

The Whitchurch connection with Jane Austen – Vicky Jordan investigates

At a time when the 250th birthday of Jane Austen (*pictured, right*) is being celebrated in many local places including Reading, Overton, and the National Trust house The Vyne, I wondered if Hardwick House and the diaries of Caroline Lybbe Powys could provide Whitchurch on-Thames with a link to the author.



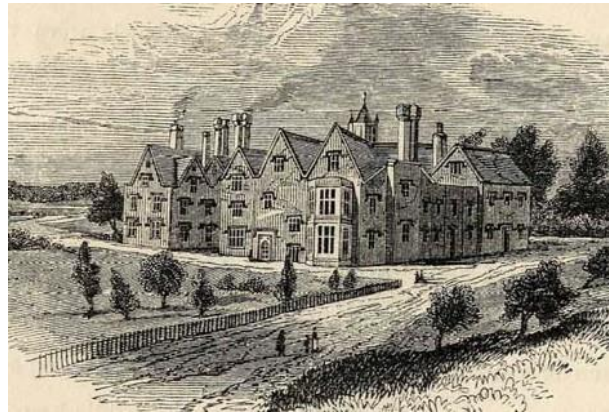
Anyone looking at the local history of Whitchurch in the Georgian and Regency period has a wonderful first-hand source in the diaries of Caroline Lybbe Powys, 1756-1808 (*pictured below*) edited by Emily J Climençon and published in 1899. The original manuscript is in the British Library, and includes travel journals, letters and diary entries as well as recipes and notes on improvements to Hardwick house and grounds. Most of the diary entries concern family matters and social events, though disappointingly very little about Whitchurch neighbours. She and her husband moved to Fawley rectory in 1784, the living of her brother in law, Reverend Thomas Powys, which allowed her son to take up residence in Hardwick (*pictured on next page, 1842 and recently*). In Fawley she was very much involved in the Henley social scene. Although the published diaries finish in 1808, she lived on until 1817.



I went to the British Library to see what the manuscript looked like and see if anything important had been left out of the printed version. By chance I was also reading a biography of Jane Austen and was struck by the occurrence of the same names, places and events in the two accounts. There were a couple of references in the manuscript to the Austins (sic) which do not appear in the published book. It soon became apparent that the two families were acquainted and connected by marriage.

Jane Austen's mother, Cassandra Leigh was brought up at Harpsden Rectory with her brother James and elder sister Jane. The Leighs had some wealthy/aristocratic relatives and the Austens always hoped that some of their money would "trickle down". It didn't. James did inherit money and changed his name to Leigh Perrot as a result. Jane married a wealthy clergyman, Rev Dr Edward Cooper who had inherited Phyllis Court estate in Henley. Cassandra married George Austen, a relatively poor clergyman with a parish at Steventon in Hampshire. The marriage ceremony was carried out at Walcot near Bath by none other than Reverend Tom Powys, who some had expected to marry Cassandra Leigh himself as they had been childhood friends.

The young men had met each other at Oxford University. Philip and Tom Powys, George Austen and Edward Cooper had all attended, as well as James Leigh and other sons of well to do families locally. Edward Cooper's sister Ann had married Ralph Cawley, who eventually became Master of Brasenose College.



Cassandra Austen and Caroline Lybbe Powys were of an age, being born in 1739 and 1738 respectively, and their daughters, Jane and Caroline Isabella were both born in 1775. It was this generation that cemented the connection when the son of Edward Cooper (also Edward Cooper) married Caroline Isabella in 1793, so the diarist Caroline became his mother in law.

It is well known that Cassandra and Jane Austen and their cousin Jane Cooper went to the school in the Abbey Gateway in Reading. They had been rescued from the school run by Mrs Crawley (Edward Cooper's sister) which had moved from Oxford to a disease ridden Southampton. All the girls were ill, but recovered. However, Jane's aunt Mrs Cooper died of typhus as a result. In 1798 further tragedy fell on the Cooper family when Jane's cousin, who had married a naval captain, Thomas Williams, was killed when a dray horse upset her carriage. The events are described in the diaries of Caroline Lybbe Powys. She also describes a visit to the Isle of Wight in the company of her husband and Dr Cooper and daughter Jane, weeks before his death in 1792.



With the marriage of the younger Edward Cooper to Caroline Isabella the links of the two families of Cooper and Lybbe Powys were cemented. Edward Cooper was Jane Austen's cousin, and the two families were also close. In fact, after the death of her mother Jane Cooper spent much time at Steventon with her cousins, and was married from there, with George Austen officiating. Unfortunately, Jane Austen found the young Edward increasingly

sanctimonious, and his views overly evangelical. His mother in law however had nothing but good to say about him! In 1799 there were visits to Harpsden Rectory by Mrs Austen and Jane and Cassandra as well as Caroline Lybbe Powys (not at the same time). The occasion was the removal of the Cooper family to Hamstall Ridware in Staffordshire, and there are descriptions of visits by both families in the subsequent years.

Further evidence of the closeness of the three families comes from the fact that Thomas Powys, Dean of Canterbury, was godfather to Henry Austen. Then, in 1794, Henry Austen in 1794 was godfather to Edward Cooper's first son, baptised at Harpsden.

When George Austen decided to retire the two girls went to Bath with their parents to live in a rented house. James Leigh Perrot (Mrs Austen's brother) was already living there and the Austens went to parties at their home

Caroline Lybbe Powys and Philip her husband went every year to Bath in the spring and met the Austens – recorded in the manuscript but not the printed book.

“Feb 8th 1802 Called on the Austins Feb 9th Called on the Leigh Perrots March 6th 1802 The Austins to tea and cards”

In conclusion, Whitchurch can claim a (very) distant connection to Jane Austen. Whereas there is no evidence that Jane Austen visited Hardwick, the families were certainly in touch with each other and Aunt Caroline and Jane Austen did meet each other in Bath.

All of which brings us to ask: What did Caroline Lybbe Powys think of her famous niece?

Alas, the diaries close in 1809 and *Sense and Sensibility* was not published until 1811. The more celebrated *Pride and Prejudice* followed in 1813, both anonymously. Although she lived until 1817 we don't know if Caroline Lybbe Powys ever read them.

And what did Jane Austen think of Aunt Caroline?

Notes:

- A photocopy of *Passages from the Diaries of Mrs Philip Lybbe Powys, of Hardwick House, Oxon. A.D. 1756-1808* is held by the History Society.
- Jane Austen's Letters, collected and edited by Deirdre Le Faye, Oxford University Press, are widely available in paperback.

Postscript:

Since I wrote this Peter Hawley has told me that a nephew of Jane Austen, Herbert Grey Austen (1815-1888) rented Whitchurch House in the late nineteenth century. He was the son of Jane Austen's brother Francis (who rose to become Admiral of the Fleet) and had a naval career. The 1881 census records him at Whitely Lodge, a 14-room villa in Reading, and he is buried in the Old Cemetery there.

Vicky Jordan, Whitchurch & Goring Heath History Society, June 2025