



Watercolour drawing of Jane Austen by her sister Cassandra,
dated 1804.

JANE AUSTEN IN CONTEXT

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Agriculture

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To the historian's eye a conspicuous feature of film and television versions of Austen's novels is the almost complete absence of farmers and farm workers. We might think this absence derives from a 'Heritage' view of the past in which the millions whose labour supported the great houses of the land are passed over in silence, but the absence is also evident in Austen's novels, only the relatively minor character of Robert Martin in *Emma* serving to represent the most numerous social orders in a period when even the King was affectionately known as 'Farmer George' and espoused the merits of the farming life, and when most parish priests were, in the words of Sir William Scott to the House of Commons in 1802, '*ex officio* a farmer'.¹ In the nine letters of Jane Austen's parents which still survive, farming is a constant concern. In one we find Mrs Austen saying that George Austen 'wants to shew his brother his lands and his cattle' and rejoicing in her own involvement in dairying: 'I have a nice dairy fitted up, and am now worth a bull and six cows.'² In another we detect the tone of someone very much in charge of this aspect of domestic business: 'What luck we shall have with those sort of cows I can't say. My little Alderney one turns out tolerably well and makes more butter than we use, and I have just bought another of the same sort, but as her calf is but just gone, can not say what she will be good for yet' (*AP*, 26 August 1770). And in a letter written in the year of Jane Austen's birth, the impression of a farming family is very clear:

The wheat promises to be very good this year, but we have had a sad wet time for getting it in, however, we got the last load in yesterday, just four weeks after we began reaping. I am afraid the weather is not likely to mend for it rains very much to-day, and we want dry weather for our peas and oats; I don't hear of any barley ripe yet, so am afraid it will be very late before harvest is over. (*AP*, 20 August 1775)

Where Jane Austen's own correspondence is concerned, of the surviving letters from January 1796 to the family's move to Bath in January 1801, a third refer to farming, many of them mentioning John Bond, George Austen's factotum at Cheesedown farm, who was to a degree intimate with the family; Jane Austen on one occasion writes '[My father] & John Bond are now very happy together, for I have just heard the heavy step of the latter along the passage' (*L*, 27–8 October 1798). Taken together, the letters of Mrs Austen and of Jane indicate that the affairs of the farm lapped through the house, much as one would expect of a rural family in these years.

The more we consider these matters, the more they throw into question just how we have tended to understand Jane Austen's early life: on 1 November 1800 she writes 'My mother is very happy in the prospect of dressing a new Doll which Molly has given Anna. My father's feelings are not so enviable, as it appears that the farm cleared 300£ last year.' Early the following year we hear similar notes of financial concern: 'My father is doing all in his power to encrease his Income by raising his Tythes &c, & I do not despair of getting very nearly six hundred a year.' George Austen's revenues from tithes were around £200 p.a. in the 1770s, and Jane's letter implies they were rising towards £600 p.a. by the end of the century, but what usually goes unnoticed is that his farm revenues were around a third of his income, and evidently he had hoped for more (*L*, 3–5 January 1801).

Early in 1801 George Austen decided to retire to Bath, putting his son James in as curate at Steventon, while retaining the Steventon living and its tithe income in his retirement. As the move was prepared, Jane Austen wrote several letters which indicate that George Austen sold his interest in the remaining years of his lease to a local farmer named Holder. It is usually thought that Austen had been given the Cheesedown lease by Thomas Knight in the 1770s, but the evidence that this was a gift seems no more than family lore and Jane does write as if he is selling his lease. If this is the case, then we must consider how much capital George had invested in his farming activities, such a farm renting for £150–£200 p.a. Cheesedown farm can be readily identified today from maps of 1741 and 1840 and covered 195 acres, to which George added 57 acres of glebe land in the neighbouring parish of Deane,

giving him a total of 252 acres and implying an annual expenditure of around £700 in addition to any rental or leasing costs, more than his best hope for tithe income.³ These considerations have large importance for the family's life since, rather than living in entire security on tithe income, they were exposed to any agricultural misfortune and directly engaged in the most important sector of the British economy.

