Episode 100 - Jane Austen's House

Zan: [00:00:00] 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 Jane Austen's house.

We are thrilled to welcome our guest, Lizzie Dunford.

Lizzie Dunford is the director of Jane Austen's house, the final home of the globally beloved author, attracting tens of thousands of visitors each year. Jane Austen's house is in the Little Hampshire village of Chawton, and Lizzie enjoys her walks through the fields and footpaths of the South Downs as much as Austen did. A trained conservator and experienced museum leader, Lizzie holds an MA in Conservation of Historic Objects from the University of Lincoln and has worked in the museums and heritage sector for over 15 years with a focus on house museums.

Welcome, Lizzie.

Lizzie: Thank you for having me. It's absolutely fabulous to be here and I've been [00:01:00] looking forward to this.

Zan: We are so excited to get to talk to you about about Jane Austen's house. And so, yeah, we're, we're just going to jump right in because we've We're chomping at the bits. We have some additions.

Lizzie: Let's go for it. Let's go for it.

Zan: So this is another episode in our biographical series on Austen. So we don't have a specific novel or passage to set up. So like I said, we're just going to dive in. So let's talk about the history of this house before Austen. So this is an old building with a lot of life lived before Austen and her family arrived. So there's layers of history, they're always present in this space and that would kind of contextualize Austen's experiences. So can you tell us a bit about the house and its place in the surrounding landscape?

Lizzie: Yeah, the house is old, so it would have been a couple of hundred years, maybe 300 years old before Austen moved it. It really has had a fascinating patchwork of history and life.

It began life in the 16th century and it was [00:02:00] originally a farmhouse. It was known as Petit John's. And for a long time it was lived in a family, by a family called the Elder Slades. And it was a farmhouse originally, so we really do have here a farmhouse prettified into a cottage. It had quite a lot of land with it, and that continued right up to the Austen's time.

And where it is in the landscape is it's in really quite a dominant position in the village of Chawton. And the village of Chawton is, is ancient. It goes back to At least the 10th century A. D. and has a really long, and that's when it first appears in the written record, but that's also when the written record first appears, so it's difficult to say quite how long it is, and how old it is. But the house is on the corner of two major roads, and always has been, and the road goes up to London, and it branches right where the house is, and one branch goes off to Winchester, which historically is a really, really significant, city, it's the county town of Hampshire, but also way, way back in the 9th, 10th century, it was the [00:03:00] capital of England and still remained really important, um, certainly very important in Wessex, which is the Southern and Western part of the UK in which we are.

The other fork takes you off to Gosport, and this is right down on the South Coast, because we're actually quite close to the, close to the sea here, we're right down the UK. And Gosport's a major naval port and all those south coast sites are really important to the Navy, um, and to coming in and out of the country, really.

So this would have been a very busy, busy road for a very long time. It's an important staging post. So the house is on this corner and it really dominates it. It got bigger and bigger over time.

It was originally built as you'd expect, as a timber framed farmhouse. It was also thatched. And in fact, when we restored the roof of the main house a couple of years ago, you could see that there are two lines of rafters where the pitch of the roof has been sharpened because thatch has a less steep pitch than tile. So to tile it, it was, it was put up. So it's [00:04:00] really expanded over the years and become quite a, it's quite a dominant building within the village in a really prominent location.

I think one of the things I really want to clarify about this house is what it is, what it means when it's a cottage. So we're really talking here, by the time it becomes into knight Austen hands, and I will come back to that. We're talking about a cottage in kind of a Marie Antoinette way of cottage, right? You know, late 18th century, Marie Antoinette is having cottages built in the grounds of

Versailles. It's connected with that rustic, picturesque movement. This is not a cottage of the working, rural class, you know, working class rural poor. This is A cottage, within that sense, and that's what Willoughby is referring to in Sense and Sensibility, when he loves a cottage. He doesn't mean, he wants to go into the hovels of the people who's working the fields. He means this kind of slightly decorative, slightly more rustic, homely place.

Zan: It's an aesthetic vibe for him.

Lizzie: It's [00:05:00] an aesthetic, yeah, and it's important for understanding. That within Austen's social and cultural context, because it can, it can be a bit confusing with where that positions her that she is living in a cottage when she gets here. It's a really beautiful building, it's got a real atmosphere. And for a long time it was independent, it was this independent farmhouse that passed down through generations, that was rented, that got bigger and bigger.

Uh, it spent a few, few decades as a pub, or it was certainly, it was owned by, or rented by a man who was an innkeeper. So it, it seems to have been the new inn for the village. Um, there was a bit of a fray outside the, outside the house, so um, not always the best reputation as a pub.

