



Overton Jane Austen Trails

Exploring Jane Austen's links to Overton and Overton in Jane Austen's time

“The Overton Scotchman has been kind enough to rid me of some of my money, in exchange for six shifts and four pair of stockings.”

Jane Austen's letter to her sister, 25th November, 1798

Jane Austen 1775 to 1817

Jane Austen, one of the world's best loved authors, was born in 1775 in Steventon, within walking distance of Overton.

During her 25 years living in this area, Jane wrote early versions of *Pride & Prejudice*, *Sense & Sensibility* and *Northanger Abbey*.



© National Portrait Gallery, London

Steventon

Jane's father, the Revd George Austen, was the rector at St Nicholas Church in Steventon and Jane and her family lived in the Rectory until 1801. Jane's brother, Edward, demolished the Rectory in 1823-4.



St Nicholas Church, Steventon ©Overton Photography Club

We can still see the fenced-off remains of the water pump which stood at the back of the house and the slope of the terraced lawn.

Jane's nephew, James Edward Austen-Leigh, believed the slope of the lawns behind Steventon Rectory must have been in her mind when she described her heroine in *Northanger Abbey*, Catherine Morland,

‘rolling down the green slope at the back of the house.’



The site of Steventon Rectory

Overton and the Austen family

Overton was described in the *Universal British Directory*, 1792-98 as a 'neat little town' and 'as ancient a borough as any in England.'

Jane's brother, James Austen, became curate at Overton in 1790 and lived in Overton Vicarage and then Court House, overlooking the village as it still does today.



Court House, Overton

In her memoir, James' daughter, Caroline Austen, describes how, after marrying Anne Mathew of Laverstoke in 1792,

‘He then left the very small vicarage house, where he had lived as a single man and took Court House, still in the parish.’



St Mary's Church and Court Farmhouse by Inigo Millard, 1785

‘The Austens would obviously have visited James while he was living at Overton whether at Overton Vicarage or Court House.’

Jane Austen's Country Life, by Deirdre Le Faye

In Jane Austen's time Overton was a busy place with its sheep markets, merchants, traders, coaching inns and post office.

All Jane and the Austen family's letters from Steventon were addressed 'Steventon near Overton' including, on 1st November 1797, Jane's father's letter to the publisher Thomas Cadell offering him *First Impressions* (later to become *Pride & Prejudice*).

The offer was declined by return of post.

Declined by Return of Post

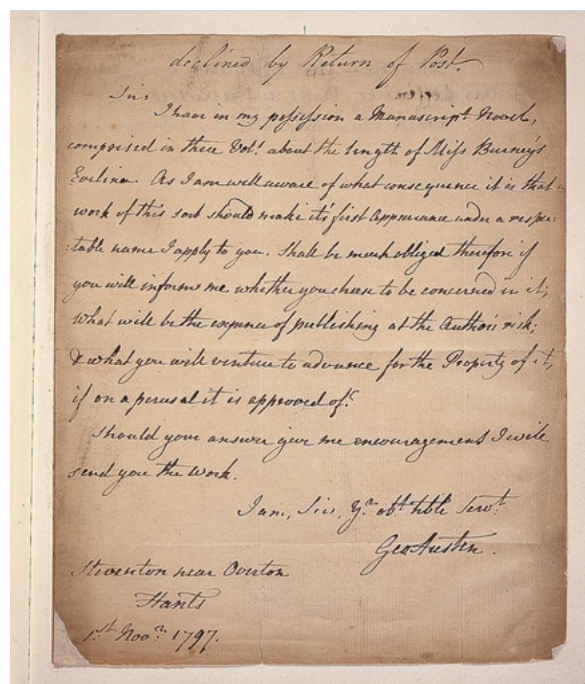
Sir,
I have in my possession a Manuscript novel, comprised in three Vols. about the length of Miss Burney's *Evelina*. As I am well aware of what consequence it is that a work of this sort should make its first appearance under a respectable name I apply to you. Shall be much obliged therefore if you will inform me whether you chuse to be concerned in it; what will be the expense of publishing at the author's risk; & what you will venture to advance for the Property of it, if on a perusal it is approved of?

Should your answer give me encouragement I will send you the work.

I am, Sir, yr, obt hble servant,
G Austen

Steventon near Overton
Hants

1st Nov 1797

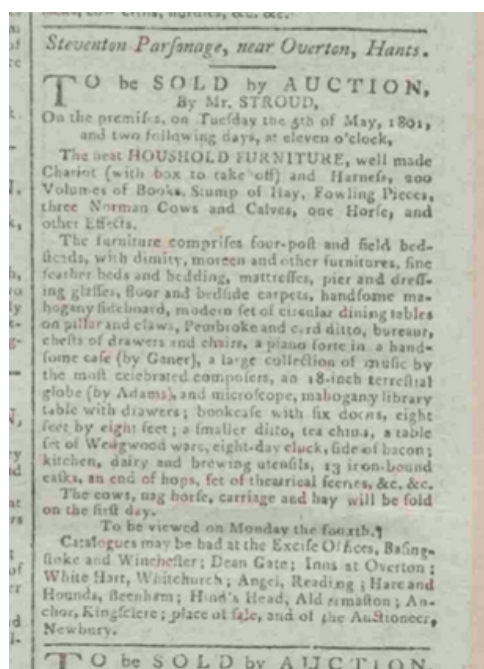


Letter from George Austen to Thomas Cadell, 1st November 1797 (MS 279) By permission of the President and Fellows of St John's College, Oxford

When the Austens left Steventon to move to Bath in 1801, the household goods from 'Steventon Parsonage, near Overton' were sold with catalogues available at all the 'Inns at Overton'. The list of items for sale included '200 Volumes of Books', 'a pianoforte' and 'a large collection of music by the most celebrated composers'.

