

Ep82: The Thing About the Late Mr. Darcy's Steward

Zan: Welcome to The Thing About Austen, a podcast about Jane Austen's world. I'm Zan.

Diane: And I'm Diane. And this episode, we're talking about the late Mr. Darcy's steward.

So this episode could also be titled The Thing About Wickham's Father. Since that individual is one and the same with the late Mr. Darcy Stewart. And Caroline is not going to let Elizabeth forget it. Elizabeth has struck up a bit of a flirtation with Wickham at this point in the novel. And she is looking forward to seeing him at the Netherfield Ball.

But learns early on that he will not be attending due to the presence of Mr. Darcy. Intrigue! Exactly. After dancing with Darcy, and really shutting down all of his attempts at conversation. I mean, this guy, [00:01:00]he's just failing. Fail, fail, fail.

Zan: You know, he tried so hard.

Diane: He tried so hard. She is approached by Miss Bingley.

Zan: So this is from the text.

They had not long separated when Miss Bingley came towards her and, with an expression of civil disdain, thus accosted her. So Miss Eliza, I hear you are quite delighted with George Wickham? Your sister has been talking to me about him and asking me a thousand questions and I find that the young man forgot to tell you, among his other communications, That he was the son of Old Wickham, the late Mr. Darcy's steward.

Oh, Caroline. She's like, I've got gossip and I need to just put you in your place.

Diane: Everything she's saying is just, it's so disrespectful towards this man who occupied this very important position in the household.

Zan: Well, and I love that Austen also puts in there that she's being, that Lizzie's being accosted by civil disdain, like, there's like, there's no veneer on this.[00:02:00]

Diane: No, I mean, it's obviously like, she has seen Darcy and Elizabeth dancing and she's like, okay, well, I've got to go do something about this, you know?

Zan: Yes. So she's really, really rolling in this classist snobbery right there. Yeah.

Diane: In the context of this novel, and in English estates of the era. A steward could have three different potential meanings.

The first would be a household steward, who was, according to R. D. Hainsworth's article, the estate steward, quote, responsible for running his master's household, provisioning it, managing the indoor servants, keeping household accounts, paying wages, and paying the bills of merchants, tradesmen, and skilled artisans.

Zan: So this kind of steward was potentially a nobleman. A significant landowner in his own right and or related to the estate holder. So think of Malvolio in Shakespeare's Twelfth Night, for example.

[00:03:00] But the household steward kind of reached its peak. The 17th century and rapidly declined after that.

Hainsworth goes on to point out that the occupational descendant of the Elizabethan household steward was that formidable, but plebeian figure, the Victorian butler kind of, kind of like that, that description. But yeah, so these are not the stewards we are looking for. .

Diane: The second kind of steward was a steward of court.

A steward of court was essentially someone who dealt with ordinary legal business related to estates, and many London based lawyers fulfilled this function. This is also not the kind of steward referenced in Pride and Prejudice. However, this steward of court would likely work in part with the third version of steward, the estate steward.

Zan: Alright, so here's, here's where we're diving in. The estate steward was the person who [00:04:00] supervised and managed the estate while the landowner was away. This position largely emerged as a standard profession or role during the mid 1700s, at the exact same time that we saw the decline of the household steward.

Hainsworth explains this as follows. During the 17th century, as landlords began more and more to live in London, Only occasionally visiting their estates, the exact reverse of earlier practice, the household steward tended to shrink in significance as the household he supervised shrank in size. This decline in the significance of the household steward was counterbalanced by a corresponding

rise in the significance of the estate steward, who had been left behind in the country as his master's viceroy.

Diane: According to the Oxford Companion to Local and Family History, I mean, what don't they have a companion to? It is in the later 17th and early 18th centuries that these stewards became a highly [00:05:00]professional group. And in the 18th and 19th centuries, they were instrumental in the spread of agricultural improvement and efficiency, and in raising the profitability of an estate.