And then when the Knights became, that adopted Edward Knight when they inherited, and of course they hadn't always been Knights. There have always been Knights in Chawton, for a very, always, for a given value of words, but certainly for a very, very long time there have been Knights in Chawton. [00:06:00] And, over the generations, other people have taken the name of knight, to maintain that through, and that is certainly what happened to, Thomas Knight, the elder whose son adopted Edward. They'd originally been born Mays and Brodnax and then, and then it passed on. So they were really, you know, their dominant land base was in Kent. It's where they, it's where they were. And they were, they weren't here very much. Um, so, uh, it became the village Bailiff's house. So a man called Bridger Seward, who also, who was, who was also described as well as a gentleman of Chawton. So he did live here previously and he came into this house. And helped look after the estate. He then passed away in April 1808, and his will still exists. You can find it, uh, on the National Archives if you want to. It shows about the things in his house, and it's there he is described as the gentleman of Chawton.

And then from that It becomes home to the Austen women. And then it keeps going.

Zan: Yeah. That is [00:07:00] quite, that is quite a history. I love that.

Lizzie: It is. Yeah, it's dense. There's a lot of it.

Zan: Like, I would imagine that like the, the, the, the central location of this making it a pub. I mean, that would make sense for it to be a pub right there in that really, really central location. And, you know. It, it becomes kind of an unofficial or official, if you're talking about the bailiff, like a centre for, for things to happen.

Lizzie: Yeah, it really was. And it became more so as well after the, after Jane's death. So the house reverted back to the estate. So Jane, as everyone will know, or I hope, died in 1817 and her mother and her sister and their sister in law, Martha Lloyd, continued living here. Right up until Cassandra's death in 1845.

It then went back to the estate and Edward Knight divided it into three workers cottages. And this is where it becomes workers cottages or workers tenements. They still would be very big, you know, there's big rooms in this house. It's quite a spacious house on its own for what it is. But the drawing room became the working men's club [00:08:00] for the village. And it's been a library as well and very much a social space and Oscar Fay Adams, who's one of the first people to come over, um, in the 1890s and writes one of the first, if not the first, non familial biography of Austen. He comments about coming into that space and seeing the billiard table and beer and benches.

So this house has a really, really long history of being a space of Stories of community. We also have, in fact, the building that I'm currently sitting in, as I talk to you now, is part of our Courtyard Galleries. And this is very much the driving machine hub of the house. Not somewhere that Austen necessarily would have come into too often. This is definitely servants spaces.

And next door to me is our beautiful, we have a bread oven. Uh, it's absolutely incredible, and again, if we think back to Emma, we hear, see, hear about the Bateses taking the apple pies, because not everybody had a bread oven, and in fact, in the wind, underneath the window in the [00:09:00] flowerbed outside that we found quite a lot of clay pipes.

So, which would be Victorian, but, and we don't know enough about Austen's time period, but we can almost possibly posit that this was quite a communal space, that people would have come to have their bread cooked in this oven because the wood involved would have been expensive and beyond a lot of people's means.

So, yeah, always really central, central home.

Diane: A place to get your, your Knightley apples nicely baked.

Lizzie: Yes, absolutely.

Diane: So it sounds like, I mean, just from the description of bread oven and all of that, like, this is very much a vibrant working home during Austen's lifetime. So can you talk to us a little bit about the day to day functioning of the house while Austen lived there and, you know, how, sort of like her role in all of that as well?

Lizzie: Yeah, as much as we can. As we know from Austen, she is very, very poor at describing anything, really, beyond emotions and the working of the human [00:10:00] mind. That she's, that she's very good at. I mean, the intangible she captures, um, without equal. The basic things like what time she gets up and what the housemates were called is, is, is not really something she's that interested in.

So there are things that we know and there are things that we can tell from being in the space and there are things we can draw parallels from other. experiences. So the house was busy, you know, it was a busy house. We have the four women who are permanent residents here, Mrs. Austen, Cassandra, Jane, and Martha. They would have had regular visitors. They also had a couple of housemates and a cook who would have lived in.

So you have, the house has two, well, it's basically Barton Cottage, so it has a corridor from, that runs from the front to back, and with offices out the back, and two drawing rooms 16 feet square on either side, and four bedrooms above, and then garrets above that.

So the servants would have lived, and staff would have lived in the garrets. There's possibly another space that might have been the cook's room, but again, This is just tangential evidence [00:11:00] from what other households of the time would have been like. They also had a manservant who didn't live in because it was an all female household, and I think that's something that's really important to really consider when we're looking at Austen's novels and also her lived experience.

The manservant lived out in villages just down the road, in the cottages just down the road and they're absolutely gorgeous and they're called pond cottages because there was once a, a pond nearby.

would have been a house that, as the majority of households of their class would have been, they kind of operated on two levels. So you had the family that were The Austen Lloyd women and then you would have had the staff and trades and people around and there would have been an overlap. We certainly see it in Austen's letters from Steventon where there's a lot more discussion about the washer women coming in and who's going to do her hair and whether it's going to be any good. She's a bit worried about it and will the clothing ever be clean if this person's doing it? That's kind of retreated by the time she gets here which also marks a societal [00:12:00] change.