Steventon Parsonage, near Overton, Hants.

TO be SOLD by AUCTION,
By Mr. STROUD,
On the premises, on Tuesday the 5th of May, 1801, And two following days, at eleven o'clock,
The neat HOUSEHOLD FURNITURE, well made Chariot (with box to take off) and Harness, 200 Volumes of Books, Stump of Hay, Fowling Pieces, Three Norman Cows and Calves, one Horse, and other Effects.
The furniture comprises four-post and field bedsteads, with dimity, moreen and other furnitures, fine feather beds and bedding, mattresses, pier and dressing glasses, floor and bedside carpets, handsome mahogany sideboard, modern set of circular dining tables on pillar and claws, Pembroke and card ditto, bureaux, chests of drawers and chairs, a piano forte in a handsome case (by Ganer), a large collection of music by the most celebrated composers, an 18-inch terrestrial globe (by Adams), and microscope, mahogany library table with drawers; bookcase with six doors, eight feet by eight feet; a smaller ditto, tea china, a table set of Wedgwood ware, eight-day clock, side of bacon; kitchen, dairy and brewing utensils, 13 iron-bound easks?, an end of hops, set of theatrical scenes, &c, &c.
The cows, nag horse, carriage and hay will be sold on the first day.
To be viewed on Monday the fourth.



Steventon Parsonage, near Overton hants, sale of household goods, Reading Mercury, Monday 27th April 1801

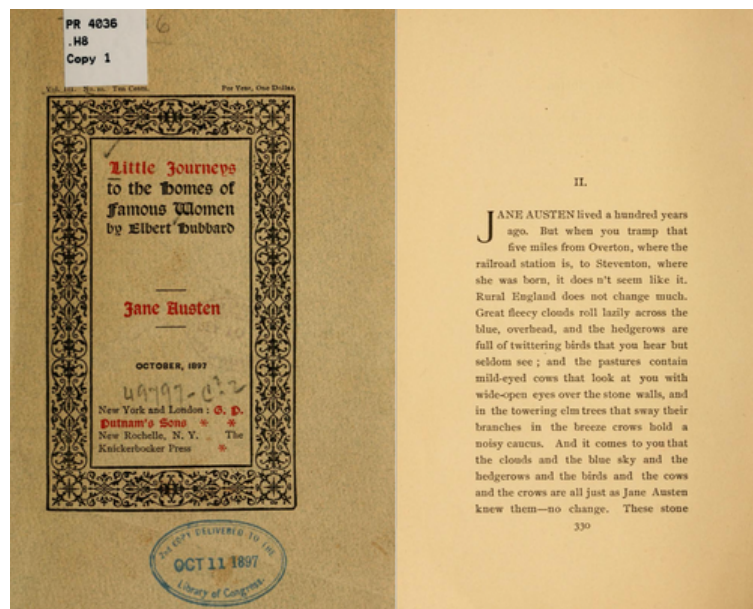
Catalogues may be had at the Excise Offices, Basingstoke and Winchester; Dean Gate; Inns at Overton; White Hart, Whitchurch; Angel, Reading; Hare and Hounds, Beenham; Hind's Head, Aldermaston; Anchor, Kingsclere; place of sale, and of the Auctioneer, Newbury.

Overton and Jane Austen Tourism

Visitors have been coming to Overton to explore the landscape and see the homes of the friends and family that influenced Jane Austen's early years and writing for over 100 years.

In 1897 the American travel-writer, Elbert Hubbard, featured the walk from Overton to Jane Austen's home at Steventon in *Little Journeys to the Homes of Famous Women*:

'Jane Austen lived a hundred years ago. But when you tramp that five miles from Overton, where the railroad station is, to Steventon, where she was born, it doesn't seem like it. Rural England doesn't change much. Great fleecy clouds roll lazily across the blue, overhead, and the hedgerows are full of twittering birds that you hear but seldom see; and the pastures contain mild-eyed cows that look at you with wide-open eyes over the stone walls, and in the towering elm trees that sway their branches in the breeze crows hold a noisy caucus. And it comes to you that the clouds and the blue sky and the hedgerows and the birds and the cows and the crows are all just as Jane Austen knew them...'



Little journeys to the homes of famous women by Elbert Hubbard, October 1897. Library of Congress [urn:oclc:record:1048120863](https://www.loc.gov/ead/oclc/record:1048120863)



The White Hart, Overton

In 1931 The White Hart was marketing itself as a Jane Austen destination:

JANE AUSTEN COUNTRY
Excellent accommodation and cuisine at **THE WHITE HART HOTEL**, Overton, Hants two miles from Steventon. (Overton 37.)



White Hart, Jane Austen advert, *The Times*, 20th March, 1931

Overton residents and Jane Austen

Listed amongst the 'principal inhabitants' of Overton in the *Universal British Directory*, 1792–1798 is John Lovett, Esq.

