

A Short Introduction to Jane Austen and Stoneleigh Abbey



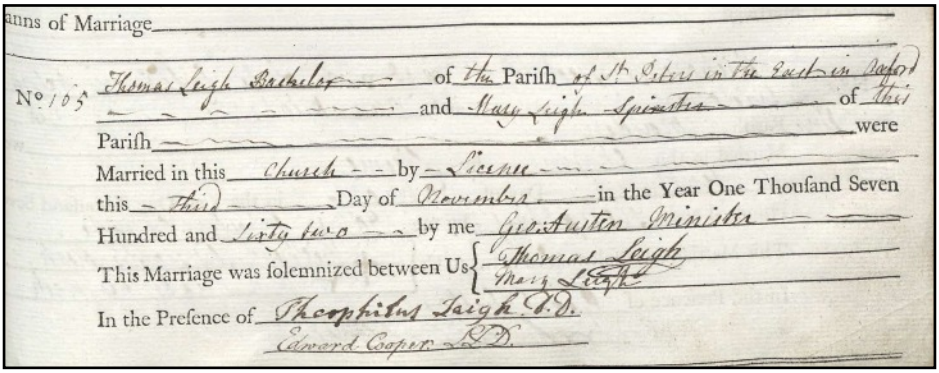
Sheila Woolf

Jane Austen. World-famous novelist, loved by so many readers for the past two centuries. A native of Hampshire, forever associated with that county, and with Bath. But with **Warwickshire,** too…and with Stoneleigh in particular. Surprised? Read on…

It is July 1806. Jane, her sister Cassandra and their mother (also called Cassandra) have been struggling to make ends meet since the Reverend George Austen, the breadwinner, died in January 1805. They have moved from one lodging to another in Bath, each time choosing less expensive accommodation. Finally they have decided to turn their backs on the city and stay with relatives in different parts of the country.

Thankfully they had several cousins who would provide temporary shelter. One of these was the Reverend Thomas Leigh, Rector of Adlestrop in Gloucestershire, a county about thirty miles south of Warwickshire .

Both he and his wife Mary were first cousins of Mrs Austen, who had been Miss Cassandra Leigh before her marriage. In fact, it was her husband the Reverend George Austen who had performed the marriage ceremony, in Oxford in 1762, of Thomas and Mary Leigh.


anns of Marriage

No 105 Thomas Leigh Batchelor of the Parish of St Peter in the East in Oxford
and Mary Leigh Spinster of this
Parish were
Married in this Church by Licence
this Third Day of November in the Year One Thousand Seven
Hundred and Sixty two by me Geo: Austen Minister
This Marriage was solemnized between Us { Thomas Leigh / Mary Leigh
In the Presence of Theophilus Leigh D.D.
Edward Cooper LL.D.

The marriage register entry of Thomas and Mary Leigh, the marriage conducted by George Austen, and witnessed by Theophilus Leigh and Edward Cooper

Jane had been born on December 16 1775. Her father George was the Rector of Steventon in Hampshire, who brought up a large family of eight children with his wife Cassandra nee Leigh. Six of these children were boys, and to supplement his income their father also took in boys as pupils; it must have been quite a chaotic, noisy household.

Mrs Austen was a practical woman who grew her own vegetables and managed the domestic economy well. The Austen boys made their way in the world as was customary for the time: some entered the church, some the navy. One son, Edward, was adopted by another family, the Knights, as their heir, and inherited grand houses at Godmersham in Kent and Chawton in Hampshire. Such arrangements seem odd today but were relatively common at the time, when propertied families failed to produce children of their own. Jane and her sister were well-educated but their progress in life would inevitably be determined by marriage. As neither did marry, their well-being would depend on the generosity - or otherwise - of the family. In 1806 the brothers were all following their various professions; Jane had not yet had any novels published, and there were few savings.

So that year the Austen ladies had an invitation to stay with Mrs Austen's cousin, the Reverend Thomas Leigh, in Adlestrop. Their intention was to travel on to Staffordshire, to stay with another cousin, the Reverend Edward Cooper, in Hamstall Ridware. The aforesaid "Uncle" Thomas, their mother's Adlestrop cousin, was always a favourite, and visited the girls when they boarded at the Abbey School in Reading, giving them pocket-money and taking them out to tea. They had stayed before at the rectory in Adlestrop, and he had visited them at Steventon. Childless himself, he was someone on whom many members of the family relied for help and advice. His name frequently appears as executor of family Wills, and he seems to have been a meticulous manager.