Um, and a difference between the family being this concept of an extended whole household and then you start to have a, uh, more of a division, although it's, it's, it's never as clear cut as it will become later on, but it would have been, you would have seen different people doing different things, so. There's no toilet, obviously, this is way before plumbing, so someone has to empty the chamber pots, and so the housemaid's job would have been to get up really early, light all the fires, sort out all the water, we have a well, a beautiful, beautiful well, next to the bakehouse, in the bakehouse next to the bread oven we have a copper, which is a large copper, copper bucket, a copper bucket with a fire underneath it and a lid, and this is what would have been used for heating gallons and gallons of water. And this would also be important for wash day.

So you have all of this going on. You have the cook in the kitchen who is doing a lot of the preparing of meals. There would have been a big range. One of the things that seems to be a little bit unclear, just generally, is quite when the transition from wood to [00:13:00] coal would have been. We certainly see that there's lots of wood being delivered to the house, particularly in 1809. So the coal might have been a little bit later. This is not a coal producing particularly area of the UK. That's further north. But it's difficult. It's a really transitional period between wood fired to coal fired. Certainly later. It would have been later in The Austen women's life, it would have been coal fired.

So you've got this hive of activity. For the Austen Lloyd women, the family, they did divvy up their class. You know, housekeeping was a real thing, you know, just because there were other people, you know, household management, Mrs. Beaton famously wrote about it. We see all three letters of, um, Austen's contemporaries, and we see it in her own letters, the difficulty of managing staff and people management.

So how the Austen women, Austen Lloyd women, divvied up the task seems to have been like this. Mrs. Austen, when they moved in, she by this point had had

eight children, lost her husband, moved a zillion times in the past few years. That's the accurate, that's the [00:14:00] accurate, accurate figure.

Zan: Technical term right there. A zillion times.

Lizzie: She's moved a zillion times. I was on the verge, you know, her grandchildren were ever, ever increasing. She'd also lost quite a few daughters in law by this time, this point, so that's seen, you know, it's a time of huge change and stress and grief.

Yeah. This period before, it doesn't stop afterwards, but it's, it's coming at the end. of a decade and a half of really quite serious impactful change and upheaval for them. So she quite rightly says, I'm hanging up my chatelaine, this is what we think, and she does not do the housekeeping. She quite famously, um, does dig in the vegetable garden.

Diane: She loves those potatoes.

Lizzie: Loves those potatoes. Yeah. Outrages.

Zan: We love it.

Lizzie: Outrages her more proper grandchildren by putting on a worker's smock and getting out.

Zan: Oh my goodness.

Lizzie: We love Mrs. Austen. She is absolutely incredible. And then it seems that Martha and Cassandra divvy up the actual housekeeping between them. We have an amazing item in our collection, which has been digitized [00:15:00] and worked from for years. Um, most famous, most recent digitization analysis was by Julianne Guerra of Martha Lloyd's household book. Which includes recipes of everything from calf's head soup, which sounds grotesque, to white soup, to all sorts of other things, apple, um, orange wine, and right up to recipes for ink.

And I think we, we need to be, it's really difficult to know how much that would have been Martha cooking from those herself and how much it would have been directions to the cook and to the kitchen staff. And it's difficult, it's difficult in a household this size. A household slightly larger. In no question, it would have been, it's pretty clear cut.

Here, it's slightly more ambiguous. And Cassandra would have also shared the housekeeping with that. It seems from the letters and from looking through chronology that there was an attempt that either Cassandra or Martha were here. One of them was here at one time. They did occasionally go away together, um, or at the same time, which had an impact on Austen's writing, as we shall see.

But Jane's job was to [00:16:00] make breakfast. So this was her job. Her job was to make breakfast, and she also ordered the tea and the sugar. Um, and looked after that. So there are letters where she talks about getting the tea from Twining's, and she seems to also help with ordering the wine and things. So they do divvy up the household tasks, but it also really seems that this house is structured in a way to support Austen to write.

There is not a pressure on Austen. You know, she is not the one taking on the vast majority of the housekeeping, she's, she has, and also she wouldn't, very unlikely she would have lit the fire to make breakfast. She's not making the bread, um, to make these things, you know, these are really dirty, dirty jobs, she's, she's just slicing and toasting and maybe helping make the marmalade and that sort of thing.

So it would have been, um, A really supportive household and we know that it, that this housekeeping has an impact on Austen. She does write in her early letters about how much she's enjoying housekeeping. This is when Cassandra's away in there in Steventon and she just orders all the food she likes. But then [00:17:00] much later here in Chawton, she's working on Persuasion and Cassandra is away and she writes to, Cassandra and Martha are both away, and she writes that she cannot think of composition when her head is full of joints of mutton.

And we will really see that it's that, that impact of running a household. And of course, you then have those incredible parallels with Virginia Woolf and A Room of One's Own and all of that concept of not just women, but at this, this era, it was, it was women needing the freedom, both physical, emotional time to be able to be creative and freed from Joints of mutton and planning what to eat next.

