

Prospect and Refuge in the Landscape of Jane Austen

Barbara Britton Wenner

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LANDSCAPE OF JANE AUSTEN

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Preface

Recently, I had the pleasure of experiencing Jane Austen's landscape myself. After renting a car in Winchester, my spouse and I set out to explore Hampshire. Our final destination that first day was Selborne, where we were to stay in a 500-year-old thatched-roof cottage. Even though the sun was low in the sky, I felt drawn from the main road and toward Chawton, about four miles from Selborne. Suddenly, after passing a dozen cottages or so, there it was—Chawton Cottage, Jane Austen's home for the last eight years of her life. A plain red brick, two-story cottage, it glowed in the late day sun and promised more pleasure of looking at the landscape during our visit.

Focusing upon Jane Austen's landscape—the ways readers perceive it, the ways her heroines regarded it, and the ways Jane Austen herself interpreted the land around her aesthetically—increases our awareness of the power of the natural environment in her work. Here we will examine some theories of aesthetic geography, the evolving ways in which Jane Austen describes her fictional landscape and the landscapes she knew personally. We will attempt to understand how Jane Austen's heroines used their surroundings to grow in their knowledge of society and themselves.

The next day we returned to visit Chawton Cottage (now officially called Jane Austen House Museum), a rather imposing house for a “cottage,”¹ with six bedrooms and large Georgian sash windows which allow a generous amount of light to stream into the rooms. Located on the formerly busy Winchester/Guildford Road, the cottage occupied a very public spot in Jane Austen's day, unlike its location on the quiet road today where all of the traffic has been diverted one-half mile north on the heavily traveled A31. Although the house is frequently photographed from the garden, actually seeing its close proximity to the once-busy road in front makes the viewer acutely aware of how noisy this location must have been during the early nineteenth century. However, now Chawton has become a sleepy village with many picturesque thatched-roof houses, the Grey Friar, a pub with a picture of Jane over the fireplace, and a tearoom, appropriately named Cassandra's Cup, with a view of Jane Austen's house directly across the road.

Even though her brother, Edward Knight, who owned the cottage, thoughtfully had the window directly on the busy road bricked up, Jane Austen still had plenty of passers-by and visitors due to the location of the cottage. According to Jane Austen's letters, the garden at Chawton Cottage, with its shrubby walk on the border, gave Jane an excuse for outdoor activity. Less than one-half mile from her home stands Chawton Manor House (now restored and containing an extensive

¹ Jane Austen herself was never known to refer to her Chawton *home* as a cottage.

collection of books by early British women writers), one of the residences her brother, Edward, had inherited from his adoptive parents, the Knights. Jane Austen visited other parts of England, from Bath to Lyme Regis to Southampton and her brother's estate, Godmersham, in Kent, but Chawton became the place where she revised her first three novels and wrote her last three. The area around it must have had a significant effect on her landscape descriptions.

Because of my own interest in this landscape, I immediately sought out the footpaths Jane Austen had walked, knowing that many of these paths had been in place from time immemorial. An intricate and extensive network of footpaths exists throughout Hampshire. The first footpath we tried began near Gracious Street in Selborne. This footpath crossed a fence, using a stile—a wooden step up over the fence—then traversed a field to a chalky cliff of three-hundred-year-old beech trees overlooking the village and the Wakes, the estate of Gilbert White, well-known late eighteenth-century naturalist. This ancient grove of trees is known as the Hanger because of the way the beeches lean over the three-hundred-foot chalk scarp-face. Since this footpath is so near Chawton, Austen, an enthusiastic walker, surely traversed it on her way to the Selborne Fair. From this footpath, we had wonderful sheltered views of the Hampshire countryside, in fact, the same view Jane Austen would have had, overlooking the slightly rolling fields toward Chawton and Alton beyond. This footpath exemplifies what aesthetic geographer Jay Appleton might call “a good place to hide and a good place to seek” for someone like Jane Austen. She wanted to see the broader picture of the landscape and yet maintain her privacy there.