The following are the principal inhabitants :

GENTRY, &c. Burchil William, Gent. (F.) Flower Francis, Gent. (F.) Lovett John, Esq. (F.) VOL. IV. NO. 52.	Searle Edward, Gent. Streatwells Thomas, Esq. (F.) Troughton Brian, Esq. (F.) Watridge John, Gent. (F.)	A a Webb
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Universal British Directory, 1792–98

In a letter to her sister on 1st September 1796, Jane writes,

'I am glad to hear so good an account of Mr Limpley and J. Lovett.'

And on 5th September 1796,

'I hope John Lovett's accident will not prevent his attending the Ball, as you will otherwise be obliged to dance with Mr. Tinton the whole Evening.'

Although many of Jane Austen's letters were destroyed by her sister after her death, her 'beloved friend', Anne Lefroy of Ashe Parsonage, wrote frequently about Overton and its residents in her letters, giving us a picture of how connected Overton was to those living in the surrounding villages like Ashe and Steventon.

On 6th June 1801, Anne Lefroy describes a trip to Overton and bumping into James Austen on her return:

'...I drove the Donkey up the Lanes by Overton, as we returned we met J. Austen [James] who had been to call at Freefolk...'

On 12th June 1801 she is visiting the Lovetts in Overton,

'I drove my Donkey to Overton to call upon Miss Lovett whom I found in great distress as poor Amy is so bad that she cannot live many days. Mr. Lovett is in London & both John & his Sister really grieve as much as they did for their Mother two years ago -'



Ashe Parsonage, Ashe, home of Mrs Anne Lefroy and Revd George Lefroy



Jane Austen's donkey carriage, ©Jane Austen's House

Anne Lefroy's donkey carriage would have been similar to Jane Austen's which can be seen at Jane Austen's House in Chawton.

On 17th June 1801, Anne Lefroy dined with the Lovetts and refers to Sam Goddard (the one armed man at Overton) having died:

'Mr & Miss Lovett dined with us & Lord & Lady Portsmouth came to Tea. Poor old Misselbrook died yesterday & Sam Goddard (the one armed man at Overton) too is dead, Misselbrook was 84. I do not know what age Goddard was but he too was a very old man.'

In October 1801 Anne Lefroy is dining at 'James Austens' in Steventon with Jane and her sister Cassandra, who were visiting from Bath.

James Austen and his wife, Mary Lloyd, had moved to Steventon Rectory (also known as Steventon Parsonage) after Jane, her parents and her sister moved to Bath at the beginning of 1801.

'We dined at James Austens to take our leave of Mr. & Miss Austens who are to return to Bath on Monday next -'



Engraving of Steventon Rectory from James Edward Austen-Leigh's memoir of his aunt, Jane Austen

In April 1804, Anne Lefroy's son-in-law, Henry Rice, had even been considering taking Court House, Overton (former home of James Austen).

'...you enquire what I meant about the House at Overton. The Churchers have been about leaving Court House & Rice [Mrs Lefroy's son-in-law] had a strong inclination to take it.'

Gentlemen, like Jane's father, George Austen, from the villages surrounding Overton, would have attended meetings at Overton whether social dining clubs, magistrates meetings, charitable or other gatherings about issues which may affect the surrounding parishes. Anne Lefroy's husband, George Lefroy, regularly attended meetings and dining clubs in Overton.

In June 1801 Anne Lefroy writes to her son:

'Mr Lefroy went to an income tax meeting at Overton but returned to dinner. Mr James Austen dined here in the evening.'

And in April 1802:

'Miss Lyford, Miss Lovett & Lucy dined here & your father went with Rice & Holder to the Overton Club'

And in her very last letter before her untimely death in December 1804 Anne Lefroy wrote that her husband had again gone to a meeting in Overton: *'...he is today gone upon the poney to a meeting at Overton.'*

Quidhampton, Overton and Harris Wither

On December 2nd 1802, Harris Bigg Wither of Manydown House, a few miles from Steventon and Overton, proposed to Jane Austen whilst she and her sister were staying with the family. Jane accepted the proposal, but had a change of heart overnight and declined the offer the next day.

Two years later, in 1804, Harris Wither and his new wife stayed at Quidhampton in the manor of Overton whilst waiting for their house at Wimering to be ready.

In October 1804, Jane's friend, Anne Lefroy, wrote,

'Harris Wither who is to be married next month has borrowed Quidhampton of the St. Johns till his own house at Wimering is ready for his reception.'

On November 18th 1804, Anne Lefroy wrote,

'Harris Wither seems very happy & I think will be sorry to leave the quiet of Quidhampton for the bustle of the Regiment but perhaps he may get his leave of absence prolonged -'

And later that month,

'Harris Wither & his Wife are still at Quidhampton & seem very happy. I am to meet them at Rices tomorrow. Every one in the Neighbourhood seems pleased with the Bride -'

The death of Mrs Lefroy

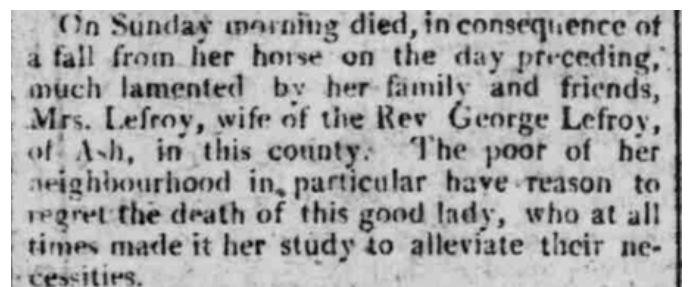
On 15th December 1804 Anne Lefroy fell from her horse at the top of Overton Hill after a trip to Overton to do some errands, dying the next day, which was Jane Austen's birthday.

