

A brief introduction to Chawton House and Jane Austen's House; two worlds which Jane Austen brought together.

Towards the end of the eighteenth century, Thomas and Catherine Knight needed a suitable boy to adopt and make their heir. He would inherit their Chawton estate which had been in the Knight family for over two hundred years, and the more recently acquired (even grander!) Godmersham Park estate. The childless couple eventually chose Edward Austen, third son of the vicar of Steventon, George Austen. George was a distant relative of Thomas', and his parish lay within the Knight estate, a few miles from Chawton itself. The Wellings silhouette of 1783 commemorates young Edward's adoption. It shows Edward (in the middle) being presented to Catherine Knight by his father while Thomas Knight and his sister watch (from the right).

Much later, the mature Edward was able to offer his by then widowed mother and two sisters a permanent home on one of his estates. In 1809, they chose to live in Chawton village and their house, one of many properties on the Chawton estate, became the Austen women's simple yet beloved dwelling. They were also welcome at the great manor house under a mile away, where Edward or his brothers or well-born tenants might be in temporary residence from time to time. They also often visited the Godmersham Park Estate, where Edward and his family resided for the majority of each year.

The Chawton Manor House is now a library dedicated to the study of work written mainly by English women between 1600 and 1830. The tenanted cottage where Jane Austen lived is now The Jane Austen House museum. Both these worlds – that of land-owning wealth (the manor house) and that of genteel poverty (the cottage) were astutely observed by Jane, the younger of Edward's two unmarried sisters. She was a little-known writer back then, but she is now widely acknowledged as the second most read author in English after Shakespeare.