth century, with designs covering more of the surface area of the pieces. If Austen had seen this newer style, yet ordered an older, more disciplined pattern to match existing dishes, then the border of woodland leaves may well have looked outdated or unpleasing to her eyes.

By encouraging the wealthy to appreciate simplicity, while making it possible for the middle classes to acquire articles of elegance, Josiah Wedgwood led a revolution in English taste. Austen's description of General Tilney's breakfast set demonstrates a keen awareness of how Wedgwood articulated his style and was regarded by his contemporaries. Unlike General Tilney, Austen apparently was not entertained by the arts and allurements of Wedgwood's London showroom, but at home at Chawton, the acquisition of Wedgwood was something to be celebrated—blighted leaves and all.

NOTES

1. In the interest of brevity and simplicity, this paper omits discussion of other Wedgwood ceramic types used to make tableware (principally pearlware, but also caneware, basalt, and jasper) and the entire category of ornamental wares.

2. Letters alluding to the Knight, Bridges, and Leigh Wedgwood orders were reviewed by the author at the archives of the Wedgwood Museum in Barlaston, Staffordshire, with the kind assistance of archivist Mr. Kevin Salt. This search was not comprehensive; a deeper examination of both letters and order books in the archives would likely reveal more Austen connections who were Wedgwood customers.

3. In 1768, Thomas B. M. Knight's wife Jane wrote to Wedgwood on behalf of her friends "Mr and Mrs Denton of Winchester," whose order was long overdue; the Knights would presumably have been established customers themselves before interceding for the Dentons.

4. E.g.: "It is unnecessary to say that this alludes to the Pottery of Staffordshire, which, by the united efforts of Mr. Wedgwood and his late partner, Mr. Bentley, has been carried on to a degree of perfection, both in the line of utility and ornament, that leaves all works, ancient or modern, far behind" ("Obituary" 84). Writing in 1791, a German commentator, Gebhard Wendeborn, considered Wedgwood and Bentley the only English pottery firm worth mentioning: "The earthen ware, the compositions, and the imitations of antiquity of a Wedgwood and Bentley exceed every thing in its kind; they are well known abroad, and admired by the curious" (161).

5. See also *A Tour* (19); Tuckett (149); and Rev. of *The Costume of Great Britain* (267).

6. The Bath showroom, opened in 1772, was managed by William Ward, father of novelist Ann Radcliffe. It was initially located, much to Josiah Wedgwood's displeasure, in Westgate Buildings and was soon moved to better quarters on Milsom Street (Norton 41).

7. A search for the 1811 London Order Book in the Wedgwood Archives, conducted in April 2009, revealed a corresponding index entry, but the book itself could not be located at the time. This book would presumably provide detail on the order placed by Austen in the spring of 1811 and the somewhat later order of a breakfast set by Martha Lloyd.

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