Mrs Lefroy had bumped into James Austen in Overton, and in the 1870s Caroline Austen, James Austen's youngest daughter, described the circumstances of Mrs Lefroy's death in her *Reminiscences*:

'She was riding a very quiet horse, attended by a servant, as usual. My father saw her in Overton, and she observed the animal she rode was so stupid and lazy, she could scarcely make him canter. My father rode homeward, she staying to do some errands in Overton; next morning the news of her death reached Steventon. After getting to the top of Overton Hill, the horse seemed to be running away - it was not known whether anything had frightened him - the servant, unwisely, rode up to catch the bridle rein - missed his hold and the animal darted off faster. He could not give any clear account, but it was supposed that Mrs Lefroy in her terror, threw herself off, and fell heavily on the hard ground. She never spoke afterwards, and she died in a few hours.'

Reminiscences of Caroline Austen (1986), The Jane Austen Society

The 'death of this good lady' was widely reported in the newspapers of the time.



Hampshire Chronicle Monday 24th December 1804

in 1808 Jane Austen wrote her poem, *To the Memory of Mrs. Lefroy*, on the fourth anniversary of the death of her 'beloved friend'.



Site of Mrs Lefroy's accident today

In 1901 Constance Hill describes a visit to the site of Anne Lefroy's accident in her book *Jane Austen Her Homes and Her Friends*.

'To Jane such a friend must have been invaluable, but alas! she had the grief of losing her early in 1804, when Mrs. Lefroy was killed by a fall from her horse.'

The exact spot where the accident took place has been pointed out to us. It is where the narrow lane from Polehampton crosses the Overton Road.'

Overton Merchants and Traders

With grocers, fishmongers, tailors, corset-makers, textile sellers and shoe-makers listed amongst its many merchants, Overton residents, and those from surrounding parishes, including Steventon, would have been able to purchase most of their everyday needs in Overton.

On 25th November, 1798, Jane Austen wrote to her sister,

'The Overton Scotchman has been kind enough to rid me of some of my money, in exchange for six shifts and four pair of stockings.'

In Jane Austen's time a Scotchman may have been a pedlar, and in *The Times*, June 23rd 1791 John Irving, Mercer (textile seller) from Overton was described as a 'pedlar'.

MEETINGS OF CREDITORS AT GUILDHALL		
THIS DAY.		
John Invinge, Overton, pedlar	Meet	10
DIVIDENDS.		
Benjamin Hall, Snow-hill, cheesemonger		10
Joseph Gatte and William Waller, Wandsworth.		

186	O V E R T O N, HANTS.	
Webb Thomas, Gent. (F.)	Physic.	Martin George, Taylor
Brookman Robert, (F.) Apothecary	TRADERS, &c.	Morrell Edmund, Shoemaker
Allin John, (F.)		Nash William, (F.) Schoolmaster
Baker William, (F.) Grocer		Nash William, Parish-clerk
Bartelotte John, Victualler, (Greyhound)		Ofman James, Warrenter
Beale Joseph, (F.) Malster		Paice William, (F.) Victualler, (Red Lion)
Beazley John, New Inn		Pain Thomas, (F.) Blacksmith
Blackburn John, (F.) Carpenter		Palmer Thomas, Taylor
Brown Robert, Grocer		Paskell William, (F.)
Brown William, Farmer		Penton Joseph, Staymaker
Burges Thomas, Brickmaker		Pike Thomas, Fishmonger
Chamberlin William, (F.) Taylor		Pink John, Breches-maker
Cook George, Farmer		Pithoufe Thomas, (F.) Blacksmith
Cooper Thomas, Taylor		Purdue Robert, Bricklayer
Corps James, Fellmonger		Purdue John, Bricklayer
Corps John, Carpenter		Pyle William, Grocer
Craft John, Breches-maker		Pyle William, Butcher
Crimble James, (F.) Miller		Pyle Thomas, (F.) Gardener
Crockford James, Grocer		Rawlins John, Farmer
Cuffley Peter, (F.) Blacksmith		Reddall William, Blacksmith
Dicker John, Malster		Sawkins William, (F.) Carpenter
Farley William, Collar-maker		Small George, Farmer
Farmer Moses, (F.) Farmer		Small Thomas, (F.) Miller
Flower Francis, (F.) Farmer		Small Thomas, Malster
Gauntlet Gabriel, Shoemaker		Smith Thomas, Glazier
Hammerton David, Blacksmith		Spier Edward, Shoemaker
Hankin William, White Hart Inn		Sprent William, Schoolmaster
Hunt John, Clockmaker		Stephens John, Shoemaker
Hutchins George, Butcher		Thomas Elias, Shoemaker
Husband George, Staymaker		Toogood William, Grocer
Irving John, Mercer		Toogood John, (F.)
Kercher Anthony, Shoemaker		Tyler Thomas, (F.) Wheeler
Lamb George, (F.) Oil and Colour Man		Venn Thomas, Wheeler
Lambole George, Hair-dresser		Ward John, Farmer
Lyhood Gabriel, (F.)		Webb John, Miller
		Wiltshire Stephen, Shoemaker

Universal British Directory, 1792-98

There were at least four inns in Overton in Jane Austen's time (New Inn, White Hart, Red Lion and Greyhound), three of which are still in business today.

