

Walk Awhile



Briefing Paper 18

Jane Austen and Godmersham Park

Introduction

Godmersham House Park via the footpath leading down from the North Downs Way National Trail found at TQ 056520. The footpath leads off to the right from the North Downs Way National Trail at a point about 300 metres before the NDW itself turns right and drops down from the eastern edge of Kings Wood to join Mountain Street.

Although Jane Austen lived for most of her life in Hampshire, both she and her sister often visited Canterbury and stayed with her brother Edward Austen at Godmersham Park. Edward inherited Godmersham from the son of Thomas Knight, who had the Georgian mansion built in 1732. Thomas Knight's son was childless and adopted Edward Austen as his heir. Edward changed his name from Austen to Knight to ensure inheritance of the estate. In 1791 Edward Knight married Elizabeth Bridges of Goodnestone and letters written by Jane Austen record staying at both Goodnestone and Godmersham.¹ Jane also wrote that she feared her sister Cassandra would move permanently to Godmersham Park and expressed the view that if she had to move she would not like Canterbury as well as Southampton.²

Memorials to Thomas Knight, Edward Austen and his wife Elizabeth can be found on either side of the nave in the church of St Lawrence, which lies just behind Godmersham House. After dropping down

¹ Brown, Hutchinson and Irwin; *Written City, A Literary Guide to Canterbury* revised edition 1990 page 43.

² *Ibid.*

from the North Downs Way continue along the footpath across the grounds (passing the old gamekeepers house to your left) towards the River Stour and then take the path due south towards the house and follow the lane for two hundred metres that runs due south by the side of the garden wall until the church is reached

Following the death of Edward Knight's wife Jane Austen continued to visit Godmersham and keep house for her brother between the years 1794-1813.³ During the period when she visited Godmersham Park Austen wrote the first drafts of *Sense and Sensibility*, *Pride and Prejudice* and *Northanger Abbey*.⁴

In Anne Marie Edwards book 'In the Steps of Jane Austen' she suggests many areas where Godmersham may have had an influence upon Jane Austen's work. He suggests that Jane observed the busy social life and society at Godmersham that may have found expression in Mansfield Park. Anne Marie Edwards also suggests that the view from the hillside overlooking Godmersham Park is not unlike the first view that Elizabeth Bennett sees of Pemberley for the first time in *Pride and Prejudice*.⁵

³ Christopher John Wright, *A Guide to the Pilgrims Way and North Downs Way*, 4th edition page 281.

⁴ The Jane Austen Society; www.janeaustensoci.freeuk.com/pages/janeausten1.htm

⁵ Anne Marie Edwards *In the steps of Jane Austen*, 1979

