

Episode 104 - The Thing About the Crescent

Diane: [00:00:00] From Masterpiece on PBS comes Miss. Austen, a drama told from the perspective of Jane Austen's sister Cassandra based on Gill Hornby's novel by the same name, filled with mystery. The Sisterly Tale follows Cassandra as she notoriously Burns Jane's letters. The series releases in the US on May 4th. At 9:00 PM eight Central and feature stars like Keely Hawes, Patsy Farran, and Rose Leslie again, that's Miss. Austen from Masterpiece on PBS premiering on May 4th.

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 Crescent.[00:01:00]

This episode takes us to Bath. We are still near the beginning of Northanger Abbey. Catherine has met Henry Tilney when the man suddenly disappears. Not at all suspicious or concerning or alarming at all. Obviously Catherine has her eyes wide open and make sure to look for him everywhere she goes. I mean, she is scoping out the town.

Zan: Her eyes are peeled.

Diane: Mm-hmm. She's feeling extra confident of spying him one Sunday because the weather is particularly fine. And so of course everyone must be out and about. She's like, this is my opportunity. This is the moment.

Zan: Yeah, she's, she's ready for this. So this is from the text.

As soon as divine service was over, the Thorpe and Alans eagerly joined each other, and after staying long enough in the pump room to discover that the crowd was insupportable and that there was not a gentle face to be seen, which everybody discovers every Sunday throughout [00:02:00] the season. They hasten away to the crescent to breathe the fresh air of better company.

Diane: Like, okay, we, we gotta get out of here and head to the crescent. That's where things are really happening.

Zan: I love that. It's the fresh air of better company, not the fresh air of like, you know, open space. Right? No, it's better company.

Diane: So before we get into the history of the Crescent, we want to first take a moment to thank PBS for sponsoring this episode.

Zan: And to tell you about Miss Austen, which is premiering on masterpiece on PBS in the US on Sunday, May 4th at 9:00 PM eight Central.

Diane: There are so many exciting things coming out this year in celebration of Jane Austen's 250th birthday.

You may have heard about it. I don't know.

Zan: It's kind of kind of a thing.

Diane: It's kind of a thing, and this new series is another great way to add some Austen to your [00:03:00] life.

Zan: Obviously. Who doesn't need that? So the series features Keely Hawes as Cassandra Austen, and is told from her perspective as Jane's beloved sister. And there are four episodes in this series and all four will be released at once, which I love.

Diane: That's perfect for people like me who like to watch everything in one go.

Absolutely.

I do not like having to wait. So.

Zan: Again, that's Miss Austen releasing on Masterpiece on PBS on Sunday, May 4th.

Diane: So get some of your friends together. This might be an opportunity to host a little watch party or something along those lines and

Zan: mm-hmm. And eat some crescent rolls while you do so.

Diane: I mean, honestly, that's a great idea. Make some tea sandwiches out of crescent rolls and host a Miss. Austen watch party if anybody actually ends up doing that.

I wanna see pictures, right? For sure. Email us.

Zan: The crescent rolls and Miss. Austen must be documented.

Diane: Yes. Yes. [00:04:00] Okay, so now it's time to talk about the crescent that we're actually here to talk about. Not crescent rolls, unfortunately not the The edible one. Yeah. Yeah. Unfortunately, the Royal Crescent in bath is arguably one of the city's most remarkable architectural landmarks.

In Austen's works, she refers to it as just the Crescent, which was common at the time. There are some debates about when the royal was added to the description. Many say that this change in the name came near the end of the 18th century after Prince Frederick, the Duke of York and Albany stayed there.

We had a royal personage. We must commemorate it.

Zan: Ergo, the place is now royal. Yes, exactly. However, in his book, *the Royal Crescent in Bath, A Fragment of English Life*, William Lowndes points out that in 1767 in a contract between the younger John Wood who designed The Crescent and Michael Hemmings, one of the builders, the [00:05:00] area is described as the Royal Crescent.

So Lowndes suggests that wood always meant for it to be called by that full title. We should say that there are other Crescent mentioned in Austen that we will hopefully get to in the future, but for this episode we are just focused on the royal Crescent.

Diane: The, the is very the royal crescent.

Zan: Absolutely.

Diane: I do appreciate that. He, he was apparently. Thinking, no, I don't need a royal personage to come here. It's going. It's just royal on its own.

Zan: It's royal on its own. Exactly. He's like, I don't have visions of grandeur. It's just, it is what it is. Yeah.

Diane: These are just facts.

