

What was expected of Jane and her siblings?

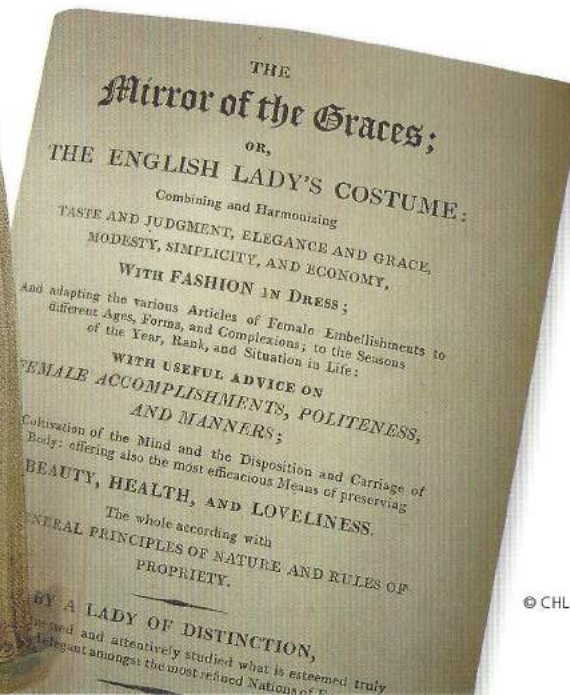


The Austen girls

Cassandra Elizabeth (1773–1845)

Cassandra was Jane Austen's only sister, and her trusted soul mate. Cassandra's fiancé, Thomas Fowle, a childhood sweetheart from her days at her father's family prep school, died in 1797. The twenty four year old Cassandra, broken-hearted, chose to consider herself a widow. She was a talented amateur artist and an expressive writer of letters to her sister when separated from her. Cassandra, like Jane, frequently visited her brothers' families, as well as other relatives and friends. She was often supporting a household on the arrival of a new baby, and both sisters

lovingly played this expected 'devoted aunt' role. Cassandra appears to have lived up to the expectations of an older sister and a dutiful daughter, as well as of a respectable spinster. She nursed both her mother and Jane tenderly during their times of illness, and outlived them both.



Jane (1775–1817)

Jane was the seventh child out of eight, and the second of two daughters born to the Rev. George Austen, 1731–1805 (the local Church of England clergyman), and his wife Cassandra. He had a fairly respectable income of about £600 a year. He supplemented this by tutoring prep school boys who came to board with the family, and by managing the farming of church land surrounding his rectory. Despite all his hard work, George Austen had money worries, and could not plan to give his daughters a generous dowry in the future.

Money issues

In those days, a girl hoping to find a well-born young man as a husband was expected to have such a dowry to offer, bringing money and/or land into her family-by-marriage. Young ladies had virtually no opportunities to develop their own successful careers as an alternative source of income. If they did not marry, they would remain dependent on their relations or have a grim life of servitude or even poor-house residence in front of them.

How they were educated

In 1783, little Jane and her older sister Cassandra went briefly to be taught by a relation, Mrs Cawley, who lived in Oxford and then later moved to Southampton. After health problems, the girls were transferred to the Abbey boarding school in Reading between 1785 and 1787. This rather sparse education was all that was expected of a young lady at that time, provided she had proper manners and some feminine skills to demonstrate such as dancing, needlework and musical or artistic talent. Between them, the two Austen sisters were high achievers in these required skills, but they had other talents which exceeded expectations.



The two sisters were unusually lucky to receive an extended home education alongside their brothers and the lively boarders who were sons of noble families. The girls were able to study under their dear father's scholarly yet child-centred guidance, alongside privileged friends. The Austen's restricted income did not exclude them from making warm contacts among local upper-class families, since a clergyman like George had considerable status as a scholar parish priest, beloved by his congregation.