Austen's farming would have been primarily of the 'sheep-corn' type which is practised extensively in the light heathlands of England, and would have been supplemented with a small amount of cattle farming for beef and dairying. Steventon had been enclosed around 1741 into four modern farms. The arable land would typically have been planted in rotation with wheat, then peas, then oats or barley, with clover underneath to further hearten the soil, perhaps with a fourth year lying fallow, and each of the farms would have maintained sheep flocks, both for the value of the animals and the production of vital manure. The *General View of the Agriculture of Hampshire* (1794) provides a contemporary sketch: 'Towards Basingstoke, the land upon the top of the hills is in general very deep, strong land, with chalk underneath, which produces large crops, particularly in dry season, as it never burns. The usual crops are 1) wheat, 2) pease, 3) oats or barley, with clover.' The *General View* also estimates the sheep population at 185,000 for Hampshire as a whole, nearly one for each human, and notes that 140,000 were sold each year at the Weyhill sheep fair. The parish of Deane (of which George Austen had the living) had 1,300 sheep, and there were 900 in Ashe, another neighbouring parish, figures which constitute the typical range for a Hampshire parish. No figures are given for Steventon, but we may deduce a similar number.⁴

George Austen's farming on his own account was not the limit of his exposure to agricultural economics: his tithes as rector comprised 10 per cent by value of agricultural production in the parish and varied with prices (which were rising strongly in the last years of the century, hence Jane's remark about her father being able to 'raise his tythes'). It follows that *all* of George Austen's revenue, whether from farming or tithes, was derived from the land and related to the market for agricultural products. It also follows that during Jane's Steventon years George Austen's relationship with the local

agricultural community cannot have been entirely comfortable: negotiating to raise tithes was a necessary but vexatious part of the parson's relation with his parishioners, even in good times, and in these years in which the agricultural revolution was reaching its apogee there was much alienation between landowners and workers: bad harvests and disruption of trade with the Continent led to huge rises in agricultural prices which were not matched by rises in wages; enclosures were already increasing in the 1780s, but after 1792 landowners found in the French wars a patriotic excuse for completing the conversion of common land into private farms. Over 40 per cent of all Parliamentary enclosure acts were passed during the years of war with France, and 547 were passed 1800–5, almost twenty for each week of the Parliamentary session. Enclosures dispossessed the commoners and converted them to impoverished wage-slaves reliant on Poor Relief. The *General View* noted that 'A considerable quantity of land has lately been enclosed, which increases its value from six shillings to twelve shillings per acre' (p. 11), probably referring to the enclosure of 3,520 acres of Basing Down in 1786–9, an area of roughly two and a half miles (4 km) square through which the thirteen-year old Jane must have passed on her way to shop in Basingstoke. Further afield, Mrs Austen's cousin, Thomas Leigh of Adlestrop, was a wholesale and vigorous encloser, a fact which she must have appreciated on her visits to him.⁵ Commoners who lost their rights through such enclosures became vagrants who had to be returned to their parishes under the Laws of Settlement, relocations which were always unpleasant and usually involved the churchwardens, and at least by implication the parson, as the agencies responsible for implementation of the Poor Law. As Steventon was a closed parish, belonging entirely to the Knight family, and supporting only some thirty families, it is probable that the local effect of the wider catastrophe was not as acutely experienced as elsewhere, but poverty in the neighbouring parishes of North Waltham and Overton – which were open and much more heavily populated – would have led to unpleasant expulsions under the Settlement Acts.⁶ As Peter Virgin notes, the church 'according to classic eighteenth-century theory, was a pillar of the constitution; and as such it was part and parcel of the system of law, as well as being the partner – some said the ally – of the

state'.⁷ Most records of such resettlements have been lost but there is a record of the 'Removal of Elizabeth Armstrong, singlewoman, from Steventon to Old Basing' in 1797, and another from 1816 when 'Robert Rabbits, wife Sarah and children Olliff and Elizabeth were removed from Steventon to Kingsclere'.⁸