So The Crescent was constructed between 1767 and 1775. Based on wood, the younger's design, it stretches 500 feet or about 150 meters and consists of 30

terrorist houses arranged in a semi ellipse. The Crescent has [00:06:00] 114 ionic columns on the first floor, designed in a classical style with scroll like details at the top. Above these columns, there is an in tablature or elegant horizontal structure inspired by Palladian architecture, which is known for its symmetry and classical influence.

Zan: This is all constructed of stone quarried locally at Coombe Downe, which Ann Marie Edwards in her book in the Steps of Jane Austen describes as a softly glowing honey colored limestone Just sounds delightful. Altogether. This makes for a stunningly unified facade that is considered a masterpiece of 18th century British architecture.

Diane: In an 1819 bath tour guide titled *Walks Through Bath, describing everything worthy of interest*. I just really appreciate, you know, describing everything worthy of interest. These, these are all bangers, you know what I mean? No, skips like this is [00:07:00] all good stuff.

Zan: Everything worthy of interest, I mean. The claims these books make, I just, I adore their audacity.

Diane: Ugh, it's a spectacular. The Crescent in this book is described as quote, the very acme and grandeur of all bath and goes on to explain that it is, quote, considered the highest situation in bath. It has a fine pavement, carriage road, iron rails, lamps, and et cetera, and a green plot for walking upon in the front of it.

The crescent is a noble pile of building. Its extraordinary. Elevation is the admiration of every spectator, and which completely overlooks the city by comparison. It is like looking down from the top of St. Paul's Cathedral into the streets of London. Just minor praise, like very like.

Zan: Yeah, and, and having been at the top of St. Paul's Cathedral and at the top of the Crescent, I. I, I have questions.

Diane: You're gonna [00:08:00] dispute that claim.

Zan: I'm, I'm going to politely dissent from that opinion.

So the idea for the Crescent seems to have been born out of a combination of both John Wood, the elder, and the youngers concepts. The older John Wood, for example, created much of the architecture of the city center, which includes the plans for the King's Circus, just called the Circus today.

And this is a ring of large townhouses, forming a circle with three entrances, and initially quote, surrounded a paved center with a reservoir in the center. As John Hadden describes in his book titled *Bath*. Michael Forsyth, in his book also titled *Bath* describes the Elderwood style as quote, essentially urban and inward looking, and his design for the circus created buildings that again, "turned their backs on the countryside beyond. They're all inward facing into this circular center." [00:09:00]

Diane: The younger John Woods actually completed the circus after his father's death in 1754, and then seemed to see the potential to contrast his father's inward looking design by creating an effect that brought country house vibes to the urban setting.

The Crescent was designed to take advantage of the commons. A large grassy area designated as an open space, and he decided to build a series of united townhouses that would face this broad expanse of lawn and nature, which would afford every resident a prospect of this seemingly rural landscape.

And we'll wait till we get to the ha-ha..

This is

Zan: an example of roos in Herbe, which is Latin for the country in the town.

Diane: Country mouse, city mouse.

Zan: Precisely. You've nailed it. Absolutely.

And so this is basically an illusion generally created by design in which the countryside, running through the heart of the city is kind of meant to kind of replicate [00:10:00] this idea of country.

So the Crescent design and location really lean into that illusion that when you look out the window of your lavish townhouse, that you're basically experiencing the same view as you would from your ostensibly, equally lavish, but definitely bigger country estate.

Diane: The view onto the Commons even includes one of our favorite landscape design features, which is the ha ha.

Haha ha the sound you make when you fall into this dangerous pit.

Zan: Correct

Diane: the haha separates the upper and lower lawns and is another landscape illusion. And for more on this, see our episode on the Haha in Mansfield Park, and we'll get back to the landscape and views in a minute. But for now, let's get back to wood, the younger and his design.

Zan: So Wood connected the circus, which was part of his father's legacy to the Crescent. And he does this by connecting it through Brock Street, a street that was named [00:11:00] after wood, the younger's brother-in-law, lots of family stuff going on here. Mm-hmm. And initially it was designed to be quite short, this, the street was designed to be quite short and not really lead anywhere.

However, what the younger decides that he's gonna extend that and, and make that the, the connection between the crescent and the circus. And so when you're walking on Brock Street from the circus, the reveal that you get is really quite stunning.

Diane: According to Lowndes, this was deliberate on Woods's part. He intended for people to take a gentle stroll from the circus along a dignified but unremarkable street. Then the breathtaking view of his Palladian masterpiece would explode before their eyes. It was a masterly conception, and it is as valid today as it was more than 200 years ago.

