

Talk to JASNA Calgary 16 March 2013 by Amber M. Adams

‘Only Eleven Guineas for the Tables’

The talk will inform the title and I shall come back to it at the end.

Weather

People who have visited Britain, or seen British shows on television, or even the new Bond film *Skyfall* know that in Britain it rains. British weather has a huge impact on activities – last summer, for example, the Duke of Edinburgh ended up in hospital after standing in the rain on the royal barge at the Queen’s Jubilee celebrations and missed all the rest of the fun.

Jane Austen’s letters and novels are full of remarks about the weather. She was on the road a lot: she loved making social calls, visits, long stays, trips to London. Some may think that is all her characters do in the novels. As we shall see, travelling was all quite an undertaking. Mr Woodhouse, in *Emma*, was right to be anxious. He knew that wet clothes and shoes made you ill.

The Rev Gilbert White (1720-93) published *The Natural History of Selborne* in 1788.¹ He was for much of his life curate at Selborne, about 4 miles from Chawton and 15 from Steventon. He recorded the weather, flora and fauna, mostly birds and gives us a fascinating account of the 18th century in this area of Hampshire.

White tells us of several great frosts in that century. January 1776, when Jane was one month old, was one of the worst: ‘Snow driving all the day – a prodigious mass overwhelmed all the works of men, drifting over the tops of the gates and filling the hollow lanes ... the narrow roads were filled above the tops of the hedges’ – two days later ‘the snow increased, all traffic was halted’² – Mr Woodhouse panicked at a slight fall. On 31 January the temperature dropped to 0° F (-18° C), rather unheard of in Hampshire. In March 1777, however, it was very hot and humid – but this weather was ‘succeeded and preceded by harsh frosts and ice and cutting winds’.

The weather (draughts, dampness) crept into houses: in *Persuasion* Admiral Croft says: ‘We do not like our lodgings here the worse, I can tell you, for putting us in mind of those we first had at North Yarmouth. The wind blows through one of the cupboards just in the same way’.³

On 9 November 1800 Jane was sitting in the dining room at Steventon and heard a crash – the elms were blown down, the ‘Maypole bearing the weathercock was broke in two’. She writes to Cassandra: ‘I am happy to add that no greater evil than the loss of the trees has been the consequence of the storm ... we grieve therefore in some comfort’.⁴

The state of the roads was deplorable – on 27 October 1798 Jane, returning to Steventon, writes to Cassandra: ‘We found the roads all the way from Staines most disgracefully dirty – Steventon Lane has its full share of it and I don’t know when I shall be able to get to Deane’.⁵ Steventon rectory lane was always bad, rutted, muddy and miry. In July 1768 when the Austen family moved from Deane rectory to Steventon rectory, Mrs Austen travelled on top of a feather bed on soft furnishings on the cart – and this was summer, and it was only two and a half miles.⁶

In towns there was no plumbing - all the detritus of daily living was in the roads. Pattens were worn to elevate the feet from the mess. These were wooden or metal platforms, strapped to the shoes with leather thongs, difficult to put on and to walk on. In *Persuasion* the 'ceaseless clink of pattens' in Bath is mentioned.⁷ Bath, built as a tourist destination, had elevated pavements (sidewalks), unusual at that time: in *Persuasion* Mary writes to Anne: 'What dreadful weather we have had! It may not be felt in Bath, with your nice pavements ...'.⁸ There is also an animated discussion about which lady had the thickest boots in *Persuasion* - the loser (or winner!) got to walk in the rain, but she was accompanied by a man! Mrs Allen in *Northanger Abbey*, after a shower in the morning says that it was 'too dirty for [her] to accompany her husband to the Pump-room'.⁹ She might have been splashed by passing traffic.

Ladies' clothes and bonnets became very dirty in wet conditions and could not be washed. Fabrics used in ladies' clothing were silks, cotton twill, velvet, wool. Muslin, for summer wear, is washable with care, but it shrinks. Jane does not discuss these problems – they were too commonplace. The pelisse (a coat, with or without sleeves, long or just above the hemline of the dress) came into fashion in the early 1800s and had fur or wool linings in winter. Jane and Cassandra paid 17/- each in 1811 for a London seamstress to make pelisses. (Conversion rates vary from CAD 946-77.7). Shoes and boots were made of fabric or leather and were not waterproof.

By 27 May 1817, Jane regarded herself as a 'very genteel, portable sort of an invalid'. She was brought to Winchester to see a doctor. She wrote to her nephew Edward to thank his parents (her brother James) for sending his carriage to take her. There were two outriders for her safety, Henry (Austen) and William Knight – but it rained almost all the way and Jane was very distressed that they got so wet.¹⁰

So storms, rain, winds, snow and frost all curtailed excursions and many of Jane's social outings and expected visits were rearranged.