Across the street from Jane Austen House Museum, another promising footpath caught our eyes. This footpath went from the village between two hedges so close that they grazed our shoulders as we passed between them, over several turnstiles through a field where horses grazed. As we followed the muddy path through a wood, we came to a series of farm buildings and a diversion, marked by a sign, as the footpath continued through a field of cattle. A diversion is meant to be temporary until the farmer has made the necessary improvements requiring it. The footpaths through private property are always open for public use, but walkers also know that they must keep to the paths and always close any gates they open. We remembered Mr. Knightley's assiduous care for the public footpaths running through his property in *Emma*. He speaks to his brother, “I was telling you of my idea of moving the path to Langham, of turning it more to the right that it may not cut through the home meadows ... I should not attempt it, if it were the means of inconvenience to the Highbury people” (128). Even today, the English people give legal protection to footpaths and enjoy walking on them.

If we examine how topography affected Jane Austen and how she related to her landscape, we notice that in many ways, her relationship with her environment parallels her heroines' relationship with the landscape in her narratives. She had very public access to society, both in living directly on the main road to Winchester and following the footpaths that crisscross the area around her home. Though she had good opportunities for what aesthetic geographers call “prospect-viewing,” from the beech hanger to the narrow hedgerows with views out onto the fields, to the large windows overlooking the coach route, she also had recourse to a private refuge. A “zone of safety,” as Appleton might call it, provided her with a retreat

when she desired it, both to stay out of the picture herself as well as to write her heroines into it.

A short walk from Jane Austen's cottage brought us to Chawton Manor House. Some have thought Jane Austen wrote many of her novels there, but that seems unlikely as the house had either tenants or the numerous family members occupying it while she lived in Chawton. However, she may have been thinking of Chawton Manor House as she wrote about Donwell Abbey in *Emma*. We walked, as Emma might have, "to the delicious shade of a short avenue of limes, which stretching beyond the garden ... seemed to finish the pleasure grounds" (355). Neither ruined abbey nor a river here, but certainly the view of the distant fields beyond the garden and the avenue of limes made Chawton Manor House reminiscent of Austen's novelistic landscapes. The ancient-looking lime walk that provides a vista toward the house itself was planted after Jane Austen's death; the seemingly ancient steps and walls behind the house were built around 1895, I was surprised (and maybe a little disappointed) to learn. Even the walled garden on the property had been started in 1818, a year after Jane Austen's death. However, the old ha-ha has been excavated, a reminder of the uninterrupted "proprietary" prospect from the house toward the open fields beyond, and the other approaches around the house, including the location of the church and graveyard, remain as they were during Jane Austen's time.

Because Jane Austen spent most of her life about twenty miles away from Chawton in Steventon, we decided to join the Jane Austen Society in attending Evensong at St. Nicholas Church there. We followed the same narrow track to the church that the Austens had followed from George Austen's rectory. Although the rectory no longer exists, we saw the site of the manse, along with the nettle patch marking the pump that had been near the house. The church remains nearly as it had been when it was built in the twelfth century, a thousand-year-old yew standing next to it. This landscape has been sentimentalized by Austen relatives as "picturesque," as biographer David Nokes writes, using "memories which unconsciously refashion the landscape into a topographical metaphor for Austen's art" (56). Jane Austen herself "left us no delicious Proustian memories of the rectory's magical garden." Nokes claims she found in "the rural isolation of Steventon implied privation rather than pastoral contentment" (58). However, I believe she appreciated the "small and unassuming beauties" of the place that her nephew later described in his *Memoir* (18).