Zan: So now let's talk a bit about some of the technical aspects of building the Crescent. Wood acquired the land for the project [00:12:00] at a rate of 200 pounds per annum. Then according to Lowndes, disposed of individual plots to builders at a quarterly rental, so several different builders and contractors worked on the Crescent over the years, and as we mentioned earlier, this was part of a series of 30 different townhouses that meant that each original builder purchased a part of the crescent facade and then the space behind it.

Then each builder would negotiate a contract with a purchaser who then would design and build their home according to their own tastes and needs. So while the front looked like one continuous single facade, the interiors were all different.

Diane: That facade, however, was the whole point of the structure. In fact, the contracts for the Crescent required that builders and contractors would make the front of the building according to Wood's uniform exterior plans.

And according to Lowndes" in every contract, wood insisted that when each house was finished, its builder undertook to [00:13:00] cleanse and tone down the stone. Work on the outside to the end, no crack may appear, and the whole building may be of one color." This is like proto HOA or CCN r's. Yes. Kind of a situation.

Zan: Totally.

This is perhaps what leads to Maggie Lane's description of the Crescent as part of the truly impressive 18th century design overhaul. Of Bath in her book, *Jane Austen's England*. She writes, "it's planned mathematically, precise streets of uniform houses designed to look not so much like a row of individual dwellings as the single imposing front of a great mansion were an innovation."

Furthermore, these architectural feats were, " a manifestation in stone of all the 18th century stood for. The circus and the crescent were invented to delight the eye and demonstrate the superiority of the age of reason. "

Diane: And

Zan: yet, as we've mentioned, what seems like a clearly uniform design on the [00:14:00] front isn't necessarily the same in the back. When you look at the buildings from the back, the illusion of uniformity unravels pretty quickly gone is the perfectly balanced Palladian vision. Replaced instead by a series of slightly mismatched roof lines, uneven windows, and unexpected architectural choices. It's not an eyesore, but it's definitely not uniform.

As Lane describes it, quote, the Georgians appeared to care nothing for the backs of their houses, which in Bath shows an astonishing want of proportion and pattern in the fenestrations. So perfect. In the front. You know, like, like it's, they are not the same, they just don't match.

Diane: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

For additional context, Lowndes actually includes part of the contracts for number seven on the Crescent, where wood initially contracts with Hemmings, the builder we mentioned earlier in the episode. And then Hemmings created a design for a Mrs. Elizabeth Tyndall, a widow who pays 1,700 pounds for [00:15:00] Hemmings to meet all of her building requirements. Her contract includes things like a range in the kitchen, a large closet under the stairs with shelves. Lady Catherine de Berg will approve Is she and Marble Chinni pieces Lady Catherine de Berg will also approve.

She even lists needing a privy in the back garden and that Hemmings would level the ground in the back and consult her gardener on what else to include. So very specific.

Zan: All of this is just a fascinating quirk of 18th century town planning. Really, it's a system that prioritizes the aesthetic experience of the public facing side while leaving the practicalities to the owners.

Diane: So when Austen mentions the Crescent in *Northanger Abbey*, she doesn't specifically mean the architecture and buildings. She's actually referring to the location as a place to actively walk and socialize more of a park than anything else, right?

Zan: Yeah. And this matches what the guidebook walks through. Bath also describes. So here's from [00:16:00] that text. "At all times. It is an attractive promenade for the visitors of Bath. In the season of a Sunday, it is also crowded with fashionable of every rank. And with the addition of the splendid, Baruch, dashing, curle, elegant, tandem gentleman on horseback and et cetera, the Royal Crescent strongly reminds the spectator of Hyde Park, Rotten Row and Kensington Gardens when adorned with all their brilliancy of company."

Diane: All this to say that the Crescent was a popular place to walk along and visit. It was a central part of the social scene. Edwards contextualizes this when she writes, "The Crescent with its wide pavements and cobbled carriageway overlooking fields. Sloping down to the Avon was a favorite promenade for the citizens of Bath. Jane writes often of walking here as do her characters."

Zan: Sundays in particular, as our guidebook tells us we're popular. For this kind of meeting. [00:17:00] Lane explains that "the most fashionable location for social walking, being the Crescent Fields, the green slopes in front of the Royal Crescent, which were never to be built on according to contemporary maps."

Diane: Lane goes on to point out that "Jane Austen makes many references to this custom in both her letters and novels. It is in *Northanger Abbey* that she is most explicit. A fine Sunday in Bath empties, every house of its inhabitants and all the world appears on such an occasion to walk about and tell their acquaintance what a charming day it is."