Zan: So this estate steward, or land steward, is the role that Mr. Wickham's father had at Pemberley. We know this in large part due to Wickham's own description when he's talking to Elizabeth. He tells her, My father began life in the profession which your uncle, Mr. Phillips, appears to do so much credit to.

But he gave up everything to be of use to the late Mr. Darcy, and devoted all his time to the care of the Pemberley property. He was most highly esteemed by Mr. Darcy, a most intimate, confidential friend. Mr. Darcy often acknowledged him to be under the greatest obligations to my father's active superintendents.

And one of the interesting things about Wickham's account is that he specifies that his father was trained in the law before becoming a steward. [00:06:00] This background wouldn't have been at all strange. Hainsworth writes that stewards often came from a lot of different backgrounds, including younger sons of country gentlemen, former army officers, traders, yeoman farmers, sons of previous stewards, and even You guessed it, country attorneys.

Diane: This type of legal background makes a lot of sense, particularly for stewards who are in charge of large estates like Pemberley. Stewards would be involved in financial matters, contracts, various negotiations, and other types of work where having some legal training would be a valuable asset. Absolutely.

I think what we're also seeing here is a little bit of the kind of contraction between the previous roles of estate steward and steward of court. They're taking over some of those functions as well.

Zan: Yeah. And being able to kind of cross lines between those two different distinct roles would be a huge asset, I think.

Diane: You can imagine that having a steward [00:07:00] who can both run the estate from the agricultural standpoint and also you know, like review contracts is, it's pretty helpful.

Zan: And these stewards because they were such an integral part of running the estate, one really wanted their steward close by. You would want them on call pretty much.

So according to Mark Gerard in his book, *Life in the English Country House*, in the early 18th century, quote, a common arrangement was for the owner to have a study or business room in the rustic. That would be like the basement level. With a room or rooms for the land steward adjacent. In 1786, Lord Pembroke complained that, at Wilton, a steward's office in the house would be the very devil.

One should never be free and instant from meeting people full of words and wants. However, after a few months reflection, he became convinced of the absolute indispensable necessity of a land steward doing nobody's [00:08:00] business but mine, living and boarding in the house and transacting everything in my office.

He's like, never mind, I'm going to have to retract my previous opinion and say, please, please be right next to me all the time.

Diane: I'm going to need you to have an office that's real close, because this is such a pain.

Zan: Yeah, I need help, please.

Diane: I guess I will now recognize that actually the work you do is very important, so.

Yes. Now let's talk more about what an estate steward actually did. It ultimately is as simple and complex as he runs the estate while the landlord is gone. Pretty much anything that needs to be managed in terms of the lands and property attached to the estate falls under his purview. So like, no big deal, it's fine.

Zan: He just does everything, basically. But since we wanted to provide maybe a more precise description of a land steward's responsibilities than just, you know, he does everything, we have this overview from [00:09:00] *The Complete Servant*, being a practical guide to the peculiar duties and business of all descriptions of servants.

with useful receipts and tables, published in 1825. And I gotta say, that, like, edition of useful receipts and tables, you know, I love a good table.

Diane: Such a good little edition. You know we love the titles of these 18th and 19th century books.

Zan: Oh, yeah. They're so great. But to give us that added little, like, There are charts.

I'm like, all right, you got me. You got me. I will be purchasing.

Diane: That's a selling point. You know, like people were strolling up to the circulating library and they were like, I've got to get this one because I heard it has useful receipts and tables.

Zan: I mean, I, I would bite. I would bite. So here is a description of what a land steward would do based on this book.

On entry to the business, like, like once you've taken the job as a land steward. [00:10:00] There's this really extensive list, so here we're going to give you just a snippet for context. So here we go. On his first entering into office, he should make a general survey of all the estates and property entrusted to his care.

He should also form an inventory and open a set of books on a clear and perspicuous plan. If not already done by his predecessor, taking care to enter in them a correct list of all the books, writings, deeds, schedules, court roles, and etc. From this survey, whether left by his predecessor or taken by himself, regular memorandums should be made in a book of everything necessary to be remarked or executed.