But just as the Austen ladies had set out on their round of family visits, the Reverend Thomas Leigh's world was to change forever.

He inherited the Stoneleigh estate in Warwickshire.

Why would a member of the clergy in Gloucestershire become heir to one of the most valuable estates in the country? Like so many of Jane Austen's own stories, a complicated inheritance situation had occurred.

In July 1806, at Stoneleigh Abbey, it was the end of an era. The lady of the house, the Honourable Mary Leigh, had died at her home in London and funeral arrangements had been made to inter her at Stoneleigh Church in Warwickshire, a hundred miles away from London.

Oxford Journal 12 July 1806

On Wednesday the 2nd instant died, at her house at Kensington, the Hon. Mary Leigh, of Stoneleigh Abbey, Warwickshire, the only surviving sister of the late Edward Lord Leigh. Of her it can with truth be said, that the great estates; which descended to her from her brother, were always dedicated to the best and noblest of purpose, the relief of the distressed, and the general good of her fellow creatures. And yesterday her remains passed in great funeral pomp through this city for Interment in the family vault at Stoneleigh.

Mary Leigh was single, the only sister of the late Edward, 5th Lord Leigh, who had died some twenty years before, in 1786. A brilliant young man – classical scholar, musician, mathematician – he had nevertheless been declared a "lunatic of unsound mind" in 1774, and was thus barred from marriage and children.



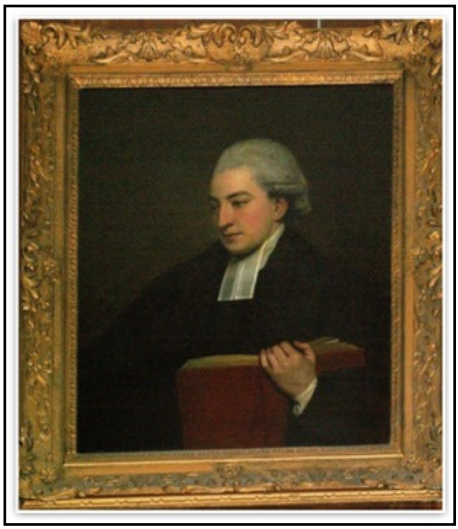


With Mary's death came the end of the Warwickshire line of the Leigh family. All that could be done was to look towards the Gloucestershire cousins for, as Edward had put it in his Will, "the first and nearest of my kindred, being male and of my name and blood."

The "nearest kindred" ought in fact to have been the eldest living cousin in the Gloucestershire branch, James Leigh. He had already died, however, in 1774. Nevertheless he had a son, James Henry, aged only nine when his father died. Now, admittedly, he was, in 1806, of an age to inherit, but his father's brother, the Reverend Thomas, was chosen as someone who would take on the Warwickshire estate as a life interest, managing it well until it would pass, at his death, to his nephew James Henry.



James Leigh of Adlestrop Park



portrait reputed to be the Reverend Thomas Leigh

One “contender” for the inheritance was Mrs Austen’s own brother, James Leigh-Perrot. As would happen to his nephew Edward Austen-Knight, he had taken on an “extra” surname as part of an inheritance deal with another family. Now he was claiming that he should inherit the Stoneleigh estate. After many legal wranglings he was bought out for a considerable sum. Remaining a very wealthy man, he held out the prospect to the Austen family that they would benefit by his Will after his wife’s death. Sadly for them, however, his wife lived to a great age, and money never came their way. Indeed Jane was so distressed by this that it affected her health. It seems that the only bequests the Austen ladies received from the Leighs were two brilliant centre diamond rings worth five guineas each, left to Cassandra and Jane by Mary Leigh.

And now cousin Thomas came to meet the lawyers, and take possession of Stoneleigh and its vast estate. The Austen ladies had already made their way from Bath to Adlestrop Rectory, and when he returned there later that month he suggested that they accompany him on his return to Stoneleigh in August. Warwickshire was midway between Gloucester-shire and Staffordshire, and so they would be half way en route for the Cooper cousins in Hamstall Ridware.