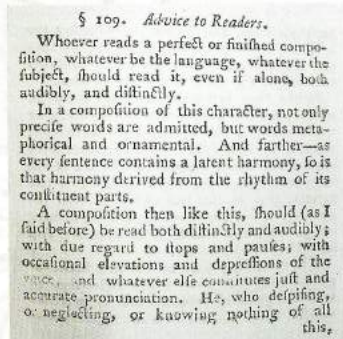
Reading habits

By the age of eight, Jane Austen was an avid reader of both the serious and the popular literature of the day. Her father had a library of at least 300 books and allowed his children to read whatever they wished. Young Jane was very familiar with eighteenth century novels, such as those of Fielding and Richardson, which were full of rowdy adventures. Jane enjoyed writing little stories containing drunken quarrels and violence which must have much amused her brothers and the boarding pupils in her home. However well she attuned her reading and writing to boys, it might well have shocked adults!

Early writing

Jane started writing full length drafts of fiction in her later teenage years. She did this in private, but perhaps she was encouraged by the public example of other young women writers of her day. She praised three popular books in her famous 'Defense of the Novel' written within an early work of her own. (The work was revised

and published many years later as *Northanger Abbey*.) The books she singled out for admiration were Frances Burney's *Cecilia* and *Camilla*, and Maria Edgeworth's *Belinda*. This sort of reading was regarded by many as too frivolous for a high-minded young lady, but it was clear that Jane was not conforming to that sort of expectation! Her letters at this time write wittily about dances and parties she attended in Hampshire, and also of visits to London, Bath and Southampton where she attended plays and other social events. She certainly does not sound like a high-minded, demure young lady in these letters; the tone of her writing can be exuberant, cutting or ironic.



Elegant Extracts, an 'improving book' which also features in *Emma*

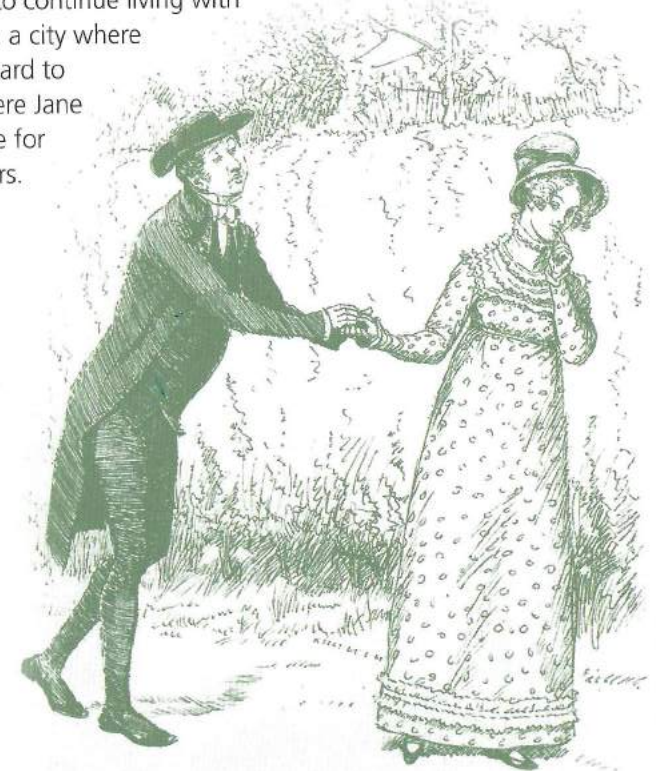
Letter from Jane Austen



Falling in love

Jane did not conduct her love-life according to the expectations placed upon genteel young ladies of her time. During 1795-6, in her twentieth year of age, Jane had an unsanctioned mutual flirtation with young Tom Lefroy, an Irish relative of Jane Austen's close older friend, Anne Lefroy. Mrs Lefroy, aware that Jane seemed saddened when Tom was suddenly whisked away from Hampshire for London, tried unsuccessfully to match Jane up with an intellectual clergyman the following year. Jane was not at all interested in this suitable young man! Five years later, she went on to refuse a very tempting offer of marriage from the heir of a fine house at Manydown, Hampshire, the younger brother of dear friends, on the grounds that she could not love him. To many people back then, this would be a most unexpected decision, given the pressure on young ladies to make a good match. Jane's refusal meant that when her father, who was nearly 70, abruptly decided to retire with his wife and unmarried daughters to Bath in 1800, the sisters had no choice but to continue living with their parents in a city where they found it hard to settle, and where Jane wrote very little for almost ten years.