Zan: That is such a lovely and like concrete description of invisible labor, which is a hard thing to kind of quantify for her to be able to, you know, you know, we have that term for it now. Invisible labor is something that was kind of coined somewhat more recently, but it's always existed. And for her to be able to say like, You know, legs of mutton. They're in my head and I can't get around that.

Diane: Just carrying that mental load all the time.

Zan: Yeah, that's such a, [00:18:00] a very effective concrete example of what that takes from her. To have to kind of balance that with, with a household that can or cannot assist her in her writing. Yeah.

Diane: I like that she was in charge of the tea and the wine, you know, the important things in life.

Lizzie: Yeah, you know, she had the good jobs. She had the good jobs. She had it all. It was great.

Zan: And I love that when she got the opportunity, she was like, um, the grocery list will be full of the things I love. That I like. Yeah. She just orders the things she likes.

Lizzie: Yeah, it's good.

Diane: So, you know, thinking about Austen in this space and Trying to find time to write, like you were talking about, in her work, she's carving out distinctions between those public and private spaces, Fanny's room and Mansfield Park, we see that in a lot of detail. How would Austen's experience at Chawton inform her awareness of these public and private spaces in a domestic context?

Lizzie: It's quite difficult to say, really, with that, partly because whilst we have [00:19:00] rooms that are allocated, so we have a room that we believe was Jane Austen's bedroom, and so we call it, Sharing it with Cassandra. She shared a bedroom with Cassandra her entire life, but I think we also need to think a little bit about the articulation of private and, and private and public and domestic. They did live a, you know, this was a time when. Even letters are things for performance, so they're, they're designed to be read aloud, they're designed to be shared, so the concept of private is, is slightly less, if we note from all her heroines, when they want to go out, when they want, really want private space, particularly Lizzie, but They go out.

Diane: Yeah, into the shrubbery.

Lizzie: They're out into the shrubbery. And even, even so does Lady Catherine de Bourgh when she was, Lady Catherine de Bourgh is outside, which raises questions of what Lizzie's going to grow into.

But it is, it is fascinating. So we can see that this house is, you can have private spaces that you can shut doors. There are corridors that lead from different spaces. So you can have private spaces, you can be upstairs, [00:20:00] you can be quiet, you can be alone, you can shut yourself off if you need to. Places like, I mean, you're absolutely so right, the way that Fanny's room is just described is just so beautiful, it's so evocative, this sense of refuge.

And Austen does write in her letters, not here. Not about here, unfortunately, but she writes about when she's going to other places about having a private space. And it's where it seems to be, I can't say for here because she doesn't talk about it here. She articulates it when she's in other places about, I have a room to my own, I'm up two flights of stairs, the fire's lit.

That seems to be, you're being warm and slightly alone in a space where things are going on around her, seems to be a place where she is comfortable. And we see that in the letters, she doesn't articulate that about this space, and I suspect that's just absence, rather than, I don't want to draw anything more into that, I don't want to say that's because she has it here, [00:21:00] because it's just an absence of, of evidence, but that is definitely how she, We'll talk about when she's in other spaces, that kind of snatched moment of privacy.

But those are also often at times that are really social. You know, she's there at large family parties. So, we don't know, really, is the answer to that. I think, yeah, she definitely has, she knows very much what living in a busy, overcrowded, home like Steventon. She's known it from many different spaces where she's going and there's vast family parties.

So that sense of privacy And, yeah, I really think that, that incredible feeling of isolation when everything else is going around you, that stillness in a busy place, she knows that, and that does seem to be quite important for her because she articulates it in several letters, but just not from here unfortunately.

Zan: But I think it kind of also makes sense though, right, that, that going to other people's spaces, oftentimes, you know, you're, as a guest, you are [00:22:00] given kind of a designated space and there's nobody in the household that's going to make demands on your time in the same way. And so it makes sense that she would articulate that in the letters and it also makes sense, you know, without, you know, trying to draw too strong of a conclusion here, but it makes sense that in your own space, your own home, you're more comfortable, but that also that like that private and public is a lot more fluid. I mean, cause you know, if you have siblings, them just kind of like bursting into your room is like, you know, it's a thing,

Lizzie: especially if you share a room. Also when she's writing to Cassandra, she's writing to somebody who knows her experience. This is one of the things why we have so many. Absences of just day to day facts because she's, she doesn't need to describe it.

She doesn't need to describe it because that's a shared lived experience, even to, you know, there aren't many people that she writes to, I mean, there's very, very few if any people that she writes to that did not know Stanya, I mean there's Stanya Clark and there's Murray but she doesn't talk to them about domestic things.

You know, there are very few people that she's writing to that do not know her lived experience. So those [00:23:00] letters are documenting things that are outside that, which is frustrating because it needs those absences.

Diane: Right. Yeah, it'd be nice, nice to have that letter that's just like, you know, 7am, you know, like.

Zan: Let me walk you through the schedule.

Diane: Yeah, it would be nice to have that really detailed breakdown, but you can imagine Cassandra receiving a letter like that and be like, Why? I know this. Why are you telling me?