So here they were, arriving for the first time at Stoneleigh, to be shown round the most magnificent property they had ever visited, and it belonged to their own family! What excitement for a novelist…



It is unfortunate that no diary nor letters from Jane survive for this period, but happily Mrs Austen, seemingly bowled over by the house and its grounds, wrote a letter to her daughter-in-law Mary, Mrs James Austen, giving precise descriptions of its appearance. On arrival they had eaten:

fish venison and all manner of good things at a late hour, in a noble large parlour hung round with family pictures – everything is very grand & very fine & very large. The house is larger than I could have supposed .

She continued:

I expected to find everything about the place very fine and all that, but I had no idea of its being so beautiful. I had figured to myself long avenues dark rookeries and dismal yew trees, but here are no such melancholy things.
The Avon runs near the house amidst green meadows bounded by large and beautiful woods, full of delightful walks.

Obviously impressed by the embarrassment of riches in the house and gardens, she went on:

I do not fail to spend some time every day in the kitchen garden where the quantities of small fruits exceed anything you can form an idea of. The garden contains 5 acres and a half. The ponds supply excellent fish, the park excellent venison; there is also great plenty of pigeons, rabbits and all sorts of poultry, a delightful dairy where is made butter, good Warwickshire cheese and cream ditto. One man servant is called the baker, he does nothing but brew & bake. The quantity of casks in the strong beer cellar is beyond imagination.

Looking up at the house, she wrote:
I will now give you some idea of the inside of this vast house, first premising that there are 45 windows in front (which is quite strait with a flat roof) 15 in a row. You go up a considerable flight of steps (some offices are under the house) into a large hall.

Yet it's possible for us to suppose something of Jane's response to Stoneleigh. As the ladies were shown around the house they would have seen many portraits of their Leigh ancestors - portraits which still hang there today. Jane was an ardent supporter of the Royalist cause during the Civil War of a century and a half before, and she would no doubt have been thrilled to see her ancestor, Thomas the first Lord Leigh, created as such by King Charles I. The king had been travelling through the Midlands in 1642 and had wished, with his entourage of soldiers, to stay in Coventry. The city was, however, a Parliamentary stronghold, and its gates were closed against the king. He came to Stoneleigh and was sheltered by Thomas Leigh - who was rewarded for his hospitality by being created baron. A medallion to commemorate the stay was there for visitors to see - as indeed was a portrait of Bonnie Prince Charlie, the Young Pretender, along with a lock of his auburn hair…all suggesting a strong Leigh adherence to the Stuart cause.



Thomas, 1st Lord Leigh

Mrs Austen could be rightly proud of her illustrious Leigh ancestry, which could be traced right back to Sir Piers Leigh who supported King Richard II and who was executed as a result by Richard's successor, King Henry IV. Another Piers had carried the banner at Agincourt in 1415. Portrayed at Stoneleigh is their direct descendant Sir Thomas Leigh who, with his wife Alice, bought Stoneleigh Abbey and its estates in the sixteenth century after the Dissolution of the Monasteries. They had built their great country estate here, and it had been magnificently updated in the early eighteenth century , its final alterations having been made by the talented Edward, fifth Lord Leigh, before his "lunacy" put a stop to everything.





Sir Thomas Leigh, Lord Mayor of London 1558 and his wife Alice, from whom both Gloucestershire and Warwickshire lines are descended.

Perhaps of greatest interest to the ladies would have been the Gloucestershire portraits - of Mrs Austen's grandparents and great-grandparents, and even, the grandest of all, the Duke and Duchess of Chandos. The Duke's sister was Mary Brydges, Mrs Austen's grandmother, and his wife the duchess was clearly a family favourite: her name was Cassandra Willoughby, and she was a writer.

Maybe this is where the influence of Jane Austen's maternal family, the Leighs, is of most significance to those who study her novels. Austen's plot-lines frequently turn on inheritance situations, and the Leigh story has plenty such complications - who would inherit Stoneleigh had been discussed throughout the family since the 1770s, when Edward was declared a lunatic. Writers must get their characters' names from somewhere, too, and the Duchess of Chandos' maiden name of

Willoughby might be the origin of the name used in *Sense and Sensibility*. (Incidentally, the name Cassandra was used for at least seven girls in the extended Leigh family, perhaps as a tribute to their aristocratic namesake.)