Hugh Thomson illustration from *Pride and Prejudice*. Charlotte Lucas makes a 'suitable' marriage to a man she does not love.





Jane Austen's writing table

Living and writing at Chawton Cottage

In January 1805, Jane's much loved father died. His immediate family was now largely dependent on support from the Austen brothers and a small amount of money left to Cassandra, totalling about £450 yearly. Later in 1805, a family friend, Martha Lloyd, came to live with Mrs Austen, Cassandra, and Jane. The four women eventually took up residence in a rent-free cottage on the Chawton estate of Jane's brother Edward. As the adopted heir of rich landowners, Edward could provide them with this secure base for the rest of their lives. Jane was to spend quietly fulfilling years (1809–1817) revising her existing drafts of novels and producing new ones, and becoming, by her late thirties, a

successful and respected writer who earned about £100 a year.

These later years of Jane's at last allowed her to move far beyond the restrictive expectations of a middle-aged spinster of limited means. Sadly, she had little time to enjoy her success, as she fell ill and died at the early age of 41. She coped with her last illness without complaint. Cassandra nursed her tenderly and, along with her family and wider networks, deeply mourned the loss of 'such a sister, such a friend as can never have been surpassed.'

The Austen Boys

James (1765–1819)

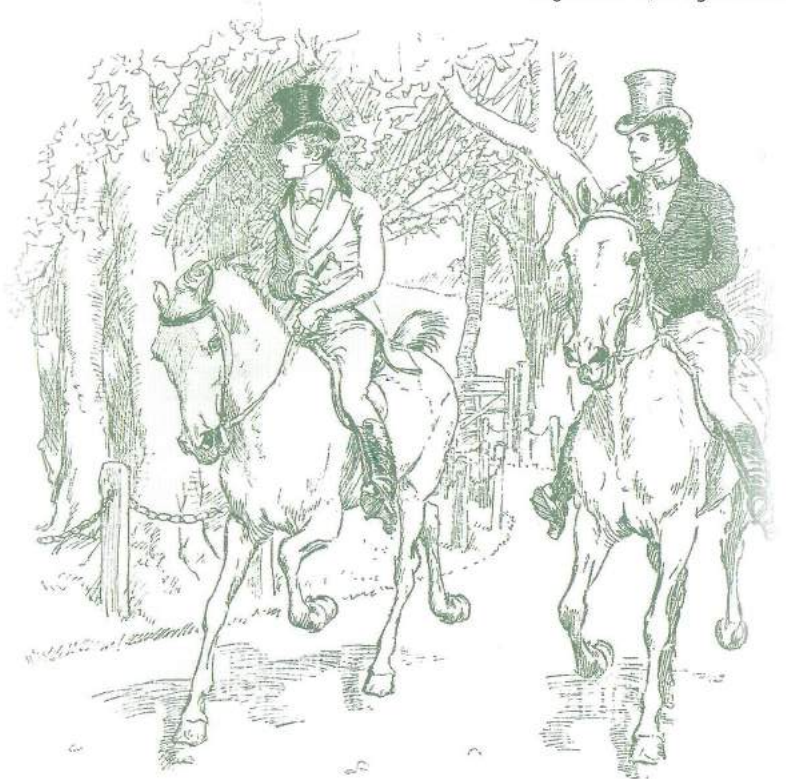
Jane's eldest brother James was a clever and serious-minded boy. He was enrolled at Oxford university at the age of 14, gained a degree at 18, and was ordained a clergyman 10 years later, eventually taking on the Steventon parish after his father's

