

Jane Austen & Adlestrop

HER OTHER FAMILY

Victoria Huxley is an editor and publisher who has lived in Adlestrop for over twenty-five years. She is the co-author of *World Heritage Sites of Great Britain and Ireland*.

Jane Austen & Adlestrop

HER OTHER FAMILY

A new perspective on
Jane Austen and her novels

Victoria Huxley



Windrush Publishing
Gloucestershire

**To Geoffrey, who first showed me the village and introduced me to
country life**

First published in Great Britain in 2013 by
WINDRUSH PUBLISHING SERVICES
Windrush House, 12 Main Street
Adlestrop, Moreton in Marsh
Gloucestershire GL56 0UN
01608 659328

Copyright © Victoria Huxley, 2013
victoriama.huxley@gmail.com

The moral right of Victoria Huxley to be identified as copyright holder of this
work has been asserted by her in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and
Patents Act 1988

ISBN 978-0-9575150-2-4
E-book available

All rights reserved

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Front cover: Portrait of Jane Austen by Cassandra Austen ©National Portrait
Gallery, London and a 1831 engraving of Adlestrop Park.

Back cover: Watercolour sketch by Humphry Repton for the bath house in the
flower garden at Adlestrop Park by permission of the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust

Cover by Mark-making Design
Maps by John Taylor
Typeset in Sabon 10.5 by Geoffrey Smith

Printed and bound in the UK by Biddles, MPG Book Group Ltd, Kings Lynn, UK

Table of Contents

List of Illustrations, Maps and Family Trees	viii
Introduction & Acknowledgements	ix
Chapter One	1
Adlestrop and the Austen Connection: the Leigh family	
<i>Introducing Adlestrop & the Leighs – Leigh influence on village – Leigh ancestors – Early influences on Jane Austen</i>	
Chapter Two	19
Country Cousins: Aristocrats and Squires	
<i>Short biographies of Jane’s cousins – The lunacy of the Fifth Lord Leigh – Speculation over the will – A Rector’s duties – Mary Leigh’s knowledge of Austen family – Class Divide – Elizabeth, the unknown correspondent</i>	
Chapter Three	41
The Improving of Adlestrop Park	
<i>A new beginning, family weddings, scandalous connections, theatricals & improvements</i>	
Chapter Four	53
An Eighteenth-century Village: the Adlestrop Jane Austen first knew	
<i>Jane Austen’s first visit in 1794 – How she travelled & what she saw – The facts & figures, population, houses, shops – Servants & villagers – Resemblance of rectory to Thornton Lacey in Mansfield Park – Great alterations to Adlestrop Park & rectory</i>	

Chapter Five **77**

Country society in a Century of Change

Town versus country in fiction & fact – Importance of a social neighbourhood – Enclosures & Jane Austen's interest in them – The decline of the Cotswolds agricultural economy – Poverty for villagers & consolidation of landowners – How Jane Austen reflects on change

Chapter Six **95**

'Call in Repton': the Picturesque Movement in Fact and Fiction

The Romantic movement – The Leighs on their Picturesque Journey – How Jane Austen embeds her Adlestrop experiences in her work – Repton and his influence on village – How Adlestrop is turned upside-down – How the past & present co-exist

Chapter Seven **113**

Family quarrels: The Fight for Stoneleigh

A family divided over the will – The expectations of the Austens – Impact on Jane Austen's themes – Portrait of eccentric Hon Mary Leigh – Links with Jane Austen's brothers – Jane Austen's sense of financial insecurity – Odious behaviour of James Leigh Perrot

Chapter Eight **131**

The real Sotherton? Jane Austen at Stoneleigh Abbey

Revd Thomas Leigh Jane, Cassandra & Mrs Austen to Stoneleigh – Strong parallels with Mansfield Park – How the Austens were impressed – Family portraits, anecdotes and stories – Local sightseeing – A feast of recollection

