

Visit to [Winchester](#) – 2008

Saturday September 20

Our room is on the third floor of the [Hermitage](#), a large Victorian house in a lovely garden of lawns and pink roses. The room is quite large, with a dresser, free-standing closet and a small, quite new bathroom. The house and room are so clean we wonder if this is a new B&B. We ate an excellent breakfast in the breakfast room which is a glass extension on the house. After our cereal and banana and orange juice, the son of the house served us a full English breakfast – lovely orange egg, large slice of bacon (not side bacon, full bacon), two sausages, cherry tomatoes and a mushroom cap, with toast and marmalade and good coffee. Fuel for the whole day!



We set off for town feeling almost knowledgeable about the route. Our aim was the tourist centre for the 11:00 City walking tour. After saying to ourselves we should go directly there, we got waylaid by taking photos of the West Gate. Plus, we went to the Cathedral Square and had to ask directions from the shop. So we were just in time to buy tickets.

Our guide, Barbara, had a German accent; she said she had lived in Winchester for thirty years – longer than in Germany. Our fellow walkers were two Canadians – a father from Vancouver and his son who is studying in London.

Our first stop was in the Abbey Garden to view from a distance the statue of [Alfred the Great](#), founder of the Royal Navy. Of course the Victorians who erected it had no idea what he looked like and they portrayed him raising his sword like a cross, in a manner that would have sliced his palm open. His widow (a rarity in itself when women often

died in childbirth) was “given” a nunnery to keep her busy as the abbess; but that building was completely destroyed by Henry VIII.

As we walked along, our guide gave us snippets of information. There have been settlements in the area from prehistoric times. The Romans had a city in this very location, and Roman walls and tunnels are found easily. They channeled the river, [Itchen](#), and relocated its course - later undone. The City is on a marsh, so there is water everywhere, now quite well channeled. Still this is why about 100 years ago [William Walker](#) spent six years as a diver shoring up the south-east wall of the Cathedral because it was sinking catastrophically. There are several small statues to him. Ironically, after surviving extremely dangerous work he died of the Spanish flu after WWI.



As we walked around the [Cathedral](#), Barbara pointed out the evidence of its 500 years of construction, seen in the changing architectural styles. Although originally Norman, it was updated to the Gothic with a high extension to the roof's pointed and by carving the heavy columns to look like many thinner ones. [Ken Follett's](#) *Pillars of the Earth* comes to mind.

Moving along up the Old High Street, Barbara pointed out the older buildings. The High Street used to be the sweeping Roman Road, but gradually some of the buildings encroached, giving it a “jog” halfway from the gate to the centre. This is similar to developments in Perugia seen on last year’s trip in Italy, except there the banks did the encroaching and the Roman Road was even grander.

The [Pentice](#) is now a building with three shops, but it used to be the woolen market. It is the only arcaded building (very low), done to keep the wool dry. In the corner near the Pentice is a now well-worn [statue](#) (Butter Cross) that marked the marketplace.

Through the West Gate and around a few buildings, we came to the Great Hall of [Castle](#) Winchester which has the [Round Table](#). As it happens, it is not really the Round Table

of the Knights. Historians believe it was built by King [Edward](#), as they know it dates to 1294 (carbon dating), and they think he probably made it for the wedding of his four children. [Henry VIII](#) painted it with his own likeness as if he were King [Arthur](#) and added all the names of the knights, presumably to bolster his dubious royal roots. In any case, it now hangs on the castle wall. Beside it is a smallish statue of [Victoria](#) to



commemorate her Jubilee. We ended our tour in the [museum](#) of the West Gate, mainly to climb to the roof and take pictures. The West Gate is one of two remaining gates of the original five in Winchester that are still celebrated on the crest (along with two lions denoting a royal city).

For lunch we ate at Pasty Presto, exactly beside the market statue. It sells many kinds of Cornish [pasties](#). Then we window-shopped our way back to the Tourist Bureau to buy tickets for the afternoon tour. There they were very helpful in giving us directions to Chawton, Jane Austen's house, and copying a bus schedule for us for Tuesday. The afternoon tour started again in the Abbey Garden, then moved along the River Itchen. The river is fast flowing and used to power several mills, one of which remains and is a flour mill run by the [National Trust](#). The banks are all channeled, at least in the City, and sluice gates prevent it from flooding. We saw ducks and a swan, and locals are permitted to fish for trout.

This led us to the playing field of a "Public" (private) school, now called [The Pilgrims' School](#) funded and refurbished by Americans in the Georgian style during the Victorian era. This afternoon's guide, named Ursula, was also a German and a long-time resident of Winchester. She told us that "public" schools gained that name because they were not monastic schools, that is, the public could attend them. Winchester [College](#) was older than and the model for [Oxford](#). It was established by the then [Bishop](#) of Winchester.

Along the way Ursula pointed out that most walls and many buildings were of [flint](#) stone, the only rock available. From a distance, cracked flint stones look like the inside

of a large oyster shells. Mixed in the Bishop's Wall and the City Wall were old tiles and bricks from Roman times. The English lost the knowledge of making these until the eighteenth century.

