

Brian Southam

## *Mansfield Park*

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Sir, - Among Janeites, house-hunting is a popular and innocent entertainment. But it can sometimes go adrift. So may I take this opportunity of nailing one particular canard – the identification of Cottesbrooke Hall, near Northampton, as the original for Mansfield Park?

Cottesbrooke is a fine Queen Anne country house, built c1702-13 and a delightful place to visit in its own right. But since there is no evidence that Jane Austen ever visited Northamptonshire, the identification with Mansfield Park is fanciful. Indeed, during the writing of *Mansfield Park*, knowing so little of the county, she had to enquire of her sister if “Northamptonshire is a county of Hedgerows”, a detail material to the story.

Moreover, Jane Austen describes Mansfield Park as “a spacious, modern-build house”. Whatever “modern-built” means in this context, by no stretch of the imagination could she be referring to architecture of the Queen Anne Period, and what she had in mind was almost certainly a Palladian-style building of the 1770s. It is very likely that the model was her brother Edward’s Kentish seat, Godmersham, which exactly fits her description of Mansfield Park.

Your readers may wonder why it is necessary to set out such elementary facts. But the canard - aired in these columns sixty years ago, in December 1931, by none less than Dr. R. W. Chapman – is in full flight again. Cottesbrooke has recently been opened to the public, and an article by Hugh Montgomery-Massingberd (in the *Weekend Telegraph* for September 28, 1991) is headed “Is This the Real Mansfield Park?” According to the 1992 edition of *Historic Houses, Castles and Gardens*, Cottesbrooke is “reputed to be the pattern for Jane Austen’s Mansfield Park”, a suggestion duly repeated in the current Newsletter of the Hampstead Centre of the National Trust. And doubtless it will appear elsewhere.