The New Inn, Jane Austen's post office



Artistic impression from floor plans of the New Inn by Donald Moss, from Overton and its National School by Alison M. Deveson

The New Inn and White Hart were described in the *Universal British Directory*, 1792-1798 as the 'two good inns' with the New Inn, which stood where the Community Centre is today, considered the 'principal'.

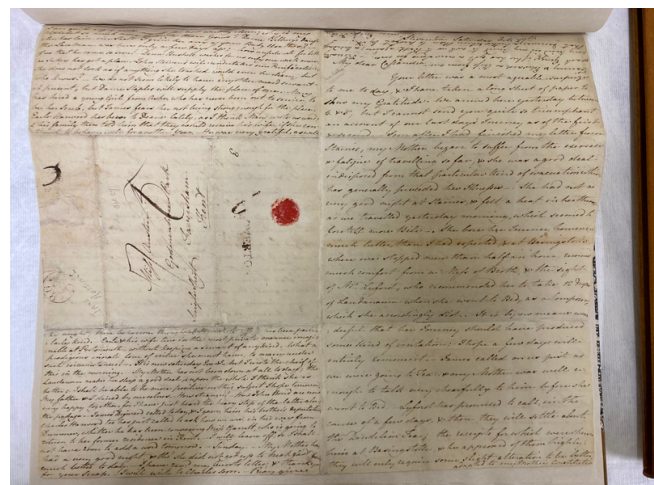
The New Inn was the local post office, and all Jane Austen's letters from Steventon are postmarked Overton.

From 1785 the mail coach service started carrying the post between London and Exeter and by 1798 the mail coach was stopping in Overton at four every morning and again on its return at half past ten at night.

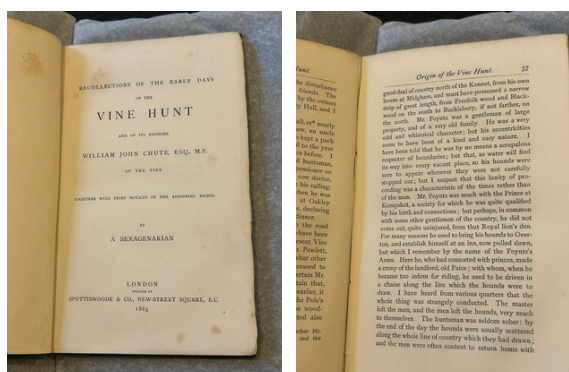
In January 1801 Jane Austen wrote to her sister from Steventon and thanked her for her letter but complained,

I should have been more grateful for it, if it had not been charged 8d. instead of 6d., which has given me the torment of writing to Mr Lambould on the occasion.'

From 1796 until his death in 1834 Mr George Lambole (Lambould) was the postmaster at Overton.



Overton postmark from Jane Austen letter, ©Jane Austen's House



Recollections of the Early Days of the Vyne Hunt (1865) by James Edward Austen-Leigh
©National Trust, The Vyne, Hampshire

The New Inn was also known as the Poyntz Arms, named for one of its regulars, William Poyntz, who was master of the Prince of Wales's hounds at the Kempshott Hunt.

Jane Austen's brother, James, occasionally hunted with the Prince of Wales and in 1865 his son, James Edward Austen-Leigh, recalled his memories of William Poyntz in his book *Recollections of the Early Days of the Vyne Hunt*.

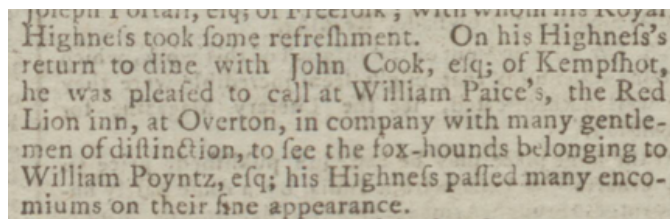
'For many seasons he used to bring his hounds to Overton, and establish himself at an inn, now pulled down, but which I remember by the name of the Poyntz's Arms. Here he, who had consorted with Princes, made a crony of the landlord, old Paice; with whom, when he became too infirm for riding, he used to be driven in a chaise along the line which the hounds were to draw.'

The Red Lion and the Prince of Wales

William Paice was also the landlord at the Red Lion, Overton, and in 1789 the *Reading Mercury* reported that the Prince of Wales stopped at the Red Lion whilst on a hunting trip to inspect William Poyntz's hounds.



King George IV as Prince Regent in Garter Robes (1816) by Sir Thomas Lawrence

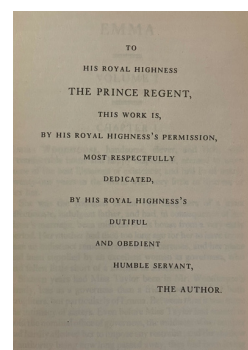


Reading Mercury, Monday 23 November, 1789

26 years later Jane Austen would dedicate her novel, *Emma*, to the Prince of Wales, by then Prince Regent, at his 'invitation'.

The Prince Regent's librarian, Mr Clarke, wrote to Jane on 16th November 1815,

'...in every new work your mind seems to increase its energy and powers of discrimination. The Regent has read & admired all your publications.'



Dedication to the Prince Regent in *Emma* by Jane Austen

The White Hart, the coaching inn



The White Hart, Overton c.1900 ©Overtonpictures.com

The White Hart was a bustling coaching inn in Jane Austen's time catering to the coaching traffic on the turnpiked London to Exeter road.