Contents

Chapter Nine **145**

The Reverend at the Abbey

Description of Stoneleigh Abbey – Repton’s improvements – How the Leighs lost the Abbey and return to Adlestrop – James Henry Leigh & Julia spend a small fortune – A new peerage for their son, Chandos Leigh

Chapter Ten **159**

A Bevy of Vicars: Clerical Connections

Jane Austen’s many clerical connections – Her fictional churchmen – How the Leighs & Austens worked ‘the system’ – Vocations or sinecures? – The Adlestrop Living – The March of Evangelism – The Cooper cousins

Chapter Eleven **179**

Warren Hastings and Jane Austen

Connections with Leighs & Austens – Warren Hastings’ son – Philadelphia Austen travels to India – Rumours of an affair & a child by Hastings – Amazing life of Eliza – Hastings in India – Impeachment Trial – On acquittal rebuilds ancestral home at Daylesford – Eliza marries Jane’s brother Henry

Chapter Twelve **197**

Adlestrop Now

Cotswolds now reinvented for tourism – Edward Thomas poem – Jane Austen’s connections little known – Leigh family still major land and property owners – Village changes over the last two centuries

Notes **213**

Bibliography **221**

Index **223**

INTRODUCTION

Jane Austen, Adlestrop and me

I first set foot in Adlestrop on a cold January day in 1985 to see a cottage that my partner (now husband) wanted to buy as a country weekend bolthole from, as he saw it, the horrors of London life.

He had just sold his own flat in London and had moved into my small terraced house in the city and therefore had some money to achieve his aim. Being a Londoner with little experience of country life I had no yearnings of my own to bring to his quest. However when he mentioned 'Adlestrop' I was immediately intrigued. Like many other people I remembered the Edward Thomas poem which for me imbued the village with a special aura of romance. A rural arcadia conjured up through beautiful verse.

On a late winter's afternoon twenty-five years ago I could see very little of the village, nothing of the cottage garden or its views but still found the unmodernised little house delightful. The ceilings were low, the wooden staircase very steep and there were lots of beams and tiny doorways and a huge stone fireplace. It had no central heating, needed rewiring, decorating and it only had a downstairs bathroom and loo, an awkward kitchen, small sitting room and two upstairs bedrooms. It had not been lived in for a year or more and was freezing cold.

As it was initially to be a weekend place and, at the time we just had one small toddler, I had no qualms about agreeing with him that it was ideal. A lease for one hundred and twenty

years was duly signed with the Trustees of the Adlestrop Settlement in mid-June. By then the garden was knee-deep in nettles, forested with buttercups and dandelions and the dirt and cobwebs inside were formidable obstacles. However we came down when time allowed and got to work, called in a local firm of builders and decorators and moved in some old furniture. Two years later we decided to move completely into the village from London and it became our family home.

I cannot remember exactly when I discovered that Adlestrop had not just one literary connection but two. Perhaps it was the small booklet I found in Adlestrop church that alerted me to the fact that Jane Austen had come to the village at least three times to visit her cousin, the Reverend Thomas Leigh. Furthermore many scholars believe that one of the themes of *Mansfield Park* may have been based on her experiences at Adlestrop. I was thrilled to think that I could be actually walking where she must have trod – on the path to the church door for example – or on a country ramble to nearby Daylesford. But it was not until I had the leisure of semi-retirement and the departure of my three sons to university that I seriously began to research the Jane Austen connections with the village.

It was a trail that led me to the Gloucestershire archives, the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust in Stratford-on-Avon (where most of the Leigh family papers are kept), Stoneleigh Abbey, churches and burial grounds and asking questions everywhere. And it made me look anew not only at the village, but at Jane Austen and her life and gave me a fresh insight into my favourite reading matter – her novels.