That's what you do!

Zan: Those are the protocols, right?

Diane: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

Zan: And this actually leads us right back to, again in *Northanger Abbey*, when Catherine is desperately searching for Henry Tilney, because where is he?

Diane: Where is he?!

Zan: The only question she really cares about.

Unfortunately for her, Tilney, does not make an appearance on the Crescent on this Sunday. [00:18:00] Instead, and this is from the text here, "Catherine and Isabella arm in arm, again tasted the sweets of friendship in an unreserved conversation. They talked much and with much enjoyment. But again, was Catherine disappointed in her hope of re-seeing her partner? "

Diane: So sad. Sigh. Big sigh. Wherever is Henry Tilney?

Zan: Yeah. Like friendship is great, but where. Is. He?

And um, this isn't the only time that Catherine seeks out Tilney on the Crescent. Later she hears from Mrs. Allen that she met Mr. And Miss. Tilney on the Crescent and walked with them for half an hour. All this while Katherine was with the Thorpe's.

And we should point out that time with John Thorpe is always wasted time.

Diane: And especially when that time could have been spent walking with the Tilney is like what?

Zan: Right. Devastating news for Catherine. Yeah.

Diane: Oh no.

And a short while later when the [00:19:00] Thorpe's tried to convince Katherine to defer her walk with the Tilney again, she learns that Thorpe has overstepped **by a lot** and rescheduled the walk for her, she is not having it, and as Lane puts it, " outraged, Katherine Hurries after the tilney to put the matter right. The point worth making is that Katherine walks as fast as the crowd would permit her. Quickening her pace. When she got clear of the Crescent, she almost ran over the remaining ground till she gained the top of Milsom Street. The crowds must indeed have been considerable."

Zan: This is a desperate dash to meet the Tilneys This is such a fun image of Catherine.

Diane: She's like, I got I, I.

Zan: Oh man.

Diane: Man, those Thorpe, you know, just come on.

Zan: Truly the audacity that he has in that moment, I, I fully understand her, like desperate needs to be like, that wasn't me.

Diane: Mm-hmm.

Zan: Yeah. So outside of Northanger, Abby, we do have another peripheral illusion to the Crescent in persuasion.

Not [00:20:00] surprising her other bath novel. At the end of that novel, when Anne and Wentworth have finally reconciled, they seemingly meander for a bit a round bath. According to Jane Austen's quote, there is that last rapturous walk. As their engagement renewed, Anne and Frederick slowly paced the gradual ascent from Union Street, where appropriately they are united to the comparatively quiet and retired gravel walk.

The gravel walk was designed by the younger Wood to link his father's masterpiece, Queen Square to his own royal Crescent running along the back gardens of one segment of the circus and of Brock Street. It provides a traffic free walk that is reasonably dry underfoot, you know, if they can avoid the chaos of the Crescent.

Mm-hmm. It makes sense that they would choose this kind of back gravel walk. Yeah. But I do think it's worth pointing out that in the 2007 *Persuasion*, the Crescent actually, has some, some screen time. And [00:21:00] in this adaptation, Anne is sprinting across the Crescent and then having a literal run in with Captain Wentworth. Like truly runs smack into the man.

Diane: It's, it's more like Catherine trying to catch up with ketchup. With the Tilneys.

Zan: Exactly, yes. Very different from what we've just had described by Austen. But you know, the drama we appreciate.

Diane: Well, if you have any thoughts on the Crescent. Or on crescent rolls, either one. You can reach out to us on Instagram at @TheThingAboutAustin and on Twitter at @Austin_Things.

You can also check out our website, TheThingAboutAustin.com, and email us at the TheThingAboutAustin@gmail.com and you can also check out our merch for the podcast on Redbubble. Go to AboutAustin.redbubble.com

And thank you again to PBS for sponsoring. This episode, *Miss Austen* will be released on Masterpiece on May 4th.

Zan: Stay tuned [00:22:00] for next episode when we'll be talking about Marianne's music with Dr. Elizabeth Weybright.

Diane: Thanks for listening. Bye.

Zan: Keely Hawes Stars as Cassandra Austen in *Miss Austen*, a four-part series from Masterpiece on PBS. Sisterhood and Family Sacrifices Come to Life in this new drama about Jane Austen. Told from the perspective of Cassandra, Jane's sister and confidant, this story is based on the internationally bestselling novel by Gill Hornby.

The series premieres in the US on May 4th at 9:00 PM eight Central.