

The Jane Austen 250th Anniversary Needlecase





Wedgewood oak leaf detail



Ivy sprig detail



Interior pocket



Interior needlecase

The Jane Austen 250th

Anniversary Needlecase:

2025 celebrates 250 years since the birth of the remarkable author and woman that was Jane Austen. As part of these celebrations, I was commissioned to create a needlework project inspired Jane Austen's House – her Hampshire home, where she spent the last 8 years of her short life, years which ended up being the most creative and productive of her writing career.

Jane was born in 1775 and grew up in the small Hampshire village of Steventon which is about 15 miles from Chawton. When aged 6, Jane's father retired from being the local Rector and moved his family to Bath. Only 4 years later, Jane's father died suddenly, leaving his family with minimal income and uncertain lodgings, the female members of the family reliant on the income of their sons/brothers.



Jane's mother tended to the gardens and her sister Cassandra the household management. This settled lifestyle therefore gave Jane a newfound freedom and peace to explore her writing. She made full use of this time and over her 8 years at Chawton, her most celebrated works were either edited and published (1811 Sense and Sensibility, 1813 Pride and Prejudice) or written and published (1814, Mansfield Park, 1816 Emma). Persuasion was also written between 1815 and 1816 and Northanger Abbey was revised, but these were not published until after her death.



Chawton Cottage, © Jane Austen House

Jane with her mother and sister, moved several times in Bath, before going to live with Jane's brother Frank in Southampton in 1807. It was an unsettled and uncertain time, particularly for the female members of the family.

Jane's brother Edward had been adopted by a wealthy couple, the Knights, and as a result he inherited large estates in both Hampshire and Kent, as well as being assured of a large income. He was therefore able in 1809 to offer rent-free lodgings to his mother and sisters. They moved into the solid and decorous house in Chawton in July. The house was part of Edward's Chawton Estate, which also included Chawton House just up the road.

The Austen ladies delighted in their new home, an attractive red brick cottage, with extensive gardens, sitting on the main route between London, Winchester and Portsmouth. Thus, it would at the time have been a hub of activity and interest.



Jane's writing table in the drawing room © Jane Austen House

It is therefore easy to understand why Chawton Cottage has become a place of pilgrimage for fans of Jane Austen's work, allowing visitors to experience the peaceful ambiance of the place where such creativity burst forth. One can imagine Jane quietly writing at her small table (pictured on the previous page).

Jane and her mother and sister, like many women of their class at the time, were also keen needlewomen. The collection at Jane Austen's House includes several examples of their work, most notably a large and beautiful paper pieced quilt, a handkerchief and a whitework shawl. It therefore seems fitting to design a needlecase inspired by the collection and this heritage of Austen creativity.



Detail of the handkerchief worked for Cassandra by Jane,



Engraving of Jane Austen from *A Memoir of Jane Austen*, 1870,
© Jane Austen's House

When creating a design inspired by a location, I never wish to copy items from the collection, but instead to be inspired by their structures, designs and colours. Thus, my needlecase design started out with inspiration from the handkerchief, pictured left, which was embroidered by Jane as a very personal gift to her beloved sister Cassandra. This includes a scalloped corner motif containing the initials CA, worked in padded satin stitch and eyelets, on a ground of the delicate cotton lawn. This exquisitely fine fabric became highly fashionable in Jane's time, since it was newly available as an import from India. It was hence considered exotic and prized for its ethereal quality, which suited the fashions of the day.

In the needlecase design I have replaced the initials with the quote from *Persuasion*:

'Time Will Explain'

Which is associated with the character Anne Elliot and speaks of patience and time leading to truth and understanding. This may refer to matters of the heart, but it seems very fitting here since the time spent embroidering a complex design often provides the peace and solace to solve many a conundrum.

I was also inspired by the delicate and tiny needlecase which was gifted (and may well have been made) by Jane to her niece Louise Knight. It still has the original wrapping with the hand-written text '*With Aunt Jane's Love*'.



It depicts a hand-painted leaf spray in rich teal and yellow ochre, a gold rim and ties of yellow silk ribbons. This colour theme has strongly influenced my own needlecase design.

The leaf forms have also been used within the design, working in bold silk  The needlecase gifted by Jane to her niece Louisa Knight © Jane Austen's House

This element of the design is further inspired by the decorative patterns of painted wooden needlework items which could be purchased as souvenirs at popular spa towns such as Bath and Tunbridge Wells in the Georgian period.



The view through the oak boughs and garden to Chawton Cottage

The oak was an important patriotic symbol at the time, harking to the wooden ships of the British Naval Fleet. As 2 of Jane's brothers, Frank and Charles, were in the Navy, this link is likely to have been important to Jane and family. The oaks are depicted in the stunning almost jade green of the leaves on the plate, combined with gold taken from Jane's home made needlecase.