Cassandra Willoughby, Duchess of Chandos



James, 1st Duke of Chandos

Another room at Stoneleigh contains portraits of a distant branch of the family - the Wentworths, Watsons and Fitzwilliams of Wentworth Woodhouse, in Yorkshire. All three names are familiar to devotees of Austen - Fitzwilliam, of course, being Mr Darcy's Christian name!

As for Wentworth, a lovely portrait hangs in the Blue Parlour today, of Elizabeth Wentworth, known to Jane and the family simply as "Aunt Betty", who had, according to family legend, secretly married a young lieutenant of that name, only revealing the fact when he had been promoted to Lieutenant General. Elizabeth was well-known to Jane, living to a great age and dying in 1788; perhaps she was the prototype for Anne Elliot in *Persuasion,* who similarly fell in love with a Wentworth, though she was persuaded to give him up at first?



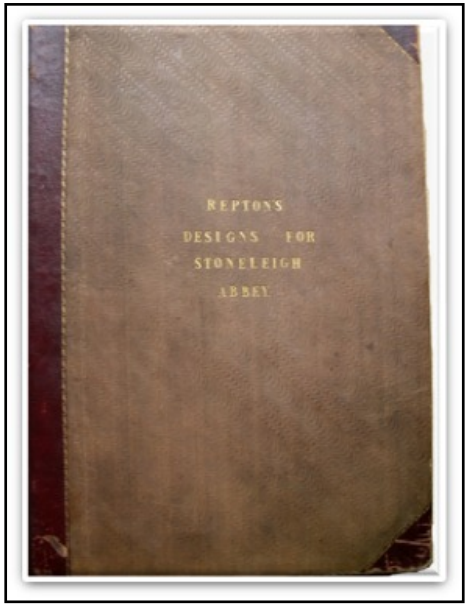
Elizabeth Wentworth - inspiration for Anne Elliot?

At Stoneleigh, too, is a pair of pictures showing nine siblings altogether. They are Mrs Austen's father Thomas with all eight of his siblings, painted in their childhood. What fun for her to see such close relatives among the portraits of dukes and barons!



One of a pair of pictures , with Thomas Leigh, Jane's grandfather, far right

In 1806 Jane had not been published and was yet to write *Emma*, *Persuasion* and *Mansfield Park*. Possibly she revised earlier novels too - many have suggested that *Northanger Abbey* has more than a touch of Stoneleigh in some of its descriptions. Most critics agree, however, that Stoneleigh had a great impact when Jane was writing *Mansfield Park*. The countryside, as the Mansfield party travels to Sotherton, is very similar to that at Stoneleigh. There is reference,too, in the story, to the landscape designer Humphry Repton, who was to make alterations at Sotherton, the home of the Rushton family. Jane would have been very familiar in real life with this popular garden designer, as he had worked extensively at Adlestrop and the Reverend Thomas Leigh was to engage him to produce new designs for Stoneleigh. These can still be seen at the Abbey in Repton's "Red Book", a rare and beautiful book comprising many ingenious designs, illustrated via delicate watercolour.



Mr Rushworth, in *Mansfield Park*, says *Smith's place is the admiration of all the country and it was a mere nothing before Mr Repton took it in. I shall have Repton.*



Garden designer Humphry Repton and a page from his Red Book for Stoneleigh Abbey



In particular the chapel at Sotherton is often seen as being modelled on the one at Stoneleigh. Fanny Price, the heroine, rather disappointed at the plainness of the chapel which she had expected to look much more Gothic, with ancestral banners and tombs, notes the mahogany and the crimson velvet cushions appearing over the ledge of the family balcony.

Standing today in the main body of Stoneleigh's chapel, one looks up to see those same crimson velvet cushions on the edge of the family gallery's balcony.



Fanny's imagination had prepared her for something grander than a mere spacious, oblong room fitted up for the purposes of devotion, with nothing more striking nor more solemn than the profusion of mahogany and the crimson velvet cushions appearing over the ledge of the family gallery above……

The Austen ladies stayed at Stoneleigh for nine days. They then travelled north to Staffordshire, as arranged.