The following day we traveled to Lyme Regis on the Devon coast (two and one-half hours from Chawton by car). As we came nearer the coast, the roads narrowed and became steeper. Soon, our car was scraping both sides of twenty-foot high hedgerows. The weather was rainy and cool, until just before we reached Lyme Regis, when the skies became blue and the stiff Lyme Bay breeze blew in so warm we had to remove our jackets. The Cobb, a large stone seawall, goes hundreds of yards out into the sea. It is the only way of protecting boats at Lyme Regis, which is flanked by high blue lias and golden sandstone cliffs and a shingle beach, the stones cracking like pistols when the tide comes in. I kept looking for Granny's Teeth. About two-thirds of the way to the end of the breakwater, I saw some slippery, roundish stones, going up the wall (twenty to thirty feet) with no way of holding on—so precarious, I could not summon the courage to go all the way to the top.

This landscape is so exposed that it fits with Appleton's formal geographic definition of hazard—"an incident or condition prejudicial to the attainment of comfort, safety or survival" (269). Louisa Musgrove, in falling off the "Teeth," did not possess sufficient knowledge of hazards and respect for them, and here, reliance upon even the most competent of men, Captain Wentworth, was of no use. Louisa was saved by a cool-headed woman, Anne, who was well aware of female vulnerability in the landscape and who coolly organized the members of the community into a rescue party. Anne had a knowledge and respect for hazards and knew not to expose herself to such a hazard as Granny's Teeth.

The Cobb is a great contrast to the next landscape at Lyme Regis that we visited. We walked across the beach from the Cobb to Lyme Regis itself. From there, we followed the directions in Anne-Marie Edwards' *In the Steps of Jane Austen*. The route led us up to Charmouth fields and to the Coastal Trail. Here on the footpath we were back to the sheltered zone-of-safety geography where Jane Austen felt so comfortable walking when she visited Lyme Regis herself in 1804. Sometimes called an "interface" by Appleton, this spot between the woods and the coastal cliffs becomes "the zone of contact between those parts of the environment which are visible from a vantage-point and those which are not, or between prospect-dominant and refuge-dominant areas" (269). This is how Jane Austen describes the scene in *Persuasion*:

The scenes in this neighborhood, Charmouth, with its high grounds and extensive sweeps of country, and still more its sweet retired bay, backed by dark cliffs, where fragments of low rock among the sands make it the happiest spot for watching the flow of the tide, for sitting in unwearied contemplation ... these places must be visited and visited again, to make the worth of Lyme understood. (117)

This view is aptly described by Austen herself when she writes that "all must linger and gaze on a first return to the sea, whoever deserve to look on it at all" (*Persuasion* 117). As we stood at the top of Charmouth fields footpath, we had shelter as well as a good overview of the entire town, the Cobb, and a long stretch of seacoast. We proceeded beside the Lyme, a little stream going down to the bay, on a path sheltered by a tunnel of trees and hedges.

A short train trip from Winchester brought us to one of the most frequently mentioned landscapes of Jane Austen's novels: Bath. Austen scholar Irene Collins describes Bath in the 1790s:

Bath was one of the architectural wonders of western Europe. Visitors who knew what they were about would pause as they approached the city over Kingsdown Hill and view the honey-coloured spectacle before them with suitable rapture. Jane could not help be impressed, even though her arrival on both her early visits took place in rain. (178)

Little evidence exists that Jane Austen worked on any of her fiction, besides the fragment *The Watsons*, during her stays in Bath, but Bath provides landscapes for both *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion*, and numerous allusions to the city are found in most of her works. On May 17, 1799, Jane wrote to Cassandra: "The prospect from the Drawing room window at which I now write is rather picturesque as it commands a perspective view [sic] of the left side of Brock Street, broken by

three Lombardy poplars in the Garden of the last house in Queen's Parade" (41). Bath is a city of crescent after crescent of stone townhouses and many scenic overlooks. Beechen Hill provides a perfect place for Henry Tilney's discourse on "foregrounds, distances, and second distances—sidescreens and perspectives—lights and shades" as well as Catherine Morland's rejection of the city itself as "unworthy to make part of a landscape" (94). Bath is both of these—the ideal prospect and a gray sea of buildings. Of course, shops and entertainment enough (both in the nineteenth and the twenty-first centuries) abound to distract many nature lovers, but Bath has riverine valleys and hilly terrain, an ideal setting for the beautiful crescents with broad expanses of grass, and footpaths, both into the hills surrounding Bath and along the Bristol-Avon Canal. Bath allowed eighteenth-century visitors to have the comforts of a city and the verdant and varied landscape of the country.