The publication of the *General View* itself was symptomatic of the enclosure process. The Board of Agriculture was formed in 1793 and immediately commissioned a series of county reports assessing the agricultural resources the country could call upon in this time of war and propagandising for enclosure as a means of improving outputs. As the wars drove up the price of food and put ideological grist in the mill of capitalists who were bent on enclosure, so even marginal lands became prospects for improvement and this particularly affected downland in Hampshire, much of which would be unwisely enclosed. To quote the *General View* again:

Many parts of the country are well wooded, and adorned with a great number of beautiful seats and villas; but we are sorry to observe such immense tracts of open heath, and uncultivated land, which strongly indicate the want of means, or inclination to improve it, and often reminds the traveller of uncivilized nations, where nature pursues her own course, without the assistance of human art. (p. 10)

Whilst the *General View* tries to appear objective, it is clearly inspired by the aim of promoting 'improvement'. Its view of common land could not be more explicit:

Under this article we shall mention commonable land which belongs to the parishioners in general, which being unenclosed, may be considered as little better than the waste land before mentioned, as it is evident that cultivated land will produce more than that which is totally uncultivated, and left for nature to pursue her own course; and with this disadvantage, that each one is endeavouring to exhaust it of every valuable production, without paying the least attention to its supposed improvement. (p. 31)

The *General View* goes on to identify some 104,845 acres of 'waste' (p. 32) and notes that some of this 'waste' is very productive, but not productive enough: 'King's Clear contains about 1000 acres, upon which young cattle of a good sort are now bred. If this were

inclosed it would make good convertible land either for the plough or for feeding, but principally for feeding, and would be worth about 15s per acre' (p. 32). Since the *View* has already equated common land with waste, the encouragement to enclose land which is vital to the livelihoods of the villagers is transparent.

The loss of rights over 'the commonable land which belongs to the parishioners in general' deprived commoners of those small amounts of grazing and arable produce which enabled them to sustain economic independence, leaving them with what they could earn in wages from the large landowners. The price of a loaf of bread rose 600 per cent between the 1780s and 1801, and in the same period agricultural wages rose only about 20 per cent. Already on 17 January 1795 the *Hampshire Chronicle* recorded the acute distress of rural workers and commended the good people of the city for having raised £287 for relief of distress caused by the bad harvest. On 16 March 1795 the same paper carried a report on the continuing distress of the poor due to the high cost of meat and wheat, and on 27 April it reported that on 12 April 500 men of the Oxfordshire militia stationed near Seaford 'notwithstanding the endeavours of the officers had taken arms and with bayonets fixed' seized a vessel laded with flour at Newhaven. The misery was such as to precipitate revolt among the very forces who had been put in arms to defend the rich against the French and revolutionary threat. The harvest of 1795 was no better, and rural misery deepened. On 8 January 1796 when Jane Austen penned her first surviving letter, describing her flirtation with Tom Lefroy at the Harwood ball, it is uncomfortable to note that the poor of Deane were starving in the frost, their possibilities of livelihood much reduced by the enclosure of their common fields in 1773 by an Act of Parliament promoted by Austen's host, John Harwood, and their family friend Henrietta Bramston, and in which George Austen himself had played a modest part.