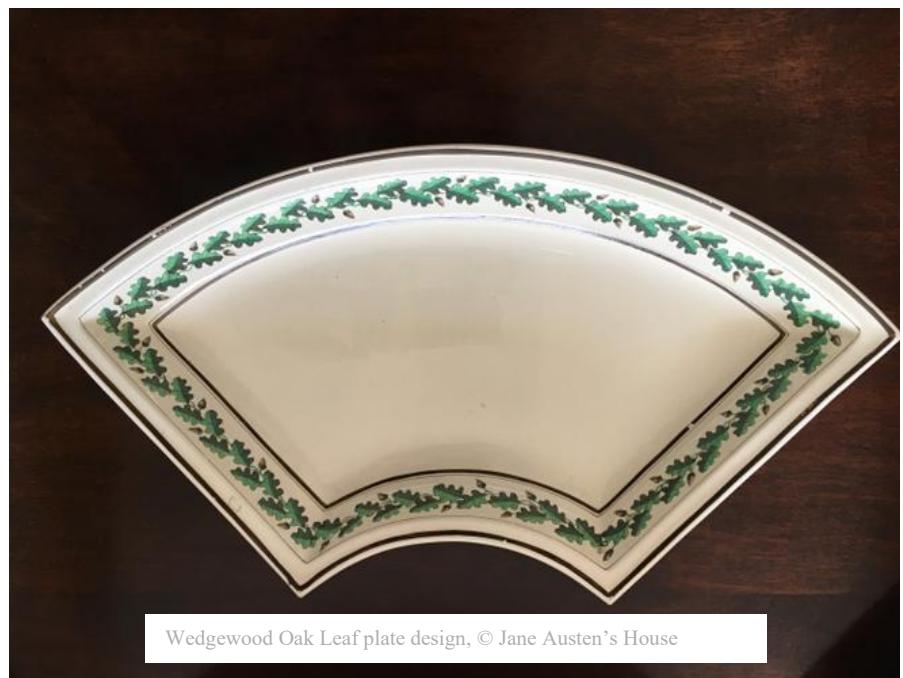
The overall shape of the needlecase is also inspired by the fan shaped form of these plates and the importance of fans and fan etiquette in the Georgian period.

It seemed fitting that the beautiful, quintessentially English Chawton Cottage where Jane Austen lived should form the centrepiece of the needlecase design, worked in fine detail to depict the red brick, red roof tiles and beautiful Georgian window forms.

When I visited the cottage, I loved this view through the garden with the house framed by the boughs of the oak tree, leading the viewer in. Hence the needlecase design includes a bough of oak at the top left, which frames the cottage and has this same effect of drawing the viewer into the scene.

However, the oak and acorn bough is stylised into rounded oak leaf forms, since it is further inspired by the fashionable Wedgwood plates in the collection which are believed to be of the design purchased by the Austen family in 1811. In a letter to Cassandra, Jane wrote:

'On Monday I had the pleasure of receiving, unpacking & approving our Wedgwood ware. It all came very safely & upon the whole is a good match, tho' I think they might have allowed us rather larger leaves, especially in such a Year of fine foliage as this. One is apt to suppose that the Woods about Birmingham must be blighted. — There was no Bill with the Goods — but that shall not screen them from being paid. I mean to ask Martha to settle the account. It will be quite in her way, for she is just now sending my Mother a breakfast set, from the same place.'



Wedgwood Oak Leaf plate design, © Jane Austen's House



Below is pictured the 'Chawton Vine' design, a fragment of which has been found in the Drawing Room. It is a beautiful lively design in a gorgeous warm yellow, accentuated by the pink dots.

This has therefore inspired the second bough of ivy leaves and tendrils, which leans across the top right of the needlecase design, worked in silk with tiny pink French knots and hints of gold.



The Chawton Vine wallpaper design, © Jane Austen's House

Finally, the tip of the needlecase includes the 'Chawton Cottage' rose, created by Harkness Roses which grows in the gardens, a stunning pale pink rose with vibrant pink centre. Worked in silk shading with gold details to simulate the central stamens and draw the rose together with the rest of the design.

I hope that you will enjoy working the 'The 250th Jane Austen Anniversary Needlecase' all the more, as you understand the themes and inspirations behind the design, and that '*time will explain*' as you quietly stitch, conjuring the peace and creative genius of Jane in her time at Chawton, perhaps while listening to one of her incredible works.

On my visit to Jane Austen's House, I also fell in love with the stunning wallpaper designs. Fragments of the original designs which would have decorated the walls in Jane's time, have been found and faithfully reproduced by Hamilton Weston Wallpapers, using the same hand-block printing methods.

The image left, shows the fragment of the 'Chawton Leaf' design dating to the early 1800s. Originally this would have been printed using 'arsenic green'. The replica is shown below and now hangs on the walls of the Dining Room. The colours have further influenced those used in the oak leaf spray in the needlecase. The pattern has also been reproduced onto fabric to cover the reverse of the needlecase.



The Chawton Leaf wallpaper design, © Jane Austen's House



The Chawton Vine wallpaper in the drawing room, © Jane Austen's House



The 'Chawton Cottage' rose