

Chawton House Library Notes

Guide: Jane

Rules:

- no photos
- uneven floors, tables, steps (watch for one step up/down)
- chairs are there for us to sit in!
- "The house is meant to make you feel welcome."
- many fire exits; meeting point at the front of the house
- No touching the artifacts

History & Overview:

- Chawton House was in existence at least at the time of the Normans because references to a manor on site are found in the *Domesday Book* of 1086
- After the Norman conquest it was surrendered to the de Port family
- It was sold to the Knight family in 1551 (the family has ties to the area that date back to the 1200s)
- Today's family head is Richard Knight; we met Jeremy, another Knight family member in the gift shop
- The house was originally a medieval house, but it was torn down and replaced by an Elizabethan house starting in 1583
- There were many royal visitors to the house since Chawton was on the way down from London to the port cities and to Winchester (the old capital of Wessex)
- Only the rich and persons of influence could travel. Since there were no hotels at that time, you would stay with the lord of the manor.
- The house came into Edward's (Jane Austen's brother) possession just before the 1800s
- Edward's grandson, Montagu Knight did extensive renovations to the house in the 1800s that transformed it into a Victorian house
- During WWI that house served as an evacuation home for orphans
- After WWII the family started to let out the house
- In 1993 the family let out the house to Sandy Lerner and her husband (founders of Cisco Systems)
 - * Sandy Lerner has two passions: Jane Austen & collecting first editions of books written by female authors. The house combines these two passions.
 - * The lease is for 125 years and was "about a pound!"
 - * The house was nearly derelict when Sandy Lerner acquired it. It underwent renovations from 1993 – 2003.
 - * It is a grade 2 star listed house, which means that it cannot be knocked down, only restored.
 - * Sandy Lerner probably spent 10 million pounds restoring the house.
 - * It opened as a library in 2003 and is very much here for the public to enjoy.

The Library:

- Many of the resources are available online.
- You can also come back and use the library. It is open 9:30 a.m. – 4:45 p.m.
- There is no charge to use the collection.
- 35 of the texts by not well-known authors are available online. (Some are better than others.)
- The room itself has been used as a library for the last 148 years.
- The shelves are Victorian and have the family cataloging markers at the top.
- Today the novels are cataloged in alphabetical order by author and the reference materials are cataloged using the Dewey Decimal System.
- The library features Flemish tapestries from the late 1500s or early 1600s. They are not part of the house originally, but were bought during the restoration, possibly because women are prominent subjects within the tapestries.
- Highlights of the collection spotted by a biased scribe who may have different tastes from you:
 - * Many of Jane Austen books, including: *Northanger Abbey*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Lady Susan*, and two volumes of her letters
 - * Some of Elizabeth Gaskell's books, including: the controversial *Ruth*, *Cranford*, a collection of short stories, and *The Life of Charlotte Bronte*
 - * A collection of poems by Elizabeth Barrett Browning

The Long Gallery:

- A sprung staircase that dates to the 1650s leads to an addition to the house called The Long Gallery.
- Long Galleries were features of English country houses during the time of Montagu Knight (Victorian era).
- They were originally designed to provide ladies with a place to get exercise, particularly during the winter.
- They also became a place where families displayed heirlooms and portraits.
- However, they were not very architecturally sound, so they didn't stay an architectural feature for very long.

Montagu Knight (portrait):

- * Oversaw extensive renovations to the house throughout the second half of the 1800s until his death in 1914.
- * Owned Steventon and the village of Chawton
- * "Typical English gentleman" (very well-respected)
- * Loved collecting old things (including the bed head and covered doors from the Continent displayed in the gallery)
- The stained glass windows put in by Montagu feature coats of arms. He spent a considerable amount of time researching family history. The windows actually provide a list of the family tree beginning with the original owners.

The Former Ladies' Drawing Room

- Featured a beautiful screen map (Spencer wanted to steal it.)
 - * Mounted in Georgian times, it is the most precise map of London from 1740 in

existence.