We arrived at Bath Spa and took a footpath that runs along the top of a hill overlooking the city, less than a mile from the former Austen residence at 4 Sydney Place. This landscape was open—no hedgerows—and gave us remarkable views of many terraces of houses—crescents on the hills on the other side of the valley and the woods above them. Yet, the path itself was protected by trees, and the walker could remain fairly sheltered. Surely, Jane Austen too had taken this path, which proceeded down to the Bristol-Avon Canal (constructed during the time Jane Austen lived in Bath). We followed the path down to the canal and then along the towpath, which eventually went through the place where Sydney Gardens had been—just opposite 4 Sydney Place.

From her residence in Bath, Jane Austen easily walked out in the country, looked back upon the city, and boated (as we did) on the Bristol Avon River to Bathampton Mill. Like us, she enjoyed the open green spaces in front of the Royal Crescent and the park near Pulteney Bridge. We moved quickly and easily from the public, wide-open green space of the Royal Crescent to the narrow Gravel Walk, which follows along behind the gardens and fences of townhouses near the Circus. Jane Austen appropriately chose this secluded landscape as the one where Anne Elliot and Captain Wentworth came to know each other's true feelings. Bath provided a wonderful novelistic landscape to move characters quickly from distractingly busy Milson Street, lined with interesting shops, to the Upper Assembly Rooms, to those open, wind-blown fields above Bath.

Finally, we journeyed to Box Hill, a seventy-five minute trip by car from Chawton today. From Emma's fictive Highbury, the trip was seven miles by carriage. As I recalled the Box Hill picnic from *Emma*, I became increasingly aware that the trip must have been quite a large undertaking, worthy of being called an expedition, and the participants must have been worn out when they reached the top of the highest summit in southern England. No wonder Frank Churchill's chattering was so irritated and irritating. The trip, even today, seemed to me a long, circuitous uphill journey. But once at the summit, we were confronted with two views: on one side Dorking and all of south Surrey, on the other side a confusing tangle of woods, difficult to follow and find one's way around—what Appleton might call "contraposition," or "the juxtaposition of symbols of contrasting type" (268).

Was this landscape "prospect" or "refuge"? The scene in *Emma* appears confused and confusing on that point, and as the narrator tells us, "There seemed a principle

of separation ... too strong for any fine prospects" (361). I am reminded of what narratologist Mieke Bal says about such a landscape: "A special role may be played by the boundary between two opposed locations" and "it is possible to be trapped in such places" (45). Emma certainly seems trapped by her own words at the Box Hill picnic. Could it be that the landscape had a role in it? They "looked without seeing—admired without intelligence" (361). It is certainly a strange trap in which Emma finds herself at Box Hill. She fails in her attempts to transgress and to transform this landscape. In the end, Emma needs Mr. Knightley's corrective reminders to understand the true importance of what transpires in this landscape. Seeing Box Hill as the exploring party in *Emma* may have seen it suggested to me the social, physical, and cultural importance of landscape and the complex ways in which they interact in Jane Austen's fiction.

The preceding pages chronicle my personal experience in the landscapes where Jane Austen lived and visited. I wanted to understand (even with the changes of two centuries) how the landscape might have been seen and enjoyed by Austen, and, by extension, her heroines. Now we will move from a brief experience of reading of what still remains today of Austen's landscapes toward a reading of Jane Austen's fictive landscape.