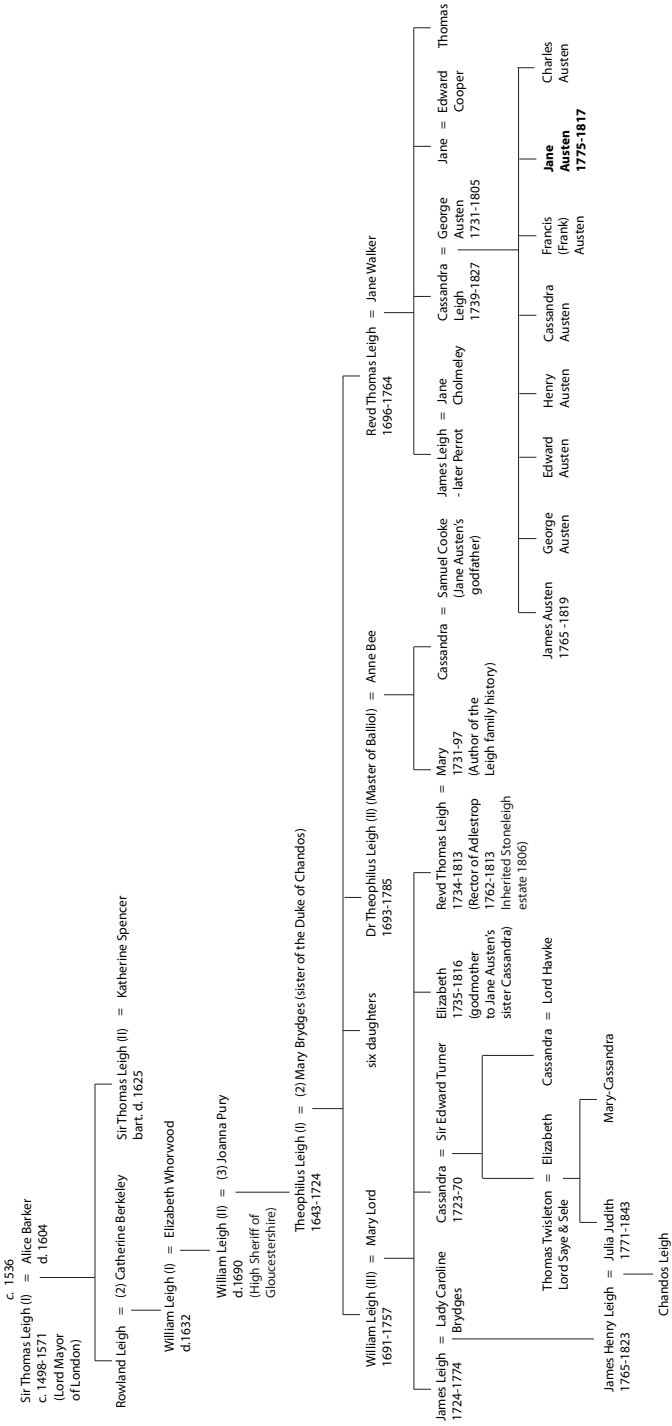
I would like to thank my husband, Geoffrey Smith, first and foremost for all his encouragement and designing the layout of the book, and the help of (in no particular order) Lord Leigh, Ralph and Angela Price, Jinnie Holt, John Gillett, John Taylor, Gillian Delaforce, David Hanks of Cotswold Images, Paula Cornwell and Cynthia Woodward at Stoneleigh Abbey, Alastair Williams at Mark-making Design, the staff of the

Introduction

Shakespeare Birthplace Trust, Gloucester Archives and Stow on the Wold Library, and David Selwyn at the Jane Austen Society. Any errors that exist are entirely of my own making.

Victoria Huxley
Adlestrop, December 2012

The Leigh and Austen Family Tree



CHAPTER ONE

Adlestrop and the Austen Connection: The Leigh Family

'...descended from a long race of plain independent Country Gentlemen' **History of the Leigh Family: Mary Leigh¹**

Young and impressionable, Jane Austen, first came to Adlestrop in 1794 when she was just nineteen, exchanging one vicarage in Hampshire to stay in another in this pretty corner of the Cotswolds. Why did she come to Adlestrop – a small and insignificant village in north Gloucestershire – and what were her family connections to this part of the world? The reasons are straightforward. Jane Austen's maternal grandfather, Thomas Leigh, was born there in 1696 and her mother was naturally keen to revisit her cousins and the happy memories of her childhood and for her own children to build bridges with the Leighs.