Dangers – all sorts

The horse was the means of overland transport, and accidents: on 19 December 1798 Jane writes to Cassandra: 'James Digweed has had a very ugly cut ... [his horse which he was stabling] kicked a great hole in his head'.¹¹

Luggage went astray: on 24 October 1798 from a coaching inn in Dartford (on the way from Godmersham to Steventon), Jane writes: 'My writing and dressing boxes...' were misplaced and on their way to the West Indies. 'In my writing box was all my worldly wealth, £7'. A man and a horse were sent in pursuit of the chaise and 'in half an hour's time I had the pleasure of being as rich as ever'. On this trip her trunk 'nearly slipt off'.¹²

In January 1799 Jane wished to travel with Charles but 'the unpleasantness of returning home by myself deters me'.¹³ A woman by herself could be subject to all sorts of miseries on public transport – she could be targeted by beggars or thieves. Jane did not like travelling by public coach.

The roads were bad in these times before Macadam got as far as Hampshire. Wheels on vehicles were made of iron – there was little comfort on the bumpy roads. White says: '[roads] ... by the traffic of ages and the fretting of water ... look more like water courses than

roads'. The road at Alton was reduced 16 or 18 feet beneath the level of the fields; there were tangled roots and torrents rushing down the sides. 'These rugged gloomy scenes affright the ladies ... and make timid horsemen shudder', he says.¹⁴

There was the great danger of overturned carriages - Mr Woodhouse at the time of a light snow fall was happy that the party had two carriages: 'if *one* is blown over in the bleak part of the common field there will be the other at hand', he says.¹⁵ At the start of *Sanditon* a carriage is overturned going up a very rough lane, half rock, half sand. Jane could be very wicked – in 1799 she did not wish to visit the Cookes at Great Bookham (the Rev Samuel Cooke was her godfather). 'I dread the idea of going to Bookham ... I am not without hopes that something may happen to prevent [the visit] ... they talk of going to Bath too in the Spring, & perhaps they may be overturned in their way down & laid up for the summer'.¹⁶

In the 1995 BBC series of *Pride & Prejudice* we see Elizabeth Bennet skipping about the lanes and countryside by herself. For several reasons she would not have been doing this. It was unsafe. Jane only walked by herself once to Deane, only 2 and a half miles. The countryside not safe: it was a time of wars, the Irish Rebellion 1798, the French Revolutionary 1792-1802 & Napoleonic Wars 1803-15 – it was wartime for most of Jane's life. The Austens lived not far from the coast and there was the constant threat of invasion from France. White writes: 'we have two gangs or hordes of gypsies which infest the south and west of England'¹⁷ – and there were sailors, tradesmen, smugglers, poachers, vagrants and vagabonds – even a leper in Selborne. In *Emma* Miss Smith & Miss Bickerton were assailed by half a dozen children, a stout woman and a great boy. This was a most unpleasant incident – but Frank Churchill came to the rescue.¹⁸

On the landed estates (Chawton, Godmersham, Pemberley) – the game was preserved for the gentry to shoot. Since this was food, and there were many poor people, poaching could be very attractive. Mantraps (bow shaped iron grippers) and spring guns were set to deter and catch poachers. These were of course concealed and the injuries inflicted by them could be very severe. Mr Woodhouse only consented to Emma's marriage after a neighbour's turkey house had been robbed of all the birds; more people around him would keep him safe. The law at this time was very draconian - stealing game was a hanging offence.

There were dangers everywhere – to be safe required numbers of people, lots of men and some form of transport.

Conclusion

The Austens decided to sell their furniture for the move to Bath as it would all have been smashed to matchwood on the journey. Presumably the ladies did the same when they moved to Southampton – we hear of the building of new furniture in Southampton. On the 9 February 1807 Jane writes: 'Our Dressing-Table is constructing on the spot, out of a large Kitchen Table belonging to the House, for doing which we have the permission of Mr Husket Lord Lansdown's painter – domestic Painter I should call him, for he lives in the Castle – Domestic Chaplains have given way to this more necessary office, & I suppose whenever the Walls want no touching up, he is employed about my Lady's face'.¹⁹

But the amounts realised from the sale of their belongings and books were disappointing: on 12 May 1801 Jane writes: '61 Guineas & a half for the 3 Cows gives one some support under the blow of only Eleven Guineas for the tables'.²⁰

Acknowledgement: I thank Brian Wilks whose excellent book *Jane Austen* (see ref. 5 below) prompted me to explore this subject.

¹ Gilbert White, *The Natural History of Selborne* (1788), Penguin, 1977

² White, p. 257

³ Jane Austen, *Persuasion*, Penguin, 1994, ch. xviii, p. 169

⁴ Deirdre Le Faye, ed. *Jane Austen's Letters*, OUP, 1995, pp. 57-8

⁵ *Letters*, p. 17

⁶ Brian Wilks, *Jane Austen*, Hamlyn, 1978, p. 16

⁷ *Persuasion*, ch. xiv, p. 132

⁸ *Persuasion*, ch. xviii, p. 161

⁹ Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey*, Arcturus, 2010, p. 74

¹⁰ *Letters*, p. 342

¹¹ *Letters*, p. 27

¹² *Letters*, pp. 15, 16

¹³ *Letters*, p. 36

¹⁴ White, pp. 15-16

¹⁵ Jane Austen, *Emma*, Penguin, 1996, p. 105

¹⁶ *Letters*, p. 33

¹⁷ White, p. 179

¹⁸ *Emma*, p. 276

¹⁹ *Letters*, p. 119

²⁰ *Letters*, p. 84