

*Brian Southam*

## ***Jane Austen beside the Seaside: An Introduction***

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Readers of Jane Austen will know that the sea held an important place in her life and imagination. For virtually the length of her writing career, from 1793 until her death in 1817, the safety of her brothers Francis and Charles, known to us appropriately as the “sailor brothers,” was a constant anxiety. The brothers served in many of the naval conflicts in the French wars from 1793 to 1815 and the war with America from 1812 to 1814, reporting on them closely in letters home. In particular, Jane attended closely to her brothers’ difficulties and successes in gaining promotion and securing prize money, the reward, so often elusive, that all sailors longed for. Moreover, through their marriages and friendships, the brothers provided the Austen family with an established place in naval society. These details and background she drew upon creatively in composing the naval areas of Mansfield Park and Persuasion. It was in this light that her first biographer, her nephew James Edward Austen-Leigh, could claim with some confidence that “with ships and sailors she felt herself at home” (18).

But the sea also carried an entirely different character, inoffensive and unthreatening, a positive blessing to mankind. This appraisal came with the medical view of the sea as therapeutic, a source of good health, and it was this understanding, together with a glimpse of its commercial possibilities, that gave birth to the seaside resort, a wholly British invention of the 1730s. The earliest of these resorts made a niche for themselves at the larger declining coastal towns, including Brighton, Margate, and Hastings in the south; Scarborough in the north; and Weymouth in the West Country. Between the 1750s and the 1780s, they rapidly outgrew their medical origins and developed as serious rivals to the established inland spas, matching them as social gathering grounds, complete with all the facilities for gentlemanly entertainment and recreation. In addition to medical treatment based upon the mineral-rich content of seawater and, later, the bracing tonic of sea air, visitors could expect to meet with polite company and find a wide range of amenities, including assembly rooms with regular balls and dances; gaming and card rooms; circulating libraries; coffee houses; fashionable shops; musical and theatrical performances; excursions to local beauty spots; and all the other diversions that an inland “watering place” could offer, “watering place” being the term that became used for seaside and spa resorts alike. With the closure of the Continent to British visitors during the war years, the existing resorts around the coast attracted an increasing number of visitors, and new resorts sprang up to meet a sharply growing demand.

In comparison with “Sailor Jane,”<sup>1</sup> the idea of “Seaside Jane” may strike many readers as frivolous and lightweight. And there need be no argument. By any scale of importance, the “sailor” author outweighs the writer of the “seaside.” True enough, resorts made an impact beyond the medical field, and for social historians their arrival is a landmark in the history of British leisure and recreation. Yet they are far from the heart of the national story, far from touching patriotic depths of feeling. In Richard II, John of Gaunt could proudly hold forth on the noble and envied insularity of “this sceptred isle, / . . . This blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England” (2.1). During the French wars, Shakespeare’s lines, much quoted, carried the defiant and boastful resonance of old. Along the French coast, Napoleon might threaten, his forces marshalled and his invasion fleet at the ready. But no crossing was made and the nation could once again celebrate the English Channel as the country’s “moat defensive,” a defining feature of this still “sceptred” isle. Resorts never have, nor ever will, inspire poetry of such nationalistic intent and bravura.

Nonetheless, at a lower key, in the realms of social comedy, and as an expression of the gentry society with which she was familiar, resorts held a particular fascination for Jane Austen, as did the sea, both in its quieter moods and in its grandeur and sublimity. In the juvenilia piece “The Three Sisters,” Mary Stanhope lays down marriage terms to her prospective husband. Among these is her allocation of the social calendar: “You must let me spend every Winter in Bath, every Spring in Town, Every Summer in taking some Tour, & every Autumn at a Watering Place” (MW 65). In this ordering, the Autumn resort visit is reduced to no more than a seasonal routine, quite unattached to any issues of health. This was Jane Austen at no more than fifteen, and in later life her satirical instincts remained as trenchantly expressed, often with a cutting edge. Of the pitiable state of Mrs. Bridges she wrote to her brother Francis: “They have been all the summer at Ramsgate, for her health, she is a poor Honey—the sort of woman who gives me the idea of being determined never to be well—& who likes her spasms & nervousness & the consequence they give her, better than anything else” (25 September 1813). Keeping Cassandra up-to-date with the latest news, she tells her of another mutual acquaintance, Edward Hussey: he “talks of fixing at Ramsgate.—Bad Taste!—He is very fond of the Sea however; some Taste in that—& some Judgement too in fixing on Ramsgate, as being by the Sea” (14 October 1813). And even serious advice to a nephew is delivered with a trace of a joke: “a little change of scene may be good for you, & Your Physicians I hope will order you to the Sea, or to a house by the side of a very considerable pond” (9 July 1816). Weymouth, a staid Hanoverian resort for many years patronized by George III, has all the appearance of having caught the biting edge of her contempt: “altogether a shocking place I perceive.” “Shocking” place it may be, but Jane Austen turns the joke upon herself. She has never been there: “without recommendation of any kind, & worthy only of being frequented by the inhabitants of Gloucester.—I am really very glad that we did not go there, & that Henry & Eliza saw nothing in it to make them feel differently” (14 September 1804).