retirement. This was the sort of role often required of the eldest son of a clergyman and scholar. In addition, he considered himself the writer of the family. He had an outdoor passion as well; he loved hunting and enjoyed the expensive leisure pursuits so popular among the nobility, which his brother Edward provided for him. His daughter Anna (born 1793) was Jane Austen's beloved first niece and it appears that James provided a sense of stability for this two year old after his first wife's death. Anna eventually married Ben Lefroy, cousin to the Tom who had been considered far above Aunt Jane's marriage expectations 15 years earlier.

Significant clergymen in Jane Austen's novels:

- ***Pride and Prejudice***: Mr Collins
- ***Emma***: Mr Elton
- ***Northanger Abbey***: Henry Tilney

Hugh Thomson, two gentlemen



Edward (1767–1852)

Edward was practical and business-like, and was approached for adoption at about the age of 12 by a rich childless couple distantly related to the Austens, Thomas and Catherine Knight. Between 1786 and 1788, Edward was sent by them on the obligatory Grand Tour of continental Europe. He eventually inherited his adoptive parents' estates in Hampshire and Kent, managed them with conscientious efficiency, and, as expected, took the last name of 'Knight'. Edward's wife (a baronet's daughter) died at 35, after the birth of her eleventh child, at a time when her oldest child, Fanny, was fifteen. The devastated yet steadfast Edward appears to have restored the stability of his eldest daughter and of all his family. Fanny, a twin cousin to Anna, and also much beloved by her Aunt Jane, went on to make a socially-approved marriage to Sir Edward Knatchbull, twelve years later. Her eldest son, Edward's grandson, later became Lord Brabourne which meant that Austen descendants unexpectedly reached the ranks of nobility!

Significant landowners in Jane Austen's novels:

- ***Pride and Prejudice***: Mr Darcy at Pemberley
- ***Mansfield Park***: Sir Thomas Bertram at Mansfield Park
- ***Persuasion***: Sir Walter Elliot at Kellynch
- ***Sense and Sensibility***: Sir John Middleton at Barton Park

Henry (1771–1850)

Henry was thought by some to be Jane Austen's favourite brother. He was passionately involved in whatever he did, but not always steady or wise. He entered Oxford University in 1788, then joined the army for seven years as a popular young officer, broke an engagement, subsequently married his widowed cousin, Eliza Cassandra de Feuillide, and eventually ended up as a church minister, after a business bankruptcy which cost his brother Edward, and other investing relatives, a great deal of money. Despite his winning charm and his fervent support for the publication of his sister's writing, he could not really be said to fulfill the expectations of a gentleman at that time!

Significant militia members in Jane Austen's novels:

- ***Pride and Prejudice***: Wickham

Francis (1774–1865) and Charles (1779–1852)

Francis and Charles both entered Portsmouth's Royal Naval Academy at the age of 12, one of the expected career paths for a younger son of a socially-ambitious family. The training for each boy was harsh but neither cracked under the pressure. They fought in the British navy during the Napoleonic wars, and both exceeded the expectations on them by eventually rising to become admirals. Alongside their career successes, both brothers remained loyal husbands and fathers, and also contributed support and financial assistance whenever their widowed mother and unmarried sisters, based in Bath, were in need of them. Edward was in a much stronger position to do the same and eventually, in 1809, the three women took up his offer of permanent residence at Chawton, ten miles away from Steventon. The five brothers remained in touch with one another despite the variations in their income and success. Between them, the Austen boys reciprocated their mother's and their two sisters' deep devotion to them.

Significant sailors in Jane Austen's novels:

- ***Mansfield Park***: William Price
- ***Persuasion***: Captain Wentworth and Admiral Croft

HMS Canopus