Of the place where deficiencies are found or improvements may be made. Of buildings and repairs necessary, insurances, dates of leases, rates, nuances, trespasses, live and dead stock, game, timber, fencing, draining paths and roads, culture commons, [00:11:00] rivers and sea coasts, and of every other specific article relative to his trust which deserves attention and therefore ought not to be committed to loose papers or left to memory.

It's fine. Basically everything. Just those things. Just those things.

Diane: It goes on for several more pages to list other responsibilities, like knowing every servant who works under him, knowing every farmer on the estate, as well as their leases, and land boundaries. He should be constantly writing the estate boundaries, making sure everything is maintained.

He's mapping. He's watching for trespassing. He's managing all the estate funds and contracts. He's a busy guy.

Zan: Very busy. And in a particularly descriptive snippet from The Complete Servant, the steward should also ensure that the tenants should not be suffered to let their lands be overrun by moles. Nor the commons and woodlands by swine unwrung.

Ah, it's so good. I just love that [00:12:00] he's like responsible for the moles and the swine as well. Like, if his list wasn't already big enough.

Diane: And all of these responsibilities add up to what Hainsworth describes as England's largest collective business. In his book, *Stewards, Lords, and People, The Estate Steward and His World in Later Stewart, England*.

He goes on to say, It extended its tentacles into most industrial and commercial undertakings. Mining, quarrying, flour milling, foaling milling, forestry, wool and textiles, urban house building, money lending, draining of marshes and other forms of land reclamation, and even ship owning, ship building, and trading voyages.

Zan: So, Yeah. The man is busy.

Diane: So basically the steward has to be conversant in everything. In like every industry imaginable. Like a walking encyclopedia of just the knowledge of the time.

Zan: Or at least have enough contacts to help other people help him suss out these [00:13:00] issues. So yeah, the man has to be well connected and he has to just basically be like able to do everything.

He's. A Swiss army knife of competency.

Diane: Yes, yes, exactly.

Zan: Well, and it's, and it's kind of amazing too, because even though the estate owner would have the final say in really large purchases, like land or major industrial or agricultural innovations, he would be hugely reliant on his steward for all the context and information provided before making those decisions.

So he's, he's trusting his steward to bring all the plans to him and say, This is why we should or should not, and then he has to be able to trust the steward and his knowledge to be able to make those plans and before he writes the checks.

Diane: I mean, it's essentially an advisory role and a lot of times like you, you are a consultant, you know, like you are there to sort of give advice to.

Awkwardly to this person who's like above you, you know, it's like you're, you're basically constantly telling your boss, this is what we should do, you know, exactly. So this was an incredibly complex

[00:14:00] profession that required a lot of varied expertise. And according to R. A. Houston's article, Stewards and other estate officials, quote, Even a cursory examination of estate correspondence shows how a steward's knowledge, personality, and influence could bear lightly or heavily.

His role as intermediary between lord and tenant meant providing advice and local knowledge. That, in turn, meant the steward of a great estate could acquire considerable power. Bed tracks. And, you know, if the earl or whatever is in London six months out of the year, then guess who's really running the show?

Yeah. This is why in so many historical romance novels that the heroine is like, Oh, we're, we've lost all of our funds because we had a crooked steward who, like, took all of our money, you know, that sort of thing.

Zan: Yeah, because the steward could so easily be this shady character. That if the earl or whoever, the landowner isn't kind of checking [00:15:00] up on him or doesn't have a solid relationship, it's very easy for that to go.

Well, furthermore, it's actually like a profession that was growing in reputation and clout. So it's one of those, those things where, where the stewards were getting more and more of this power. And this is happening especially in the 18th and 19th centuries. Land stewards were often responsible for the progress and implementation of industrial and agricultural innovations, making them progressively more powerful players in industry and capital.

And because having a good steward was so invaluable in so many ways, a smart landowner wanted to hang on to that steward as long as possible. Like, once you found a good one, you're not letting them go.