Along with the mail coach, the *Universal British Directory*, 1792-98, describes daily stagecoaches arriving at the White Hart and the New Inn bringing passengers from London to Taunton, Exeter and Salisbury and back again along with regular waggons to and from Exeter, Taunton and Frome.

Overton would have been a busy transport hub with at least 70 mail coaches, stagecoaches and waggons a week stopping to change horses.

The mail-coach from London to Exeter every day arrives at four in the morning, and returns from Exeter to London every night at half past ten.—The post-office opens at eight o'clock in the morning and shuts at nine at night.
The Mercury stage-coach, from the Swan-with-Two-Necks, Lad-lane, arrives every day at one o'clock, and returns at four in the morning.—The Taunton coach, from the Saracen's Head, every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, at one o'clock, and returns at three in the morning Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday.—Cook's Salisbury coach arrives every night at nine o'clock from Salisbury, and returns from London every morning at three.—Stedman's Salisbury coach, to the Bell and Crown, Holborn, passes through every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, at nine in the morning, and returns Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday, at half past twelve.
The Exeter waggon goes down and up five days in a week.—The Taunton twice a week.—The Frome waggon up Tuesday and down Friday.

Universal British Directory, 1792-98

Travelling by coach could be a dangerous business. In June 1801, Jane's friend, Anne Lefroy writes to her son,

'John Lovett is come home. He was overturned on his journey in the Taunton Coach, & has cut his hand, & hurt his head, but I hope not materially.'

Stagecoaches were the equivalent of public transport in Jane Austen's time and wealthier people often preferred to travel by hired or private 'post-chaise'.

In November 1800 Jane writes to her sister to describe a private post chaise being sent from her neighbour, James Holder of Ash Park,

'A sudden invitation & an own postchaise took us to Ash Park, to dine tete a tete with Mr Holder, Mr Gauntlett & James Digweed.'

In September 1796, the 20 year old Jane writes,

'As to the mode of our travelling to Town, I want to go in a Stage Coach, but Frank [Jane's brother] will not let me.'



The Taunton to London Coach, near Virginia Water, Surrey, with a plantation on the left, 1818, John Cordrey (1785-1825)

Overton, Jane Austen, the church and the clergy

Jane Austen's home and social world was immersed in the church – her father was rector at Steventon and at Deane, her brother, James Austen, was curate at Overton before becoming rector at Steventon and Jane lived in the Rectory in Steventon. Clergymen feature in all of Jane Austen's novels.

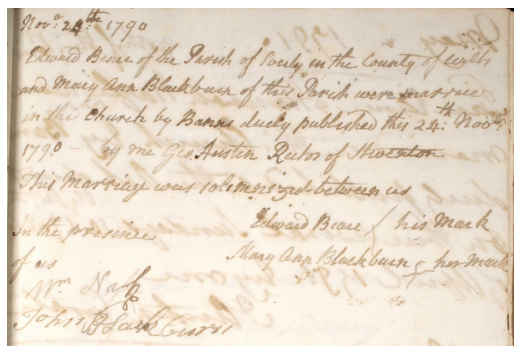
'A clergyman has nothing to do but be slovenly and selfish—read the newspaper, watch the weather, and quarrel with his wife. His curate does all the work, and the business of his own life is to dine.'

Mary Crawford in *Mansfield Park* by Jane Austen

Jane Austen may not have agreed with Mary Crawford in *Mansfield Park*, but she would have found plenty of inspiration for her clergymen characters in Overton and the villages that surrounded her home at Steventon.

St Mary's Church, Overton and the Austen family

As well as her curate brother, James Austen, her father, Revd George Austen, the rector of Steventon, occasionally also performed services in Overton.



On 24th November 1790 George Austen conducted the marriage of Edward Brace and Mary Ann Blackburn at St Mary's Church, Overton.

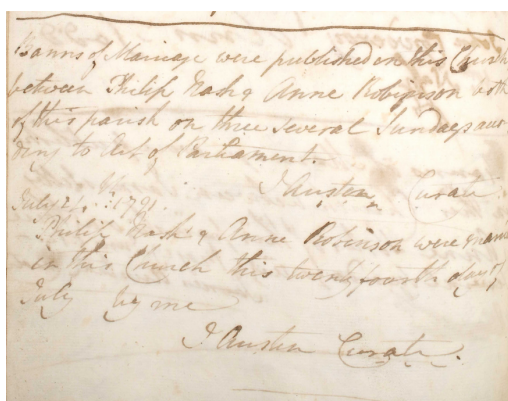


St Mary's Church, Overton

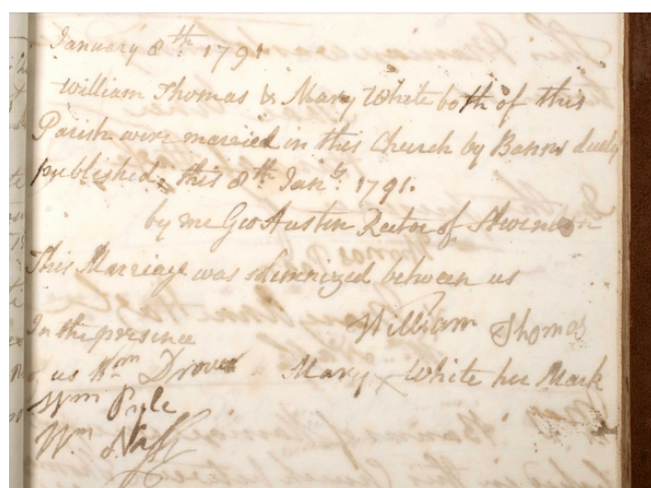
George Austen marriage, Overton Parish Register, 24th November 1790, Hampshire Records Office

And on 8th January 1791, George Austen married William Thomas and Mary White at St Mary's, Overton.