Adlestrop is the quintessential English village with its attractive country setting at the foot of a wooded hillside, the old houses fashioned in golden Cotswold stone, untroubled by modern traffic and looking as if nothing has changed for hundreds of years. It seems quite right that Jane Austen, the classic author of life in an English country village should be linked to Adlestrop.

Jane travelled with her mother and favourite sister, Cassandra, and perhaps with one or more of her brothers. A year later she would begin to write 'Elinor and Marianne' (an early version of *Sense and Sensibility*) and the epistolary short

Jane Austen and Adlestrop



novella *Lady Susan* but no one could have supposed at that moment that these writings were anything more than a suitable pastime for the daughter of a modest clergyman. There is also evidence in Jane's letters that Cassandra made further visits in 1813 and 1814.²

Jane was to become very well acquainted with Adlestrop and her cousins as she returned in 1799 and 1806 and, throughout her life, kept in constant touch with events there by letter. As the wise Lady Russell opines in *Persuasion* 'Family connections were always worth preserving'. And the cousins reciprocated and knew all the ins and outs of the Austen household. Mrs Austen relished the splendour of her Leigh heritage and their connections to lord mayors, duchesses and dukes and the titled branch of the family based at the great Stoneleigh Abbey estate in Warwickshire.

The Adlestrop Leighs were the senior branch of the Leigh

family and at Adlestrop they ruled the roost – big fish in a very small pond. One cousin was the rector, the other the owner of the mansion at Adlestrop Park and squire of the village and its environs. I believe that Jane’s visits to Adlestrop and to the vast halls of Stoneleigh Abbey fired her imagination, and these places, her cousins and the history of the Leigh family became a rich source of material which she drew upon for some of her novels’ plots and themes. In this book I will try to find out what the village was like in Jane Austen’s time and I will delve into the background of the Leighs, look at the upheavals and changes that Jane saw take place in this backwater and how it all nourished her inquisitive mind.

It was a sweet view —
sweet to the eye and the
mind. English verdure,
English culture, English
comfort...’ *Emma*



First of all it is worth looking back into village history and how it was shaped by the Leigh family. Since Saxon times Adlestrop has been known by many different names: Aedelsthorp, Eadlesthorp, Tatlestrop, Tedestrop, Tadilthorpe, Attlesthorpe and Tiddlestrop until finally ending up with its present one. This literally means ‘Tatel’s thorp’ – ‘thorp’ and ‘throp’ being interchangeable, derived from the Danish for a ‘daughter settlement’. Who ‘Tatel’ was we will never know. Over the centuries the original ‘T’ was elided becoming Adlestrop which is now indelibly engraved on the nation’s consciousness due to Edward Thomas’s famous poem ‘Adlestrop’ which invokes an idyll that is the very essence of the English countryside. On a quiet summer’s afternoon when there are few cars or people to disturb the peace, it is easy to take a romantic view of this lovely spot and imagine Jane and her sister sauntering down the lanes in their sprigged muslin frocks, pausing to admire the cottage gardens and the climbing roses and listening to

birdsong. The view at the top end of the village where the church, Old Parsonage and Adlestrop Park stand in close proximity, overlooked by green horizons, is so unspoilt it feels as if it still belongs in an early arcadia.



