



The Austen family, 1800–1809

A semi-nomadic existence

Jane Austen's father, George Austen, was the rector of Steventon in Hampshire. He and his wife, Cassandra Leigh Austen, had eight children – six sons and two daughters, Cassandra and Jane.

Cassandra remained Jane's closest friend and confidante throughout her life, and, like Jane, she never married. She died in 1845 at the age of 72, outliving her famous younger sister by nearly 28 years.



Jane Austen (1775-1817), from a watercolour painted by her sister Cassandra about 1810

Jane was always at her happiest when her routine was orderly. During the second half of the 1790s, when she was living at Steventon, her writing flowed – including early versions of the novels that were later published as *Sense and Sensibility*, *Northanger Abbey* and *Pride and Prejudice*.

By comparison, most of the first decade of the nineteenth century was less productive.

In December 1800 George Austen – by then in his late sixties – retired and moved to Bath with his wife and daughters. Cassandra was almost 28, and Jane had just turned 25.

The next eight and a half years were often semi-nomadic in character. Although the family was mainly resident in Bath between 1800 and George Austen's death in January 1805, much of its time was spent elsewhere. In particular their father loved visiting the seaside resorts of Dorset and Devon. Jane therefore had to grow used to an irregular existence.

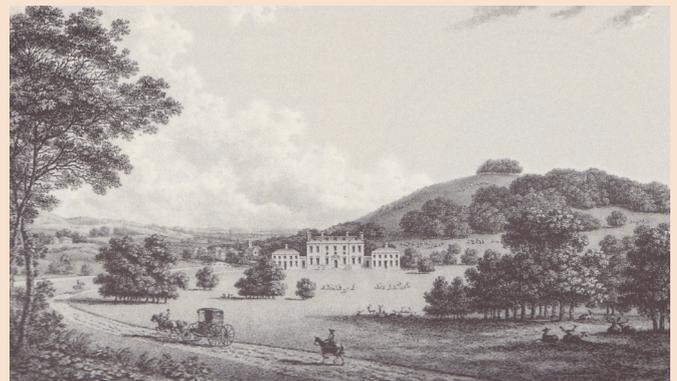
This was just as well, because, after her father died, it was no longer a matter of choice but of necessity that she, her sister and their mother moved regularly. They were adequately well off – Mrs Austen and Cassandra had a little money of their own, and most of Mrs Austen's sons provided some financial help – but they lacked the security provided by a settled home.

During the summer of 1805 Mrs Austen and her two daughters were mainly at Godmersham Park in Kent, the home of her third son, Edward. Edward had been adopted by Thomas and Catherine Knight, who were relations of his father's with no children of their own – and in due course all the Knight family estates came to him, including Godmersham.

The Austen ladies' stay in Worthing came in late 1805. Then, from October 1806 to April 1809, they lived in Southampton with Mrs Austen's fifth son, Frank, and his first wife.

Mrs Austen's household finally acquired a permanent home in 1809. Edward offered his mother and sisters a choice of two houses – one at Godmersham, the other at Chawton in Hampshire. They opted for the latter, and moved into Chawton Cottage in July 1809.

Jane remained there for the rest of her life – with the exception of the final two months, when Cassandra and their brother Henry took their seriously ill sister to Winchester for better medical treatment. Jane Austen died there on 18 July 1817, aged 41.



Godmersham Park in Kent, the house that Jane Austen's brother Edward inherited from his adoptive father, Thomas Knight