

Wargrave Local History Society

Latest News - January 2023

Jane Austen's Schooldays in Reading - Joy Pibworth

At Wargrave Local History Society's first meeting of 2023, Joy Pibworth gave an illustrated presentation "Scrambling into a little education", about the time when the author Jane Austen was at school in Reading. Joy, who had been a "Janeite" since she was a teenager, described the Henley - Wargrave - Reading area as the 'golden triangle' for Jane Austen, as several members of her wider family lived in this area.



At that time, education was not regulated. Parents of children such as Jane might keep them at home, where their mother might teach them reading, arithmetic and household management, or they might have a governess. Such schools as existed were somewhat variable.

Although now the best known of her family, Jane was probably seen as the least important of the children. She was the 7th of 8 children, having 6 brothers. One of those was disabled, and did not live at home, but was always cared for in a village near to where his parents lived. Jane's sister, Cassandra, was 2 years older than her, and it was because of Cassandra that Jane attended school at all. Their cousin, Jane Cooper, was 2 years older than Cassandra, and as these two girls spent time together, their families decided it would be a good idea for them to attend the same school. Jane Austen (then aged 7) was not happy about this, so persuaded her parents that she should also attend the school. Her mother later said that "it was Jane's fault, if Cassandra was going to have her head cut off, Jane would insist on sharing her fate". There were family connections to Oxford,

so it was decided that the girls would go to school there. They were to live with and be taught by Mrs Cawley, the widow of the Principal of Brasenose College (and related by marriage to the girls). Joy suggested that as Jane Austen's father (who had himself been at St John's College in Oxford) took in pupils to train for Oxford entrance, there would have been up to 7 extra boys in the house alongside her brothers, so this might have made her keen to join her sister and cousin at school elsewhere.

Mrs Cawley's husband had left her "his chariot and three horses, furniture and household effects", but all his money went to his siblings. She decided, therefore, to relocate to Southampton in 1783. This was becoming a popular spa at the time, but just as Mrs Cawley and the girls moved there, thousands of troops returned to England from the Siege of Gibraltar. They were riddled with disease, especially typhus. The 3 girls all caught typhus, Jane Austen especially badly. However, Mrs Cawley did not tell the girls' parents, so Jane Cooper wrote to let her mother know, and the girls were moved away. Although the disease rarely killed children, adults were more susceptible, and sadly Mrs Cooper died of it soon afterwards.

Jane Cooper's father, Edward, became vicar of Sonning - Mrs Cooper and Mrs Austen having been born at nearby Harpsden. He wanted his daughter to be schooled nearby, and the Austen's were happy to do the same, having family living at Scarlett's at Hare Hatch in Wargrave who could provide a 'safety net'.



There were many small schools advertising in the Reading Mercury at that time. One appearing in the issue of January 12th 1781 was about a school for young ladies run by a Mrs Spencer, declaring that rumours the school was to close were unfounded. It was known as The Ladies Boarding School in the Forbury, and an advert was placed following Mrs Spencer's death that Sarah Latournelle, who had been principal assistant to Mrs Spencer for 27 years, had taken over the school. Sarah Hackitt, from London, had been taken on as a French teacher, even though she did speak French, and became Sarah Latournelle in order to have a French sounding name! The school was housed in the Abbey gateway in the Forbury, and an adjacent building, and it was here that the 3 girls were sent from July 1785 until December 1786.

An insight into life in the school at that time comes from the writing of a Mrs Sherwood who, as Mary Martha Butt, was a pupil there shortly after the time of the Austen girls. The somewhat old-fashioned Sarah Latournelle was said to be "only fit for the giving out of the clothes for the wash, making tea, ordering dinner and, doing the work of the housekeeper", but also showed a maternal instinct, serving toast and butter to girls used to having dry bread. The building where the girls – about 40 of them - slept was to one side of the gateway, dating from the 1600s, an advert describing the area as salubrious. Behind the school were gardens which the girls were allowed to walk around, which Mrs Sherwood said was one of the best things about the school, whilst from the top of a rampart embankment they could look down on the abbey ruins, or watch and listen to people nearby – maybe source material for the authoress.

Jane Austen, her sister and cousin, seemed to have enjoyed their time in the school. Amongst their visitors were Edward Austen and Edward Cooper, their 18 year old brothers, who took them out to dinner in a local inn – something that the Victorians later thought strange to have been allowed. In Reading's Market Place there were chances to purchase "all the useless things in the world that could not be done without", trinkets or freshly made biscuits, or to use the circulating library.

George Austen had paid either £36 or £37 per term for the girls schooling, using the profits from his farming to boost his salary, but when his finances became more difficult, the girls left at the end of 1786.

Apart from her novels, Jane Austen wrote her “History of England, by a partial, prejudicial and ignorant historian – there will be very few dates in this history” – which was apparently written when she was about 12, and, maybe, her experiences at school in Reading became the background to her description of Mrs Goddard’s school in her novel *Emma* – an “old-fashioned boarding-school, where girls might be sent, and scramble themselves into a little education without any danger of coming back prodigies”.

Joy also outlined the problems that ensued for the school after Sarah Latounelle’s time, resulting in its property being sold in 1794 to satisfy its creditors.