The Leigh's influence on Adlestrop still holds in the twenty-first century: the current Lord Leigh lives in a nearby farm on the hill above the village and, through a trust, effectively still owns the freeholds of many of its houses plus substantial agricultural land holdings. The village is a symbol of the stability of English society and rural patterns. Many scholars believe that the eighteenth-century improvements carried out by Humphry

'You are now collecting your people delightfully, getting them exactly into a spot as is the delight of my life; three or four families in a country village is the very thing to work on...'*Jane Austen in a letter to her favourite niece, Anna Lefroy née Austen, on the art of novel writing.*³

Repton to the layout of the village, the landscaping of Adlestrop Park and the Old Parsonage and the Austens visit to Stoneleigh Abbey directly informed one of the themes of *Mansfield Park*.

This is undoubtedly true but I have discovered many other significant echoes of Jane Austen's knowledge of Adlestrop and the Leighs, both in her letters and in her work. Jane Austen was such a consummate artist that she breathed life into her fictional characters, houses and villages without stooping to direct copying – but it is inevitable that events and people from her real world gave ballast to her imagined ones.

Jane Austen's novels were instantly popular when they were first written, admired for their literary merit and humour as well as their sharp perception of character and country ways. It is tempting to assume from a brief outline of Jane Austen's life

and from the happy endings in her books that her own experience was without serious incident or excitement and that she was untouched by the greater issues of the time. In fact both her immediate and wider family offered her a rich spectacle of tragedies and extraordinary upheavals and she was also beset by the constant worry of financial insecurity, underlined by her status as a single woman of few means.

The Austen-Leigh family network was extensive with innumerable cousins, aunts and uncles, all in close touch with each other by letter and word of mouth. Without employment, many of the middle and upper classes passed their days by going on extended rounds of visits so that they could keep up with their relatives. Blood relationships were vital in a period when nepotism and connections counted for more than simple merit. A person's birth, their antecedents and their wealth all conferred respectability and a place in society. If you lost your reputation or your money or lacked the right stepping stones towards prosperity there was very little hope for you.

The Austen family were very conscious of their mother's ancestry and were brought up with family anecdotes about their eccentricities, noble marriages, and tragedies ringing in their ears. However, as so often, most of Jane Austen's biographers skate over the maternal line of descent although its history is far richer and more complex than that of the Austen line. One of Jane's cousins, Mary Leigh, wrote a history of the Leighs in 1788 just before Jane's first recorded visit to Adlestrop, and it is thanks to this rich source that many of the old stories about the family, their household and the villagers have survived. She dedicated the volume to the then 'Head of the Family' – the young James Henry Leigh stating:

You wish me to collect all the anecdotes I can recollect and gather, of our Family... prepare yrself for much oral tradition; for old Womens legends, — for Ghosts & Goblins & for being extremely tired of the prolixity of my Dear Sir.⁴

A small flavour of her storytelling gifts can be seen from this introduction.

The history is written in a large volume bound in cream and gold with decorated endpapers that show a vignette of Adlestrop Park. Mary, then aged fifty-seven, wrote her narrative clearly and legibly on the left-hand side of each double page spread leaving the facing page for notes or for addenda often inserted by her husband or other family members. The volume found its way to Stoneleigh Abbey where it was used as a scrapbook by her descendants right up to the twentieth century, in which to paste letters, notes of family events and other memorabilia.



A Tudor portrait of a thin-lipped old man with a sharply pointed nose under a three-cornered black velvet hat hangs in the dark-panelled halls of Stoneleigh Abbey. His gown is trimmed with a wide fur collar and a golden chain. This is the face of Sir Thomas Leigh (c.1498–1571) the clever and hard-working founder of the family fortunes. Even then the Leighs were a well-placed dynasty: Thomas' brother William was an Usher to King Henry VIII and another brother had the same appointment in Queen

'Then followed the history and rise of the ancient and respectable family...how it had been settled... how mentioned in Dugdale, serving the office of high sheriff, representing a borough in three successive parliaments, exertions of loyalty, and dignity of baronet, in the first year of Charles II with all the Marys and Elizabeths they had married...'*Persuasion*

Mary's court. But the younger son, Thomas, on leaving his Shropshire home sought a career in the world of the City of London where, after an apprenticeship, he became a freeman of the Mercers' Company.