Following the walls we came to the [Kingsgate](#), the other remaining Gate. Inside the walls we entered the precinct of the Cathedral. There was a bit of repetition from the morning tour, but to the end this tour Ursula offered to take us through the Cathedral at a cost of L2, paid to the ticket booth, instead of the regular L4.



Up the central aisle of the Cathedral, the eye is drawn to the soaring columns lit by mainly (not all) stained glass windows. The stone is light grey so it looks light in itself. The huge stained glass window at the entrance (back of the main aisle) was shot out by soldiers (Cromwell). Because the locals couldn't figure out how to form the picture again, they put it back together helter-skelter, creating a modern abstract effect. Ursula described the history of many commemorative grave plaques and statues. Many bishops "rest" in their own tiny chapels built in the main aisle behind the altar. The Cathedral is the longest in Europe (175 m) after the Vatican.

Of course our special interest was in Jane Austen's grave; according to Ursula she was the last person to be buried beneath the Cathedral (1817) because of water problems. Her five brothers paid for her burial; the burial stone extols her virtues as a good person but does not mention her writing because she was not famous then. A hundred years later a large brass memorial plaque was erected on the wall near the grave under a stained-glass window dedicated to St. Augustine, a play on the name Austen. The [Jane Austen Society](#) pays to have fresh flowers always there.

Behind the main altar is a space newly dedicated to [Taizé](#) services. We learned later that this is a form of worship from the South of France that involves meditation,

kneeling, singing and more. A group of about seven new Russian-style icons are mounted in this "chapel".

We wanted to attend [Evensong](#) at 5:30. Tea was in order first, and we were so disloyal as to go to Starbucks on the High Street. We relaxed thoroughly on a soft couch while watching everyone else rush back and forth with their Saturday activities. We arrived again at the Cathedral with a minute to spare, only to be asked to wait for the processional by the men and boys [choir](#) and the priests. This brought us to the realization that the times posted were for the moment the priest starts the service. Anyway, we weren't the only ones who quietly slipped across to seats. The Evensong was held in a large chapel behind the main altar with the choir and some attendees in the choir stalls and the rest of us in chairs further along. The choir sang beautifully, with the boys singing in that special soprano, sound floating to the high ceiling.



With dusk falling, we walked up the High Street to a very old building named [God Begot House](#), containing a very new Italian restaurant called "ASK". Earlier Barbara had taken us upstairs to see the old ceiling and hammered beams taken from ships. Now we were seated on the main floor where we could watch the waiters literally running up and down the stairs, yet their service was charming, not hasty or rushed. We shared a starter of stuffed mushrooms served on a cast iron hot plate. Then Deirdre had risotto and I had penne and chicken in a pesto sauce. Delicious!

Sunday September 21

We enjoyed the Evensong choral music so much we got up early enough to attend the 9:30 Choral Matins. Yesterday after Evensong we asked the priest who was closing up the Cathedral yard about the five Sunday Services. He thought because this is a "high" day, St. Matthew day, that the Cathedral would be full. It wasn't. We sat fairly close to the altar and really enjoyed the singing. So much so that we also went to the Sung

Eucharist at 11:00, after a spell outside in the sun to warm up. The Cathedral is probably always chilly.

The Sung Eucharist featured the men's choir and the girls' [choir](#). The girls were dressed in long red coats, with their hair pulled back. Again the sound of their singing gained complexity through the reverberations from the architectural shapes. The priests' chanting also soared in a deeper richness. The sermon was given by the [Bishop](#) of Argyll and the Isles. When introduced he was described as "passionate"; he put a great deal of passion into his theme of [St. Matthew](#) moving from exclusion as a tax collector for the Romans to inclusion as a disciple, drawing forth the current need for a more inclusive Christian life. I wondered if he were really addressing the current heated controversy in the Anglican Church about the ordination of women and homosexuals. The [Bishop](#) of Basingstoke was the guest priest at the Choral Matins and he also spoke about St. Matthew, but he chose to speak about the moment of personal transformation when Matthew said "yes" to Jesus and left his former life in an instant. He referred to the painting by Caravaggio, which I must look at again.

Leaving the Cathedral about 12:30, we crossed the forecourt and the war-memorial square, then through the entry to the Cathedral shop to arrive at the café. We found a table in the sun and enjoyed sandwiches for lunch. With a couple of hours before Evensong at 3:30, we retraced some of our afternoon walking tour of yesterday, taking pictures. At Jane Austen's house (now a private residence), we were able to ask a fellow to take our picture after he did so for a woman in his party. Then we strolled along the river walk to an old mill. It is a [National Trust](#) property (costly entry fee), so we only looked at the shop. Then back to the Cathedral for more singing – preceded by more picture-taking, this time of the entire front of the Cathedral. Following the Evensong we looked through the gift shop, buying only a few post cards as photos, and a few things for the JASNA Calgary bazaar in January.



For an “early night” we returned to our B & B for a short while, then walked to the Roebuck, the pub nearest our hotel. Although they advertised roasts on their outdoor sign, the barman was baffled why we thought roast was still available. Roasts are for “Sunday lunch” in Britain. We were almost the only people there and settled for nice fish and chips with a microscopic amount of bright green “mushy peas”. Beer for me and shandy for Deidre.