- * At that time the underground transit system was just being built.

- * The West End of London was only just being developed by wealthy landowners.

 - ~ They would build on squares with greens to keep their livestock.

 - ~ These squares are still there today (Hampton, Grovesnor, etc.)

- * The cartographer was named John Rocque.

- People like to imagine that Jane Austen liked to sit in the window seat (like Lisa and Anne)

- From the window you can see a Ha-Ha mound

 - * A Ha-ha was designed to trick animals and keep them from running away without spoiling the view from the house as a fence would

 - * Colleen pointed out that there is a Ha-Ha in *Mansfield Park*.

 - * Tudor gardens were very formal, but during Montagu's lifetime there was a movement to revert back to traditional "English country gardens" that depicted the landscape in a more natural form.

- The paneling and fireplace were put in by Montagu (One might say they are "Austen-tacious?")

- 99% of the furnishings in Chawton House are not original to the house, but are representatives of the time period.

The Master's Chamber:

- This room has been divided and used to be twice the current size.

- Within the past two weeks it was redecorated and they are still researching the portraits on display.

- The walls are peacock blue, a regency color.

- The room features Delphed Dutch tiles and a Tudor fireplace. Both are original to the house.

- The portraits of two horses over the fireplace go back to the Victorian Era and were actual horses kept in the stables at Chawton House (Miss Kitty & Brunette).

- There was also an olive green jacket that belonged to Edward Knight when he was about 12 or 13 on display. It was discovered in a cousin's dress up box.

The Tapestry Gallery:

- There are no tapestries in this room anymore, but there used to be.

- "That painting is going to haunt my soul."

- The gallery features a painting of Chawton House in 1740.

 - * The front looks the same as today.

 - * There's a Tudor stable block.

 - * The church looks different because it burned down and was rebuilt on the same sight.

 - * The painting features formal Tudor gardens. In 1760 there was a movement to bring back "English country gardens" more like the one we currently see on the estate.

- Elizabethan houses were usually built in the shape of an "E," but Chawton House is actually about half of an "E."

 - *This saved John Knight from having to dig additional foundation since it was built on the sight of the original medieval house.

 - * Possibly there wasn't enough money to add on to the house.

- The room features a portrait of Thomas Brodnax, Elizabeth's cousin who inherited the house when she died. (see "Family History" notes below)

Dining Room:

- There are very few original pieces left in the house, but we sat at Edward's dining table, possibly where Jane once sat. (Chelsea sensed she was in Jane's seat.)
- While the table is an original, the chairs are not.
- Montagu had this room repaneled and replaced the fireplace.
- The new fireplace was a 25th wedding anniversary gift for his wife.
- Another original is a portrait of Jane's brother, Edward, taken on his tour of the continent. We are not sure who painted it or where it was painted, but the setting of the portrait is in Rome because you can see ruins in the background.
- Apart from the portrait of Edward, all of the portraits are from Sandy Lerner's collection and are indicative of the time period for her book collection.
- One of the portraits is of Kitty Fisher from the "Lucy Locket" nursery rhyme.
 - * Both Lucy Locket and Kitty Fisher were actresses & courtesans.
 - * Lucy Locket was seeing a man named Mr. Pocket.
 - * Kitty Fisher stole him from Lucy Locket. ("Lucy Locket lost her pocket/ Kitty Fisher found it.")
 - * Mr. Pocket was not as rich as he alleged. ("Not a penny was there in it/ Only ribbon round it.")