As curate, Jane's brother conducted services at St Mary's Overton, including the marriage of Philip Nash and Anne Robinson on 24th July 1791.



James Austen marriage, Overton Parish Register, 24th July 1791, Hampshire Records Office



George Austen marriage, Overton Parish Register, 8th January 1791, Hampshire Records Office

Even after leaving her home at Steventon, Jane kept up-to-date with the latest movements of Overton's clergy,

'And now it is said that Mr Peach (beautiful Wiseacre) wants to have the Curacy of Overton...'

Jane Austen's letter to her sister, 29th May 1811

Jane Austen and the rectors and vicars of Overton

In Jane Austen's time, rectors (also known as parsons) and vicars were different. The rector did not personally have to take services (although Jane Austen's father did take services), as long as he found a suitable substitute (a vicar or/and a curate).

The rector had the right to the income from the tithes and glebe land in his 'living'- in the case of Overton this was the Rectory and Parsonage of Overton, now known as Parsonage Farmhouse.

The rector would lease out the house and farmland and written into the lease was the condition that the farmers should provide board and lodging for the rector.



Parsonage Farmhouse, Overton

Rector of Overton, William Buller, his son Richard and Jane Austen

The rector at St Mary's Church, Overton from 1776 until his death in 1796 was William Buller.

William Buller sent his son, Richard, to George Austen's boarding school for boys at Steventon Rectory which he was running to supplement his rector's income.

Richard Buller (who Jane calls 'Buller' in her letters) was living with Jane and the Austen family from around 1790/91 to 1795. Jane and 'Buller' were close in age and became firm friends, continuing their correspondence up until his early death in 1806.

In January 1796, Richard Buller was back staying with the Austen family at Steventon when Jane Austen met Tom Lefroy, who was staying with his aunt, Anne Lefroy, at Ashe Parsonage and is thought to have broken Jane's heart over Christmas 1795/96.

'Our party to Ashe to-morrow night will consist of Edward Cooper, James (for a ball is nothing without him), Buller, who is now staying with us, & I...'

Jane Austen's letter to her sister, 14th to 15th January 1796

Vicar and Rector of Overton, William Harrison and Jane Austen

William Harrison was vicar at Overton from 1796 and then rector and vicar from 1817.

The Harrison family were in the social circle of Jane Austen and her family and Jane refers to William Harrison, his sister Mary Harrison, and their mother, Mrs Harrison, several times in her letters.

After the death of his first wife, Jane's brother, James, was considering marrying William's sister, Mary Harrison.

In December 1800 Jane visited Mary Harrison (by now married to Philip-Henry Poore) in Andover and wrote to her sister:

In September 1796, Jane writes to her sister,

'Let me know... which of the Marys will carry the day with my brother James.'

Jane is referring to Mary Harrison and Mary Lloyd. Mary Lloyd won the day!

'I spent an hour in Andover... - twenty minutes...fell to the lot of Mrs Poore & her mother, whom I was glad to see in good looks & spirits.... I mounted the highly-extolled Staircase & went into the elegant Drawing Room, which I fancy is now Mrs Harrison's apartment...'

In May 1811, Jane is still following the movements of the clergy in Overton and writes to her sister,

If you have not heard, it is very fit you should, that Mr Harrison has had the Living of Fareham given him by the Bishop, & is going to reside there...'

Jane Austen's friend, Anne Lefroy, was also friendly with the Harrison family, and on Sunday 21st March 1802, Anne's son-in-law, Henry Rice, took the service at St Mary's, Overton for Mr Harrison *'who is very unwell'*.

Overton and its mills

Overton is located on the River Test, known as the Anton in Jane Austen's time.

Described in the *Universal British Directory*, 1792-98 as,

'...a fine stream for trout, which rises in a marshy ground in the parish of Ashe, about a mile from Overton.'

In 1798 the River Test drove three corn mills and a large silk-mill in Overton.



The River Test at Polhampton, Overton

The Portal family and Jane Austen

Lynch Mill in Overton, (now called Southington Mill), was leased from the Bishop of Winchester to the Portal family, who owned the paper mill at nearby Laverstoke.

The Portals, who were amongst the grandest families in the area, were in the Austen's social circle, attending the same balls and even calling on the Austens at Steventon Rectory.

Jane Austen seems rather enamoured of the handsome Benjamin Portal, writing to her sister in January 1796,

We had a visit yesterday morning from Mr. Benjamin Portal, whose eyes are as handsome as ever.

And in June 1799 Jane writes from Bath,

'...Benjamin Portal is here. How charming that is! - I do not exactly know why, but the phrase followed so naturally that I could not help putting it down.'



Photograph of drawing of Laverstoke House by kind permission of Sir Jonathan and Lady Louisa Portal

In 1798 Henry Portal built the Palladian mansion, Laverstoke House, to the designs of the architect Joseph Bonomi.

In *Sense & Sensibility*, which Jane started writing in 1795 and continued revising through 1797/98, she refers to the very same architect, Bonomi.

'My friend Lord Courtland came to me the other day on purpose to ask my advice, and laid before me three different plans of Bonomi's. I was to decide on the best of them.'