Monday September 22



This morning we walked to the bus [station](#), near the [Guildhall](#) (City Hall) and the High Street. The Tourist Centre had given us a prepared sheet of instructions for going to Jane Austen’s house in the village of [Chawton](#). As the bus had relatively few people, we were able to sit up on the second deck right at the front for an unobscured view.

We had hardly left the City centre when a “character” (old drunk, he called himself later) used our accents as a pretext for starting to chat. He was quite funny and was admiring of us to travel “without our husbands”. When conversation flagged, he interrupted a young man across the aisle who was working on a laptop listening to music.

This young man really was interesting: a music student who wrote “mashups” and played in a band called [Second Monday](#) that tours Europe for accommodation, food and beer. He was very nice – politely interested in what we were doing, and he put away his electronics for the rest of the time we were on the bus. His name was James; the other fellow was John. John was going to the US embassy in Grosvenor Square in London to collect his American pension. He said he had lived in the US most of his life, used to be rich but lost all his money, and visited there once a year for a week, staying with his ex-wife!

When we got off the bus at our stop, name "Alton Butts", a family group of three offered to show us the way to Chawton since they were also going there (for a hike in the woods, as it happened). They helped us cross a very busy road and we tromped at a quick pace along what they told us was part of [St. Swithun's Way](#) from [Canterbury](#) to Winchester. As we entered Chawton we saw several [thatched](#) homes dating from the mid-sixteenth century – very well cared-for, with lovely flower gardens.



Jane Austen's [house](#) was at the far end of the village on the corner. At first we wandered in the garden taking pictures. At my suggestion we walked back along the street to take photos and video, because rain was forecast. Only then did we go in the house. The entrance fee was L 6.50 and we had a 2 for 1 coupon. At the person at the desk was clipping out our coupon, I mentioned we were members of [JASNA](#). "Oh", she said, "then you don't have to pay. Just sign our book". So we did.

The first room was the drawing room which is now the shop. Then we looked at quite a few artifacts in the dining room. Throughout the house most things belonged to the wealthier members of her family (two brothers, [Francis](#) and [Charles](#), were Admirals and another was adopted by wealthy cousins). They were obviously a close family. Several letters were displayed as photocopies and transcriptions. The most substantial Jane Austen artifact was a small, round side table on which she wrote several of her novels. After her early death it was given to a servant and recovered much later. Upstairs were the bedrooms and a display in each room of typical clothing. Most interesting was an explanation by the exhibit's couturier regarding the many steps she took to make the clothes authentic – including not using couture standards for essentially homemade dresses. The loveliest artifacts were a spider-web-fine large lace collar made by JA herself, a lace shawl she owned and an intricate quilt made by her mother, her sister and herself. The whole house was well laid out to give the feel of how she would have lived there on a daily basis. One room was devoted to the history of her five brothers. The hallway was lined with prints of the illustrations in *Pride and Prejudice*. And the end vestibule was devoted to a description of her death from (theoretically) either

[Addison's](#) disease or [lymphoma](#), and letters from that time. Cassandra wrote a particularly heartfelt letter.

Since it was after 2:00, we decided to have lunch before exploring the two out-buildings. The person at the desk suggested we might have to go into Alton, a half hour walk. Across the road was Cassandra's Tea Room, closed on Monday and Tuesday. The pub close-by was open, however, and the kitchen was still open. After confusion about which sandwich fillings were still available, Deidre had a crab-filled baguette and I had one with three thick slices of tender roast beef.

Fortified we returned to the last part of the display in a couple of out-buildings, some contextual displays on Jane Austen's time. We were glad that it hadn't rained yet, but it was chilly and dark. Although not initially part of our plan, we walked to the [church](#) down the road where Jane Austen's mother and sister are [buried](#). Our surprise was that they both lived long lives.

By this time we had to really hustle to catch the bus. Actually, we should have just stayed and looked round the church, because we missed the bus by about 3 minutes. So we stood by the busy road for 57 minutes enduring about 15 minutes of windblown rain. Once on the bus, the route was somewhat different and longer, driving to Winchester through newer parts of some towns. The bus was full of school kids going home.



So ... we were too late to go to Evensong again. However, we were still able to visit the [Public Library](#). It has been recently refurbished behind its "listed" historical front. There are two floors - part of the second is an art gallery. There was a beautiful, delicate silver mantilla. They let me take a few pictures of the library lay-out

and use the internet to contact our B & B in Bath about the possible arrival of an envelope for me. And, I asked the librarian about the location of the Wyckham Arms, a very old pub where we had considered staying.

Our option was to have dinner there instead. It was on Canon Street, outside the walls near the King's Gate. After a ten minute walk, we entered a corner door into a warm, dark, lively, extremely traditional pub. They showed us through to the restaurant, which was decorated with innumerable pub items from hundreds of years of business. The dinners were quite expensive, so we were self-indulgent in buying two appetizers and two desserts – all delicious. Roasted pigeon breast with black pudding, country pate with salad, sticky toffee pudding and "chocolate Nemesis".