Great Hall:

- Original to the medieval house, continued in the Elizabethan house
- The paneling is original to the Tudor house (untouched by Montagu's renovations).
- The room also features an original fireplace with the date 1588 stamped on it.
 - * This is the date of the Spanish Armada.
 - * This date tells us that John Knight paid his tax into the regal coffers to help pay for costs to defend against the Armada.
- In 2001 when they were restoring the floors in the Great Hall they found a message in a bottle.
 - * The note inside indicated that the old stone floor was taken up and the present one was laid in 1868 by Montagu.
 - * The note is now framed and on display in the hall.
 - * They put the bottle back under the floor with a new note from 2001

Family History:

- For a short while, the ownership of this estate went on a straight father-to-son line.
- Coming into the 1700s it started to get complicated due to males dying without leaving behind male heirs and it passed on to cousins.
- In order to inherit the estate, one had to assume the surname of "Knight."
- At the beginning of the 18th century, two brothers with the last name of West inherited the estate and had to change their name to "Knight."
 - * The first brother died with no heirs, so the estate passed to his brother.

- * The second brother also died with no heirs, so the estate passed to their sister, Elizabeth.
- * Elizabeth was married to a man named William Woodward.
- * At the time, married women could not own property, so the estate passed to her husband and he had to change his last name to "Knight."
- * He died and Elizabeth became a wealthy widow.
- * She re-married a man named Bullstrode-Peachy and he had to change his name to Knight.
- * Both died in 1738 with no children and the estate passed to another cousin, Thomas Brodnax.
- Thomas Brodnax was "an incredibly lucky gentleman."
 - * Prior to inheriting Chawton House, he had already inherited Godmersham Park in Kent.
 - * In order to inherit Godmersham Park, he had to change his last name to "May."
 - * Then in 1738 he inherited Chawton House and had to change his last name to "Knight."
 - * Each name change required an act of Parliament!
 - * When he inherited Chawton House he also inherited the nearby village of Steventon.
 - * Thomas Brodnax May Knight married a woman named Jane Monk, a relative of the Austen family.
 - * He gave the living of the Steventon Rectory to her relative, the Reverend George Austen (Jane Austen's father).
- In 1781 Thomas Knight II inherited the estate. He and his wife Catherine had no children of their own, and they singled out Edward Austen (Jane's third brother) to adopt as their son and heir when he was 16 years old.
 - * Edward married a daughter of a baronet as soon as he returned from his tour of the continent.
 - * Edward made Godmersham Park his main home and rented Chawton House to gentlemen tenants (similar to *Persuasion*).
 - * He had 11 children. His wife died while giving birth to the 11th child.
 - * Shortly thereafter, Chawton House became vacant and Edward started coming.
 - * In 1809 he offered a house in the village to his mother and sisters.
 - * Edward began to visit more frequently after his wife died. Jane, Cassandra, and their mother got to know his family very well, particularly his daughter Fanny.
 - * Fanny became mistress of the house at age 16 when her mother died. She sought a lot of advice from Jane.
 - * Edward relocated his whole family to Chawton when Godmersham was being renovated.

Jane Austen:

- One of eight children, seventh child, six brothers, one sister.
- Her oldest brother was James. Jane did not get along with him and wrote in her letters that he was "annoying."
- Her second brother lived outside of the family because he possibly had Down's syndrome.

- Her third brother Edward inherited Chawton House.
- Her youngest brothers Frank & Charles were in the navy.
- As clergy, Austen's family were gentry, but they were not wealthy.
- In 1800 her father announced that he was retiring and moving the family to Bath.
- He died shortly thereafter and the women "wandered around for jolly nearly ten years." They took turns staying with their brothers' families.
- After Charles's wife died in 1814 the whole family gathered at Chawton to support him.

Sundries:

- Everyone in the village was expected to come to the church at Chawton House.
- All of the village was once part of the estate.
- The pub in town across from Chawton Cottage features the Knight Coat of Arms.
- Chawton House sold a famous tapestry called [the Lewkenor Tapestry](#) to a museum in New York. (The Met!)

Observations:

- Smells delightful
 - * lavender
 - * old books
 - * fresh air from the open windows (rain smell)
- Cool temperature within (possibly for preservation?)