Lizzie: But I think there's also something really important that with, that you've picked up with a, with Austen's voice and Austen's voices.

So we don't have Austen's voice talking to herself. There is no diary, and I think we, whether we can assume there was one or not, I don't know, but there certainly isn't, isn't a diary or a journal that survived in the same way that you have from Fanny Knight's journals, uh, you know, Martha Lloyd's household books, although they're not emotive, they are literally just documenting what happens, but if her contemporaries or, you know, Anne Lister, who is, is not wildly distant in time from her, Um, so you only, we only hear Austen's voice either as a narrative voice, as we know that [00:24:00] changes through every single novel, or we hear her in her letters, which to some extent will always be slightly performative.

And it's, it's one of those great things that we don't, I would love to hear Austen talking to herself.

Zan: Right.

Lizzie: Uh, we, because her letters, each letter is in a different voice. She writes to different people in different ways as well, because Cassandra, Frank, Martha's really quite strikingly different from the way she writes to Cassandra. So there are these modes of operation, but we, we never hear her talking to herself, which is, yeah, a sadness, I think.

Zan: Well, I think, you know, with this, with, with Chawton, uh, the, the house that, that she's in, not just the village, but, you know, the larger estate and everything, we've got a lot going on here. Um, and you being at that, at Jane Austen's house, you're in this, this, this unique situation where you are. As with any museum project, you're, you're doing preservation while also kind of articulating the challenges of a lived space that's had, as we've already articulated, like a long history, right? So, so, you know, trying to, to articulate [00:25:00] this is, it's a really, really interesting place. Um, so you, so there's got to be this fine line, I'm assuming, between preserving authenticity, and I say that with air quotes, right? Authenticity being something that's not really, literally feasible, but you're trying to preserve authenticity, but also you're trying to construct a narrative at a museum space. So, a house seems like it would be a particularly big challenge in that regard. So that being said, there's a lot of lore around Austen as well, right? So she's someone we know a decent amount about, but there's a lot of blank spaces and in her interiority. How does the physical space in Jane Austen's house become a touchstone for that lore? Or an opportunity to share or rein in our knowledge about her lived experiences.

Lizzie: Oh, it is a challenge. It's really interesting. I mean, I think we definitely have

Diane: Just a question about your life's work, no big deal.

Zan: Just, you know, can you encapsulate this in a soundbite for us, Lizzie?

Lizzie: Sort of, yes, actually, because I think that, [00:26:00] I think that authenticity and the narrative go hand in hand. I think there's something, for me, there's something very important about trying to preserve and communicate an unequal, an authenticity of experience.

So, one of those things, you know, lit, lit houses, museums, we do these things, we have space and we have s We have a space and we have stuff and we put them together. And, actually, the third part of that triangulation, which is something which is intangible, it's the story. The story comes within that. And, actually, the challenge is balancing that triangulation.

So that you have the story, the space, and the stuff, and that they work together. Because, actually, the reason why people are coming, the reason why this is an important place to be, Is the story and the space and actually the stuff came later people were coming to see this house They were coming on pilgrimage from the 1890s.

They were coming in an as fans They were coming when there when the drawing room was a ball It was a it was a beer room when a billiards rooms they were coming when it was [00:27:00] still lived in so actually the space is It's crucial, but when it becomes a museum, it has to have stuff, so they then become this triangulation, but I think the, the really, it is the story that's everything, the story, and this, the stuff has to illustrate the story that has to come first, and that's actually incredibly exciting in a storyteller's house, and I'm increasingly using the phrase and wanting to urge that we don't just call Austen a writer or an author, but that we call her a storyteller because it then is something more. Her stories are Something that are deeply embedded in in psyche They are part of culture global cultural heritage and there's something just they're a little bit beyond something that's just captured on the page They go into something that is that is intangible culture.

So this is a storyteller's house. So it gives us This incredible privilege and pressure of storytelling and bringing her lived experience to life. [00:28:00] And actually within that there is the interiority is a challenge. But we do want to bring onto the walls and into the space her process as a writer which goes beyond.

You know, that's always the vast challenge is how do you bring the intangible? How do you bring The workings of Austen's mind to life and obviously we have to do that through the outputs of Austen's mind and how we, how we bring that in, but it is a delicate balance, but it is exciting. It's exciting. And it's, it's something that is almost insurmountably huge challenge, but that doesn't mean it's not worth doing.

And it's, I'm probably gonna get very inarticulate about this because I know how it's, it's something that we're navigating and working towards and this kind of concept of this space that is both time travel, so you're there, you're with Austen, you're in, you know, the, the drawing room, the house is [00:29:00] As close to how it, we don't know what it was like in 1813, but in 1813 Austen read aloud her copy of Pride and Prejudice and that, and it's sharing, it's sharing those stories and having the right backdrops to sell those stories.