Sense & Sensibility by Jane Austen

The Silk Mill and the Reverend James Fordyce

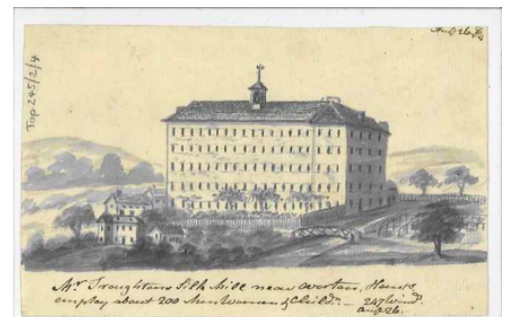
Overton Silk Mill was an imposing five storey mill built in 1769 by Thomas Streatwells and by 1790 it was being run by Bryan Troughton.

In 1786 the Revd James Fordyce visited the mill and saw 190 girls *'...happy children...in knowledge, virtue and piety'*

Jane Austen has the pompous Mr Collins read *Fordyce's Sermons* to the Bennet sisters in *Pride & Prejudice*.

In 1801 Jane Austen's friend, Anne Lefroy, describes a visit to the Silk Mill in a letter to her son.

'The two Miss Carletons Miss [Vyse] & Miss Speed came to spend the day in the morning we went first to the Silk & then to the Paper Mills'



Mr Troughton's Silk Mill, 1826, Hampshire Records Office TOP245/2/4

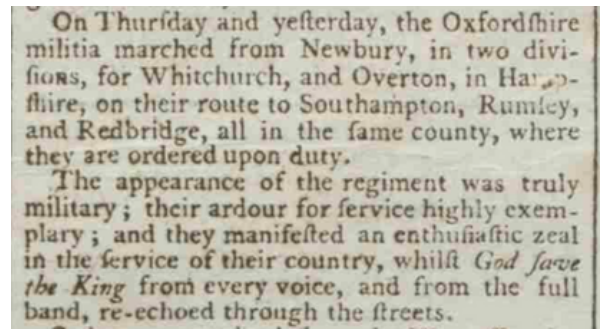
Overton, the militia and the wars

War formed the backdrop of most of Jane Austen's life.

The French Revolution, which started in 1789, led to war with Revolutionary France when Jane was 17, and lasted until 1802.

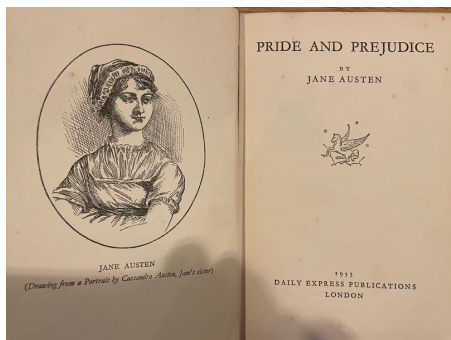
The Napoleonic Wars started in 1803 and lasted until November 1815 when Jane was almost 40 years old.

When war broke out with Revolutionary France in February 1793 the Oxfordshire militia marched to the south coast, stopping at Overton en route.



Oxfordshire militia march to Overton, Reading Mercury, Monday 25th February 1793

Jane's brother, Henry Austen, decided to join the Oxfordshire militia that had only recently marched within three miles of his Steventon home, receiving his commission on 8th April 1793.



Just three years later, in 1796, Jane Austen started writing *First Impressions*, which was to become *Pride & Prejudice*, in which Mr Wickham and the militia play such a central part.

'At present, indeed, they were well supplied both with news and happiness by the recent arrival of a militia regiment in the neighbourhood; it was to remain the whole winter, and Meryton was the head quarters.'

Pride & Prejudice by Jane Austen

There was a brief period of peace after the Treaty of Amiens was signed on 25th March 1802 which lasted until the start of the Napoleonic Wars in May 1803.

On 1st October 1801 the preliminary articles of the Treaty of Amiens were signed in London and celebrations broke out across the country. News of the Peace spread to Overton and on 3rd October 1801 Mrs Lefroy describes seeing Mr Lovett and Mr Troughton, the owner of Overton Silk Mill, in Overton giving money towards the celebrations.

'My dearest Edward this morning we borrowed Mr Austens Gig ...as we came thro' Overton we found [Price] going about to collect a subscription to make a bonfire illuminations &c on account of the peace. I have my half guinea with great pleasure & Mr Lovett, Mr Troughton etc did the same.'

On Monday 21st October 1805 the Royal Navy defeated Napoleon's forces at Trafalgar, removing the threat of invasion. In the battle Lord Nelson was killed.

On 5th November 1805 Lieutenant John Richards Lapenotiere stopped at Overton to change horses on his journey to London bringing the momentous news of the victory at Trafalgar and the death in action of Lord Nelson.

'Lapenotiere landed at Falmouth on Monday 4th November 1805 and set out 'express by post chaise' for London, following what is now The Trafalgar Way. He took some 37 hours to cover the 271 mile journey, changing horses 21 times. The 16th change was made at Overton in the early evening of 5th November at a cost of one pound thirteen shillings.'

From the Trafalgar Way Plaque, Overton

'Overton was where she did her shopping, where her oldest brother was curate, and was only three miles from her home at the Steventon Rectory.'

Jane Austen's Soldier Brother (1996) by Clive Caplan in the Jane Austen Society of North America journal:



Image courtesy of Overton Photographic Club - www.overtonphoto.co.uk

Trafalgar Way Plaque, Overton

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