The culmination of these impulses and interests is found in Sanditon, Jane Austen’s seaside story, a seventh novel which she began writing late in January 1817 and continued, working against time, until March, when she gave way to her final illness. Since Jane Austen left no plan for its continuation and outcome, we are left to make what we can of this precious fragment, its resolution a matter of guesswork. What we do have in these eleven completed chapters is Jane Austen’s amused, sometimes sardonic account of the changes taking place in a little fishing-village on the Sussex coast during the process of its transformation into a minor resort. The manuscript amounts to 23,500 words, perhaps a fifth of a full-scale work,<sup>2</sup> yet

enough to tell us that in portraying this corner of post-war society, her art was set in an intriguing new direction whose destination remains challenging and enigmatic.

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In this book, I have not attempted to recount the history of resorts from the 1730s onwards; an entertaining story, it has been often told. My objectives have been both simpler and more elusive. In the first place, I have tried to give a straightforward account of the resorts that the Austens visited. Yet there are serious gaps in our primary source, Jane Austen's correspondence. Unfortunately, such an instance arises here, a gap of over three years, extending from the end of May 1801 until mid-September 1804, leaving us with no letters to or from the resorts the Austens visited over these years: Sidmouth in 1801; Dawlish, Teignmouth, and south and mid-Wales in 1802; and Lyme Regis in 1803. Nor are there any other contemporary records to throw light on the family's seaside experiences. Hence we have no account by Jane Austen, or by anyone at all, vague or detailed, of the family's resort comings and goings during these three-and-a-half years, of the society they encountered, of how they occupied their time, and so on. This seems fated to remain an irreparable gap, such is the unlikelihood of any of the missing letters being found. Nonetheless, other contemporary sources convey some sense of what visitors found in these resorts and the pursuits they followed. The most available of these sources are guidebooks and tours; of these, I have quoted from none later than 1803 for Sidmouth, 1804 for Dawlish and Teignmouth, and 1805 for Lyme Regis, in the belief that these accounts hold good for the time that the Austen family was there.

The seaside also found a place in Jane Austen's private world. It held romantic memories, recollections of a friendship that began at one of the Devonshire resorts. The family biographies are discreet on the matter and only the barest details have come down to us—that during this stay and at an unidentified resort, she met a man living in the locality and that a serious and heartfelt friendship was formed. However, before they could meet again, this promising relationship was cut short by his death, an event that may stand behind the darker emotional coloration of the Lyme chapters of *Persuasion*, where the attachment, long-dormant, between Anne Elliot and Captain Wentworth sees the first light of rediscovery. In the circumstances, some conjecture may be permissible, and in chapter two I have offered a modest level of speculation.

Beyond the surviving letters is our primary evidence, the novels themselves. These divide neatly into three groups. The first includes the four novels—*Sense and Sensibility*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Mansfield Park*, and *Emma*. In these, although parts of the action take place at resorts, the story never takes the reader to the seaside itself, a location much talked of but unvisited by the narrative. A further chapter treats *Persuasion*, the sole completed novel in which we accompany the characters to Lyme Regis, a resort in the West Country that the Austens had visited. The final set of chapters is given to *Sanditon*, a pioneering work that stands as the first genuine resort novel in English literature. Fragment though it is, the manuscript gives rise to discussion ranging over many topics, from Jane Austen's late style to competing schools of economic thought.

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*Notes*

<sup>1</sup> I take this term from Paul Johnson's Sunday Telegraph review of Jane Austen and the Navy (7 Jan. 2001).

<sup>2</sup> For comparative word lengths, Persuasion is c. 88,000; Pride and Prejudice c. 122,000; and Emma c. 160,000.

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