We have the spaces as authentic as we can make it, we have incredible reproduced wallpaper that Austen would have known. We have some furniture that would have been in the house. We have other furniture that was about from Steventon. Ultimately, the key thing that we are preserving and handing on to future generations of communicating is that story.

And that is everything. There is lore, there is mythos, there are things that we are not entirely sure if they're You know, the squeaky door is a classic example. Is it true? Is it not? You know, James Edward Austen, he wrote a lot of stuff. A lot of it's brilliant. It's, it's, if it is true, does that mean the house had carpets? Because at the moment it has floorboards and you can hear everybody coming. Is she, is she really doing it to hide it from the [00:30:00] servants when this is a household when everybody, you know, it's, it's, it's difficult to unpack some of those things but it's there. It, it is, it is, it is there.

So yeah, that's a really inarticulate way of saying it's got to come back to story and there is so much that we don't know and we try not to show what we don't know and we try to keep with what we, what we do but yeah, it's, it's It's hard, it's about, you know, this is a place that is so unbelievably important, you know, I, I tell that story, I tell the story of Pride and Prejudice being read aloud in the drawing room, at least two or three times a week, myself, personally, and there is still something about that that gives me goosebumps, to still stand in that space is incredible, Pride and Prejudice is a novel that means so much to me, you know, it's, it's just, it's part of me, and I know it will be to, A lot of our listeners.

And so all those other novels are, you know, they are beyond something that you picked up and you read. They are something more, [00:31:00] more than that. And to be in this space is incredible. So that's where it is. You know, you've got the space, you've got that story. And then it's how do we use the incredible collection that we have?

I mean, it is an incredible collection. It's amazing. Just thinking about this stuff, we've got this incredible collection as well. Astonishing first editions, and letters, and some jewelry, and costume, and clothing, and just this incredible collection that documents her legacy and her impact. So, but for me, that's, it's, it's almost it's story and space that come first.

And then we use this incredible I mean, this stuff's just amazing. Um, to bring that to life and, uh, to have a, a way in.

Diane: Do you have a particular favorite piece in the collection?

Lizzie: Oh.

Diane: Like choosing a favorite child? Right.

Lizzie: It's like, I don't know. Um, no, I don't. That's really difficult. I don't have a favorite. I don't think I have a favorite piece.

I have a very strong fondness for the Patchwork coverlet because of, because of the stories it's yet to tell us, [00:32:00] actually. It's an incredible piece of work. It's laid out. Uh, it's been clearly and cleverly designed. But it's, it's where those fabrics have come from and what they can actually show us about the Austen family as consumers of global products is going to be really interesting and what it can potentially tell us about, you know, there's, there's, there's every chance that those scraps of what Austen was right, wearing while she's writing this stuff is, is in that quilt. So, um, That's, that's, that is a key object.

I also, I do have a favorite edition of Pride and Prejudice, first edition of Pride and Prejudice, which I'm very privileged to be able to say that, I'm very aware, which is full of beautiful annotations by somebody who was reading it at the turn of the 20th century.

Zan: Oh wow.

Lizzie: And it's, it's absolutely stunning. They've mapped out family trees and then recorded each time they've re read, they've re read it. So I'm very, I'm very fond of, very fond of that. But yeah, beyond that, it's, it's very difficult.

Zan: One of the things that I am loving about both of those artifacts, as well as what you were describing, is that There's so obviously a palimpsest that goes into [00:33:00] everything that we're talking about, you know, even with us starting with the history of the building, right? The fact that that is very clearly a palimpsest and that, and that then each of the objects has its layered history. I mean, that's kind of, I mean, our podcast is very much so about that kind of thing too, like unpicking little tiny details and finding out the nuance that they bring to it. But I love that. In your articulation of it, it's not just the object for the object's sake. It's, it's for the storytelling that it can do.

Lizzie: No, but then also if we're going, going into color literature, we also have to be aware and we're very aware that there's also the death of the author within this. Because, so death of an author is the theory that every time you read a novel, actually the author's intention isn't as important because every reader

brings their own lived experience to that novel and that imposes on the interpretation.

And that is also completely valid here and it's very important, you know, we, we, this, this house is, it's a site of performance both historically and today in, in every sense of where that people are performing and living out experiences that they've wanted to have [00:34:00] there. But also everyone brings their own interactions, their own Austen, their own relationship with Austen to this house.

Yeah. And ultimately. That's not just, that's not down to us, that's, that's, that's what people bring to the house as well. So it is a space of sort of two way communication and two way interaction because You know, we will have, we will have visitors that come on, you know, that come today that they'll be people that have never read Austen and have absolutely no interest in her.

They're coming along with an, they're a part of a tour, it's just something on their list, or they're coming along with a partner. Or you will have people who have spent their life studying this. And that's, they will, each one of those people will bring their own experiences. So every single visit to this site will be different.

And it's different, you know, if you came every year, it would be different. Partly because of what we changed, but also partly because your, you will have changed as a visitor. So there might, you might come around and there's an object that didn't speak to you at all. And then the next [00:35:00] time you come, because of your lived experience will change.