Diane: Before we tie things back into pride and prejudice, we do want to take a few minutes to point out that land stewards were generally men.

However, there are some incredible examples of women who were estate managers, stewards and all but name. According [00:16:00] to Sarah Shields and her article, an old maid in a house is the devil, single women and landed estate management in 18th century England.

Zan: Such a good title. Such a good title.

Diane: So good. I love it.

She writes, quote, single women were overseeing the management of vast family estates, work that too often went unrewarded in their own lifetime and unrecognized in subsequent estate histories, due in large part to their unmarried status. Again, I mean, I feel like this, this comes up a lot if you read any sort of historical fiction.

Like there's oftentimes like that female character who is basically running everything by getting no credit and trying to do everything on her own and yeah.

Who's more plugged in than any other male that's ostensibly supposed to be running the estate.

Absolutely. And the person who's supposed to be in charge is like absentee and they don't care and they're just like off gambling and everything away in London.

Zan: Yeah. Yeah. And she's like, Oh, by the way, I know everything that's happening on the estate.

Diane: She's like, I know exactly how much our wool is worth. [00:17:00] Thank you very much.

Zan: Mm hmm. Mm hmm. And we love, we love that. We love that in our fiction. We also love that in real life, right? The fact that this was like, there, there are plenty of examples of this.

One example would be even Mariah Edgeworth, who again is an author that Austin knew and, and really liked. Mariah Edgeworth helped with estate management. And, and in her case particularly, she was essentially her father's assistant. in the managing of Edgeworth's town, which was their estate in Ireland.

And while estate management in Ireland from an English ruling class is its own incredibly intricate conversation, what we do want to point out is that Edgeworth's experiences make her insights into abysmal land management and absentee landlordism. All the more cutting in her works like *Castle Rackrent* and *Absentee*.

Diane: There were other women who took on management and even large aspects of stewardship under their purview and really took charge of their estates in [00:18:00] meaningful ways. Sometimes these women would have close working relationships with estate stewards, and other times they would do the majority of that estate management on their own.

Either way. While the absentee fathers, brothers, or husbands were away, or any other range of situations, these women were calling the shots.

Zan: Again, we love it. We love it. But let's now bring all of this information about land stewards back to Austen's novel. One of the first things that becomes easily apparent after learning about how much a land owner relies on his steward This tells us a lot about Darcy and Wickham's fathers.

The late Mr. Darcy had to have an immense amount of trust in Wickham's father.

Diane: We get a sense of that in Wickham's description when he says, He was most highly esteemed by Mr. Darcy. A most intimate, confidential friend, Mr. Darcy often acknowledged himself to be under the greatest obligations to my father's active [00:19:00] superintendents.

Zan: Again, it's Wickham, so we have to get corroborating information before we can trust this. But we actually get some specific details from, from Mr. Darcy, although in much more measured tones, when he gives his letter to Elizabeth. In that letter, he writes, Mr. Wickham is the son of a very respectable man, who had for many years the management of all the Pemberley estates, and whose good conduct in the discharge of his trust naturally inclined my father to be of service to him.

So, I mean, that's a pretty glowing recommendation from Darcy.

Diane: It's worth mentioning here that most land stewards started as young men and stayed with the same family or landowner for their entire lives. It was really hard to start up new for both steward and landowner. And so it was very rare for them to go separate ways unless, you know, there was some real skulduggery going on, as we mentioned earlier.

And what that means in this context is that these men likely had years [00:20:00] and years of this close working relationship.

Zan: Yeah. Furthermore, because of this close working relationship, the lines between classes got a little bit blurry. And we see this in Wickham and Darcy's differing accounts. Of their childhoods.

And in the obvious pain and betrayal that Darcy feels over Wickham's actions throughout the novel. They played with each other and grew up together, which might be argued as being the result of the two of them being children. With more relaxed social rules around them, even for the actual steward, the lines could get a little bit blurry.

And this is Han where Haynesworth gives us a little bit more context. He writes, stewards had the ability as well as the delegated authority to negotiate with and even confront men of every degree from Dukes to laborers whose interests or activities impinged on those of their master.

