

56 Days: The Final Chapter of Jane Austen's Life

Jane Maxwell is a Cathedral Guide at Winchester with specialist knowledge of Jane Austen, and she is also a guide at Chawton House Library. In this article she has assembled some extracts of letters and writings, both from Jane and members of her family, which together tell the story of Jane's last days in Winchester.

On 24th May 1817 Jane Austen, accompanied by her sister Cassandra, departed from Chawton Cottage, and travelled to Winchester in the carriage of eldest brother James. They took up lodgings in the home of Mrs David, at No 8 College Street, the arrangements having been made by close friend Mrs Elizabeth Heathcote and her sister Miss Alethea Bigg. This was to be Jane's home for the last 56 days of her life. As her life drew to a close, her letters related the intimate details of her final struggle.



Fig 1 Jane Austen, rear view, by Cassandra Austen reproduced by kind permission of Belinda Austen

27th May 1817, Jane to nephew James Edward Austen:

"I know no better way my dearest Edward, of thanking you for your most affectionate concern for me during my illness, than by telling myself as soon as possible that I continue to get better. I will not boast of my handwriting; neither that, nor my face have yet recovered their proper beauty, but in other respects I am gaining strength very fast. I am now out of bed from 9 in the morning to 10 at night – upon the sofa t'is true, but I eat my meals with Aunt Cassandra in a rational way and can employ myself, and walk from one room to another. Mr Lyford¹ says he will cure me, and if he fails I shall draw up a memorial and lay it before the Dean² and Chapter, and have no doubt of redress from that pious learned and disinterested body.

"Our lodgings are very comfortable. We have a neat little drawing room with a bow-window overlooking Dr Gabell's³ garden. Thanks to the kindness of your father and mother in sending me their carriage, my journey hither on Saturday was performed with very little fatigue, and had it been a fine day I think I should have felt none, but it distressed me to see Uncle Henry and William Knight⁴ who kindly attended us on horseback, riding in the rain almost all the way.

"We see Mrs Heathcote every day, & William⁵ is to call upon us soon. God bless you my dear Edward. If ever you are ill, may you be as tenderly nursed as I have been, may the same blessed alleviations of anxious sympathizing friends be yours, & may you possess –

as I dare say you will – the greatest blessing of all, in the consciousness of not being unworthy of their love. I could not feel this.”

28th May, 1817 Jane to Mrs Frances Tilson⁶:

“My attendant is encouraging, and talks of making me quite well. I live chiefly on the sofa, but am allowed to a walk from one room to the other. I have been out once in a sedan chair, and am to repeat it, and be promoted to a wheel-chair as the weather serves. On this subject I will only say farther, that my dearest sister, my tender, watchful, indefatigable nurse, has not been made ill by her exertions. As to what I owe to her, and to the anxious affection of all my beloved family on this occasion, I can only cry over it, and pray to God to bless them more and more.”

This is an extract from Jane’s last known letter. The reference to her outing in a sedan chair is her last known excursion into the world, and although it is not recorded where she went, it is probable that she was carried the short distance round into the Cathedral Close to visit Mrs Heathcote. From this time on, the letters of her closest family members describe her remaining days.

12th June 1817, brother James to his son James Edward:

“I grieve to write that which you will grieve to read; but I must tell you that we can no longer flatter ourselves with the least hope of having your dear valuable Aunt Jane restored to us.



Fig 2 James Austen reproduced by kind permission of Jane Austen’s House Museum

“The symptoms which returned after the first four or five days at Winchester have never subsided, and Mr Lyford has candidly told us that her case is desperate..... It is some consolation to know that our poor invalid has hitherto felt no very severe pain – which is rather an extraordinary circumstance in her complaint. I saw her on Tuesday and found her much altered, but composed and cheerful. She is well aware of her situation... Lyford said he saw no sign of immediate dissolution, but added that with such a pulse it was impossible for any person to last long, and indeed no one can wish that – an easy departure from this to a better world is all that we can pray for.”

In her memoirs circa 1870, James’ daughter Caroline⁷ subsequently wrote:

“My Lyford could give no hope of recovery. He told my mother that the duration of the illness must be very uncertain, it might be lingering or it might, with equal probability come to a sudden close – and that he feared the last period, whenever it arrived, would be one of severe suffering – but this was mercifully ordered otherwise.

“My mother, after a little time, had joined her sisters-in-law to make it more cheerful for them, and also to take a share in the necessary attendance... The religious services most suitable to her (Aunt Jane’s) state were ministered to her, during this stage of her illness – sometimes by a brother.”

Two of them were clergymen⁸, and at Winchester she was within easy distance of both.

19th June 1817, brother Charles recorded:

“...Jane a little better. Saw her twice in the evening, for the last time in this world as I greatly fear, the doctor having no hope of her final recovery.”

18th July 1817, James’ wife, Mary wrote:

“Jane breathed her last half after four in the morning. Only Cassandra and I were with her; Henry came.”

20th July 1817, Cassandra, from College Street to niece Fanny Knight⁹:

“My dearest Fanny – doubly dear to me now for her dear sake whom we have lost...Since Tuesday evening when her complaint returned, there was a visible change, she slept more and much more comfortably, indeed during the last eight and forty hours she was more asleep than awake. Her looks altered and she fell away, but I perceived no material diminution of strength and tho’ I was then hopeless of a recovery I had no suspicion how rapidly my loss was approaching.

I have lost a treasure, such a sister, such a friend as never can have been surpassed. She was the sun of my life, the gilder of every pleasure, the soother of every sorrow, I had not a thought concealed from her, and it is as if I had lost a part of myself. I loved her only too well, not better than she deserved, but I am conscious that my affection for her made me sometimes unjust to and negligent of others, and I can acknowledge more than as a general principle, the justice of the hand that has struck this blow....