That object will suddenly speak to you in a different way. So it's an ever changing place that is completely un static, uh, but rooted, rooted in core facts, core understandings, core , museological practices, but that will never be the same and will always be different. And that's extraordinary.

It is a, it, it's a tale that And a novel and a, in its own right, that changes with every reading and every visit. And it's incredible.

Zan: Yeah. That is,

that is incredible. I've got a little bit of goosebumps because I have been lucky enough to, I have, I have visited the museum before and yet I know that my, my appreciation for Austen has enriched in my understanding of the objects and things like that.

My experience would be vastly different, but, but you know, I remember sitting out in the gardens and just breathing in the air and just, you know, just soaking it in that way. And the fact that I was, I was there with a group of students, I was leading a student tour. And so everybody [00:36:00] there was having their own experience.

So it was, it was very, very cool to have. I have had that experience myself. So that when you explain that you get to see that on a daily basis, these different interactions, these different people that are having profound or not so profound interactions with the space. I mean, I imagine that like the amount of people that get a little bit teary at Jane Austen's desk are probably.

Lizzie: It's quite a few. Yeah. It's quite a few. Yeah. impactful moment. Yeah. Sitting in that space.

Zan: Yeah. And, and even you describing reading like, like. Uh, she read Pride and Prejudice in the free room, the fact that you still have that very real reaction.

Lizzie: Oh, still. Still. Very, very, very real reaction. It's, it's, it's quite incredible. It's, um, yeah, it's, it's an intense experience if, I mean, if you wanted to be, or you can just wander through.

Zan: Cool old stuff. Great.

Diane: I think it's a testament to the, I don't know, the pull of the place that, like you said, even when it was, you know, for billiards and beer that people were still like, Oh, this is Jane Austen's house. [00:37:00] Yeah. I'm curious if you could, I wonder if you could talk a little bit more about the transition from

Lizzie: Oh, of course.

Diane: You know, that into the space as it is now, as an actual museum.

Lizzie: Yeah. So it's really fascinating. It comes around as part of a much wider movement, not just in the UK, but across the world, about turning, about becoming, preserving writers houses.

It's, it's, it's something that's really important, particularly in Western Europe. I know there's many amazing writers houses in the States. And there's a real intensification in the UK, um, around sort of 60 years from the end of the 19th century up. Austen is actually, it's quite late in the becoming a writer's house as a museum and that transition from private to public space.

The house remained as these three workers cottages rented for the estate. Right up until the late 1940s, but in the mid 1940s, the Jane Austen Society was founded by a woman called Dorothy Darnell who lived in Alton and who would walk past and see that the [00:38:00] house was in a bit of a state, um, and was wanting to really restore it and open it as a museum.

Jane Austen says she was founded, she worked hard, they were campaigning. The house was then put up for sale and the Austen Society were fundraising to raise the funds to buy it. And a man called Thierry Carpenter bought it. And he set up the Jane Austen Memorial Trust. And he and his, and his grandson ran the museum for many, many, many years.

And we became a CIO in 2014, but the Carpenters were deeply involved in running for a long time and worked closely in parallel with the Jane Austen Society, um, to do that. So you had this fascinating transition from private to public. And in fact, when the house first opened. Uh, some of those cottages were still tenanted.

So it wasn't until the 60s, I think, that it really, a whole house was, was able to be open. And we still have some places that, that aren't open that are staff offices, again, like the room I'm sitting in now, which is an ex [00:39:00] grain shed, um, very pretty grain shed with some incredible, very old beams, but it is, it is an ex grain shed.

So yeah, so it was a really fascinating transition and after Thierry Carpenter bought the house, there was some work done to collect objects. The Jane Austen Society started collecting objects, um, but really that's when the, the serious collecting of bringing stuff in to build this incredible collection came about.

And yes, some of it was donated, some of it was purchased over the years and it has just built and grown to be, I believe, one of the finest collections of Austen material in the world. And with that extra significance of a vast. amount of it is, has come home, um, has been part of it. Even, you know, even the letters that were written in the Steventon years, Cassandra kept them, they would have been here.

Um, so that, that gives it that extra, extra power. Yeah.

Zan: Yeah. Absolutely. Oh, I love that. The chills. Yeah.

Lizzie: Yeah. So yeah, but writers houses, amazing places, amazing places. [00:40:00] They are phenomenal. They're sites of huge inspiration and to walk

in the footsteps where things were created, whether it's Elizabeth Bennet, uh, Jane Eyre, everything, you know, uh, where they wrote Wordsworth, where they wrote Daffodils, Elizabeth Gaskell's house, there are phenomenal, phenomenal places to visit and, um, I would strongly recommend a literary tour of the UK and beyond to kind of get that sense because they're different and it is interesting to see where, you know, this is what's been driving literary pilgrimage, you know, Dorothy and William Wordsworth went to visit Byrne's house right back when in the early years of the early years of the 19th century.