Indeed, through 1796 the condition of the poor was becoming of national concern, occasioning a vast quasi-governmental report by Sir Frederic Morton Eden, debates in Parliament over the reform of the Poor Law, and a general atmosphere of crisis.⁹ Eden himself indicates just what rural poverty could mean when he cites the 'Parochial Report on the State of the Poor' for Petersfield, Hampshire, in October 1795, where the diet of the poor comprised bread

and milk for breakfast, bread and cheese for lunch three days a week, bread and cheese for supper every day of the week, the other four meals comprising poor-quality meat. The reality of this diet is revealed when one reads that the allowance of cheese per person per week was half a pound (250g), distributed between the ten meals. Eden's report includes the following commentary in which the smugness of the well-fed baulks at the ungratefulness of the poor:

The Poor are chiefly supported in a work-house, under the superintendence of a standing overseer, who has been in office above 5 years. He does not reside in the house, but attends at meals, provides victuals, and collects the Poor's Rates . . . He pays every proper attention to the wants of the necessitous, and administers the concerns of the parish with fidelity, and discrimination: notwithstanding this, he is disliked by the Poor, and several attempts have been made to burn his house; the gentlemen, however, stand by him, and approve of his proceedings. (vol. 2, p. 223)

What, then, do we conclude from such contextual information? Firstly, our tendency to see George Austen as primarily a country rector, secondarily a teacher of genteel pupils and thirdly a bit of a farmer, must be reordered once we appreciate how much money he had tied up in his farm. Because all of his income depended on the price of corn and sheep, he must have stood pretty much as any risk-capitalist does in any petty manufacturing activity, calculating his investments, banking on good luck and trusting his own acumen. Secondly, we must recognise that Jane Austen's lifespan coincided with boom times for rectors' livings: the value of benefices trebled between 1770 and 1800, so Austen was unusually privileged relative to the kind of life rectors had experienced in earlier years, and relative to what would occur in the 1830s. This affluence was a long-term consequence of rising agricultural rents which depended upon enclosure and the application of new scientific and capital-intensive techniques, all of which were given a particular boost by the French wars. Thirdly, that whilst the gentry profited from such a surge in prices and rents, the rural poor were immiserated and driven off the land, creating many kinds of moral dilemmas for the rural clergy who were implicated in their management. Given all these considerations, we have been entirely

mistaken to cast George Austen in a dress which might have been more appropriate for a cleric of a later period: he was as engaged in capitalist agricultural activity as any farmer would be today. He may have left much of the day-to-day management to John Bond, or he may have been much more involved than most biographers have thought, but either way he was not living remote from the enormous economic changes which transformed Britain in his lifetime: he was playing his own modest but full role in the drama. It follows that Jane Austen's mentality was formed in a household very much more engaged with the shaping forces of the British economy than in the insulated genteel home that is usually presumed. This realisation enables us to re-evaluate the acuity with which her novels represent the socio-economic transformation of Britain in her lifetime.

NOTES

1. Quoted in Irene Collins, *Jane Austen and the Clergy* (London: Hambledon, 1993), p. 54.
2. Letter from Mrs Austen to Mrs Walter, 6 June 1773, *Austen Papers, 1704-1856*, ed. R. A. Austen-Leigh (1942), p. 29. Subsequent references are included in the text and sourced to *AP*.
3. Arthur Young gives annual costs for a similar farm in Wiltshire in *Annals of Agriculture*, 8 (1787), 64-5.
4. *General View of the Agriculture of Hampshire* (1794), pp. 11-24. Subsequent references are included in the text.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 11. On Adlestrop, see Robert Clark, 'Jane Austen and the Enclosures', in *England's Green and Pleasant Land*, eds. W. M. Verhoeven and Amanda Gilroy (Leuven, NL: Peeters, 2004), pp. 105-24.
6. When the *General View* was revised for its second edition in 1813, it supplied a comprehensive table of parochial population and expenses. Although by this time Jane Austen had moved to Chawton, her brother remained rector of Steventon, where there were 33 families comprising 153 residents and a poor law expenditure of £98 p.a. In the neighbouring parishes of Overton and North Waltham, there were 299 families comprising 1,468 people and an expenditure of £1,155 p.a. Typically, in the 1770s there would have been almost no expenditure for the relief of the poor, but by 1813 many families were receiving as much in poor relief as they were able to make through their labour.