Fig 3 Fanny Knight reproduced by kind permission of Jane Austen’s House Museum

I thank God that I was able to attend her to the last, and amongst my many causes of self reproach I have not to add any wilful neglect of her comfort. She felt herself to be dying about an hour before she became tranquil and apparently unconscious. During that half hour was her struggle, poor soul! She said she could not tell us what she suffered, though she complained of little fixed pain. When I asked her if there was anything she wanted, her answer was she wanted nothing but death and some of her words were “God grant me patience, Pray for me, Oh pray for me”. Her voice was affected but as long as she spoke she was intelligible. I do not mean to break your heart my dearest Fanny by these particulars, I mean to afford you gratification whilst I am relieving my own feelings.

“Immediately after dinner on Thursday (17th July) I went into the town to do an errand which your dear Aunt was anxious about. I returned about a quarter before six and found her recovering from faintness and oppression, she got so well as to be able to give me a minute account of her seizure and when the clock struck 6 she was talking quietly to me. I cannot say how soon afterwards she was seized again with the same faintness, which was followed by the sufferings she could not describe, but Mr Lyford had been sent for, had applied something to give her ease and she was in a state of quiet insensibility by seven o’clock at the latest.

“From that time till half past breathe, she scarcely moved every reason to think with that her sufferings were head with every breath I sat close to her with a supporting her head, which six hours - fatigue then to Mrs J(ames) A(usten) for took it again and in about her last. I was able to close a great gratification to me There was nothing convulsed pain in her look, on the motion of her head she gave statue, and even in her coffin, air over her countenance, as contemplate. . .



Fig 4 Cassandra Austen reproduced by kind permission of Jane Austen’s House Museum

four when she ceased to a limb, so that we have with gratitude to the Almighty, over. A slight motion of the remained till almost the last. pillow in my lap to assist in was almost off the bed, for made me resign my place two hours and a half when I one hour more she breathed her eyes myself and it was to render these last services. or which gave the idea of contrary, but for the continual me the idea of a beautiful there is such a sweet serene is quite pleasant to

“The last sad ceremony is to take place on Thursday morning, her dear remains are to be deposited in the cathedral – it is a satisfaction to me to think that they are to lie in a building she admired so much – her precious soul I presume to hope reposes in a far superior mansion. May mine one day be reunited to it. Your dear Papa, your uncles Henry and Frank and Edward Austen instead of his father will attend, I hope they will none of them suffer lastingly from their pious exertions. The ceremony must be over before ten o’clock as the cathedral service begins at that hour, so that we shall be at home early in the day, for there will be nothing to keep us here afterwards...”

29th July 1817, Cassandra, from Chawton, to Fanny Knight

“... Thursday¹⁰ was not so dreadful a day to me as you imagined, there was so much necessary to be done that there was not time for additional misery. Everything was conducted with the greatest tranquillity, and but that I was determined I would see the last and therefore was upon the listen, I should not have known when they left the house. I watched the little mournful procession the length of the street and when it turned from my sight and I had lost her for ever – even then I was not overpowered, nor so much agitated as I am now in writing of it. Never was human being more sincerely mourned by those who attended her remains than was this dear creature...”

“...I do think of her in every variety of circumstance. In our happy hours of confidential intercourse, in the chearful family party, which she so ornamented, in her sick room, on her

death bed and as (I hope) an inhabitant of heaven. Oh if I may one day be reunited to her there!”

December 1817: brother Henry in his *Biographical Notice of the Author*



Fig 5 Jane Austen by Cassandra Austen, pencil and watercolour, circa 1810, NPG 3630 reproduced using creative commons licence detailed at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>

“Winchester Cathedral in the whole catalogue of its mighty dead does not contain the ashes of a brighter genius or a sincerer Christian.”

NOTES

1. Giles-King Lyford, 1764-1837, Surgeon in Ordinary at the County Hospital, Winchester, located in Parchment Street 1759-1868
2. Dean Thomas Rennell, 1805-1840, close friend of Mrs Heathcote
3. Dr Gabell, Headmaster of Winchester College

4. William Knight, son of brother Edward, who owned the Chawton and Godmersham estates
5. Mrs Heathcote, née Elizabeth Bigg of Manydown
Residing at the then No 11 The Close, demolished 1842
Widow of Rev'd William Heathcote, baronet's son of Hursley Park,
And sometime Prebendary of Winchester.
William, Mrs Heathcote's son, and close friend of James Edward Austen
6. Mrs Frances Tilson, wife of brother Henry's London banking partner
7. Caroline Austen started her Reminiscences in the 1870's, recording many of her mother, Mary Austen's, memories surrounding the time of Jane Austen's death
8. Two clergymen brothers: James, and Henry who was only very recently ordained; Cassandra was also getting comfort by attending the morning services in the cathedral
9. Fanny Knight, eldest daughter of brother Edward, home Godmersham, Kent
10. 24th July 1817 - a fine day
Jane was buried in the north nave aisle of Winchester Cathedral in an early, quiet and brief funeral. Attending were brothers Edward, Henry, Frank, and nephew James Edward who was deputising for his father James who had become too ill to attend. The service was conducted by Rev'd Thomas Watkins

SOURCES

Henry Austen, *Biographical Notice of The Author*, (Preface to *Persuasion* and *Northanger Abbey*), December 1817

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Claire Tomalin, *Jane Austen, A Life*, published by Vintage Books, 1999

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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