So this is nothing new. It's a real driving force for us to be in the space where these things were made. And I don't, yeah, it's very difficult. Is it just, we want to be there? Do we want it to rub off? What do we want to do? Why? The why? I think we could fill, I think we could fill many hours talking about the why, but yeah, I, I,

Zan: it is an urge. Yeah.

Lizzie: It's a real urge. It's a real drive, but um, [00:41:00] yeah, I have a real passion for working in writers houses. There's something absolutely incredible about it. And for a sense of, we all have, you know, for work, for work when we have to work, there's something really incredible about being somewhere and working somewhere that matters most of the time and continues to matter.

Uh, and that's, um, for a whole range of reasons and particularly for Austen, this house. is so emotionally important for so many people who are not here. You're not just the staff that work here. It's beyond team obstinate, headstrong girls, stretchers across the world. And we are very aware of that and very appreciative of it.

And we know that this is There are so many people for who this is a home that can possibly never visit and it's really important. So we take that, we take that very seriously, that responsibility and sharing it. And I think that's, um, that's incredible. That's when a career becomes a vocation.

Diane: Well, Lizzie, thank you so much for taking the time to come on and talk to us about this [00:42:00] incredible space.

Lizzie: It is incredible as well. It's really incredible. Come and see us.

Diane: Well, can, can you tell our listeners where they can, where they can follow you online, where they can follow the house online, where they can

support Jane Austen's house and how they can do that and anything like that. Everything like that.

Lizzie: So we are, we have a very cool web address, which is www.janeaustens.house, it's very cool, um, and on that website you'll find a whole range of resources. We have an incredible virtual tour that you can explore the house digitally. We also, most months, not every month, we do that as a guided tour, so you can come and join our team and they can show you through the rooms and explain how to do it by yourself, have an explorer come and find out more with our members of staff. We have a whole, our collections are on there. Not everything, because there's a lot, but the real highlights of it that you can explore. Online exhibitions, whenever we do an exhibition on site, we also post that on our website to explore.

Uh, there's learning resources on there. There's a lot on there, it's really good. [00:43:00] Spend some time, it really is something that you can look at from home. It, you won't, you won't fully get the sense of space, but you will get a lot of that sense of the spirit of it.

We are very active on social and we are, we love it, um, so over on Instagram we're at Jane Austen's. I can't remember quite them all, but we're right there. If you find Jane Austen's house, we are, we're on them all. We're on, um, Facebook, Instagram, X, and TikTok. So we're over those, over those channels and I am out in the internet as well, so you can find me too. I'm more active on Instagram than anything else, but you can find me.

Find me there. But yeah, there's a, there's a lot. We, we, we know, going back to that, we're knowing how important it is. We know that this is, there are people that can't, can't visit us and can't get to us and can't be a part, but we very much want to share what we're doing. But, um, yeah, it's all there. If you want to be a part of it and want to, it's, it's, it's there. Please come and come and join us. And be part of our events.

Zan: I think past exhibits are also virtually catalogued as [00:44:00] well, right?

Lizzie: Oh, everything. Yeah, everything from, everything from 2020 onwards is all, it's all there. It's all up there. So you can go back and look through different, different things that we've done over the past couple of years.

Diane: And you guys do a lot of great virtual talks and things, so people can join in from anywhere.

Lizzie: We do, yeah. Yeah, we do virtual talks. So we do, a really lovely thing that is really fantastic is we do an online book club as well, which is really lovely. So we do that once, we do that monthly throughout the year.

We do have online talks. We work a lot in partnership with other amazing, particularly female, writers houses. Elizabeth Gaskell's house, Lebronte House and we've recently been doing some work as well with the Ellen Montgomery Institute. And the amazing Emily Carhouse up in British Columbia and, um, that will expand hopefully over the years and decades and next year, you know, next year is Austen's 250th birthday, which is going to be incredible.

So we will, as much as we can, make sure there's a balance between online and in person events. We probably, by the very nature of it, there will be more in person events. Next [00:45:00] year, um, but we will try and we will make sure there are still still online events and stuff because we really love them. I mean, it was amazing. We started doing them in November 2020. And, you know, all through those, those first few months of the really intense lockdown here in the UK in 2021. And it was, it was incredible. It was incredible for us, um, as well as every, you know, to be able to be in that digital space with people from all over the world and sharing that.

So We know as sort of our eyes from personal experience that of emotive impact and how important it's, so it's something that as long as the technology lasts and you know, as much as I can promise, , it's something that we will con, we will continue to do.

Zan: Well, thank you again, Lizzie, so much for talk, talking with us. This has been an absolute delight to get to, to know a little bit more about the museum, um, and, and her space and all the things that go into it. So thank you so much.

Lizzie: You're very welcome. Thank you for having me.

Diane: Thank you again to Lizzie Dunford for joining us for this episode. You [00:46:00] can find us on Instagram at the thing about Austen and on Twitter at Austen Things.

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

Zan: stay tuned for next episode, when we'll be talking about pin money.

Diane: Thanks for listening!

Bye!