Diane: So there's something very liminal about their social position.

Stewards have a lot of autonomy and authority. But they are still considered [00:21:00] of a lower social rank because they work for their living. And this is what Ms. Bingley is conveying when she tries to warn Lizzie off from Wickham. She's essentially saying he's lower class, like she's not like Don't date him.

He's kind of sketchy, and he's predatory. She's just like, ew, you know, his dad was a steward. And Lizzie doesn't love that kind of class snobbery. So she tells Miss Bingley, His guilt and his dissent appear, by your account, to be the same. For I have heard you accuse him of nothing worse than being the son of Mr.

Darcy Stewart. And of that, I can assure you, he informed me himself.

Zan: She's like, mm, I already knew that, so thanks, goodbye. Yeah. And it, it's kind of funny because this also comes up. Near the end of the novel, when Lady Catherine de Bourgh has again, not surprisingly, a lot of snobby ideas about the absolute degradation of having any connection via marriage to a steward.

So that's again in our episode about the shades of Pemberley, where she's like, I just, did [00:22:00] you know that that was something like, she's just so appalled. That she might have, like, that Darcy's gonna have to be related to this man whose father was a steward. Again, Lady Catherine de Bourgh with the snobbery.

We all had that on the bingo card. Yeah,

Diane: yeah. And there is one more mention of stewards in Pride and Prejudice that we have to mention. When Mr. Darcy arrives early back at Pemberley during Lizzie's visit, he tells her that Business with his steward had occasioned his coming forward a few hours before the rest of the party, with whom he had been traveling.

Zan: I kind of love this for like a lot of reasons, obviously they're both just so awkward with each other, but this is kind of a reminder of both the importance of this role that the steward has. But a reminder also of just how closely Darcy has to work with this individual and how much he has to trust this person.

So he's coming back to, like, take care of his estate. And so it's a reminder of how responsible Darcy is that he's coming back and being like, I'm going to take care of [00:23:00] business. And Lizzie finds that very attractive, you know,

Diane: she's like, Hmm, well, beautiful estate, beautiful man taking care of business

Zan: yeah, she's like fanning herself quietly.

Diane: She's like, Okay, okay. Yeah. Yeah. I mean, he's obviously, you know. He's not somebody who's going to lit. Like, Pemberley fall into disrepair. Yeah. Yeah.

Zan: Well, it's, you know, there's, there's a lot of description, again, and we've talked about this before, but the descriptions of Pemberley and its grounds. And that's largely under the steward's purview, but also, again, that Darcy's working closely with the steward to make sure this is all maintained, the fishing, the, like, all of these things.

Diane: He's definitely not an absentee landlord.

Zan: No, he's being very conscientious.

Diane: And we know this, of course, because earlier in the novel, when Caroline is trying to flirt with him and doing such a poor Caroline, she's so bad at flirting and she's going on and on. We did talk about this in our episode on Darcy's pen, when she's going on and on about like, Oh, all the letters he has to write and like, Oh, letters of business, you know, oh, they're so odious.

And yeah, [00:24:00] and he's like, Well, yep, that's part of my job, you know, so yeah. And he takes it seriously. Yeah. And you can imagine, like, that a good portion of that, right, he's, is going to be correspondence with his steward and making sure that he knows what is going on. Yeah. Yep.

Zan: And it's, and it's working, is, is what Lizzie is seeing.

She's, it's, it's working. It's working for Lizzie on lots of levels.

Diane: It's working for all of us, I think. So.

Zan: Agreed. Agreed.

Diane: Well, if you too find Darcy and his management of Pemberley very attractive, feel free to let us know. You can find us on Instagram at TheThingAboutAusten and on Twitter at Austen_Things.

You can also check out our website, TheThingAboutAusten.com and email us at TheThingAboutAusten@gmail.com.

Zan: And stay tuned for next episode where we will be talking about the pump room.

Diane: Thanks for listening. Bye. Bye. [00:25:00]