In 2016, when researching the history of Stoneleigh Church, just a mile from the Abbey, the Stoneleigh History Society was asked whether Jane Austen might ever had worshipped there. After all, those nine days must have included at least one Sunday, and their host was himself a clergyman. No evidence of this has yet been found, but when trying to decipher the names on now-badly-worn memorial slabs in the nave of the church, a familiar name was discovered:one Elizabeth Bennet! Had Jane indeed attended Stoneleigh Church, or at least visited it, and seen there the name inscribed of one who had died in 1750?

Who knows?

What is undoubtedly true is that the Leigh family's stories, and the visit made to Stoneleigh in 1806, played an influential part in the imaginative processes of Jane Austen.

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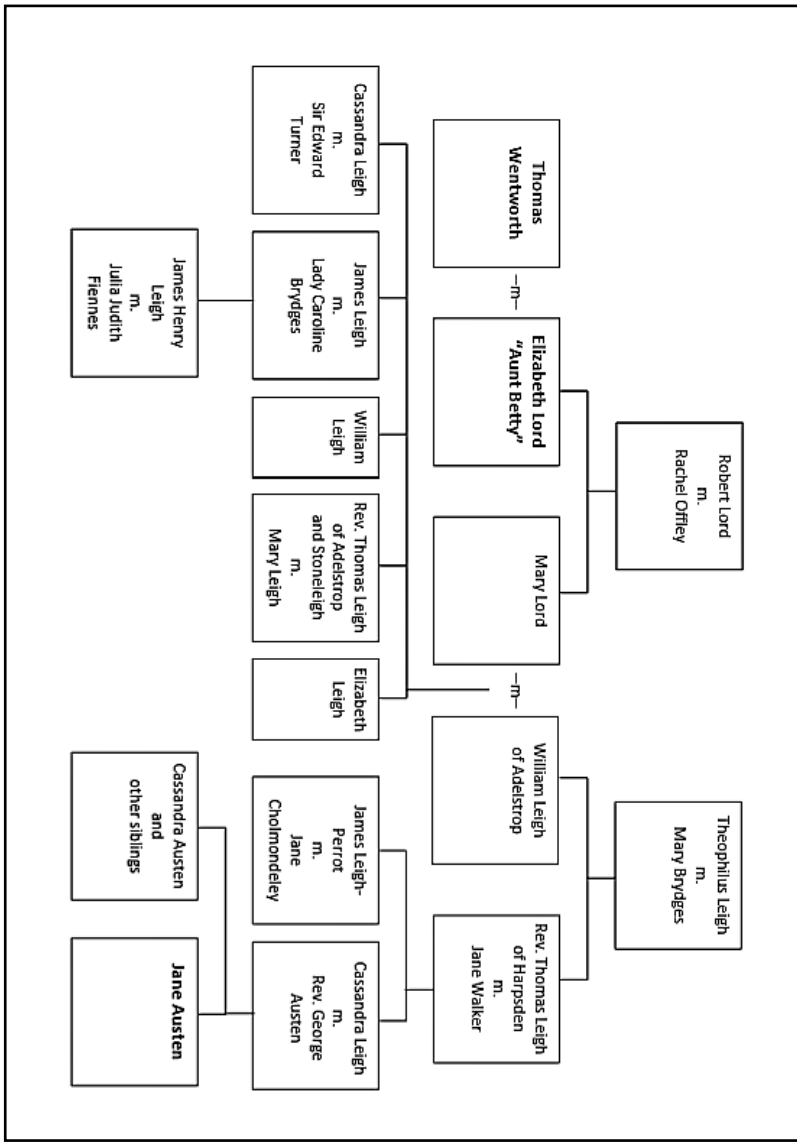
The Real Jane Austen - *Paula Byrne* Harper Press 2013

Jane Austen and Adlestrop - *Victoria Huxley* Windrush 2013

Jane Austen at Home - *Lucy Worsley* Hodder & Stoughton 2017

The Story of Elizabeth Wentworth - Sheila Woolf 2018

and visiting www.stoneleighabbey.org



Jane Austen and the Leighs, showing the "Aunt Betty Wentworth" relationship