The Mercers were a livery company that specialised in

the importing and selling of luxury fabrics such as silks and velvets to the monarch and the aristocracy. They also engaged in the lucrative wool trade and dabbled on the foreign markets. Sir Thomas Gresham, Royal Agent and founder of the Royal Exchange was one of Thomas Leigh's contemporaries and also a Mercer. The Mercers were a byword for wealth and success at that time – perhaps their most famous member was the legendary Dick Whittington in the fourteenth century – another country boy from Gloucestershire who rose to become Lord Mayor of London.

Thomas made a very successful marriage in about 1536 to Alice Barker, the niece and heiress of an eminent fellow Mercer, Rowland Hill. Thomas Leigh continued to gain prominence in the company and also in civic life culminating with his election as Lord Mayor of London in 1558. He had the great honour of escorting the young Queen Elizabeth to St Paul's Cathedral on her coronation procession and was awarded a knighthood by her during his mayoralty. Further wealth was to follow when his father-in-law appointed him a legatee and sole executor of his estates which included the roofless ruin of the old abbey at Stoneleigh. After the Dissolution King Henry VIII had donated this property to Charles Brandon, Duke of Suffolk and in 1561 Sir Rowland Hill purchased it.

The mid-sixteenth century was a good time to buy land when so many former religious estates were on the market after the Reformation and Thomas invested wisely. He already owned land in Gloucestershire at Longborough, a village some five miles from Adlestrop, courtesy of his marriage, and in 1553 he purchased the manor of Adlestrop from the Crown for the sum of £1,429.⁵ In Elizabethan times a pound might correlate to £150 today so this was a substantial outlay if one does the multiplication: the equivalent of £215,000.

The previous owners of the village had been the abbots of Evesham Abbey which was settled by St Egwin, the third bishop of Worcester and consecrated by Pope Constantine in 709 –

a very early foundation. During its heyday it was one of the richest religious houses in England. In 718, a charter records the grant of six hides of land at Daeglesford (Daylesford) by Aethelwold, the king of Mercia, to the monastery. This land included Adlestrop as it covered the fields from the Bladen River (the Evenlode) right up to the Iron Age tumuli on the hill near to Chastleton where one of the mounds was excavated to reveal that it may have been a significant ‘portal dolmen’ dating back to 4000-3000 BC and, although badly ruined, still contained the ancient bones of at least three adults and four children.⁶ Later charters record the village boundaries of Tatlestreow or Tatlestrop.⁷

By the time Sir Thomas died in 1571 he had amassed an enormous amount of land in Warwickshire, Gloucestershire and Leicestershire as well as valuable properties in London and Middlesex. It was his eldest son, Rowland, who inherited Adlestrop. Stoneleigh along with some other manors and the Hamstall Ridware estate in Staffordshire passed to his middle son, Thomas while the third son was given a Northamptonshire estate. However while the senior line at Adlestrop remained ‘simple squires, the cadet line at Stoneleigh rose to a peerage’.⁸

What sort of influence did these country cousins have on Jane Austen? Both the Warwickshire and Gloucestershire Leighs were firm Royalists and supported the Stuart cause. This percolated down to Jane herself who as a young girl wrote of the Stuarts in her Goldsmith’s *History of England* that they were, ‘a family who were always ill-used, Betrayed and Neglected, whose virtues are seldom allowed, while their errors are never forgotten’. Her niece, Caroline Austen noted of her aunt:

Of her historical opinions I am able to record thus much — that she was a most loyal adherent of Charles the 1st, and that she always encouraged my youthful belief in Mary Stuart’s perfect innocence of all the crime with which History has charged her memory.⁹

Adlestrop Park was noted by Mary Leigh as ‘a staunch asylum to every friend of the royalist cause’.¹⁰ At Stoneleigh Abbey, the great grandson of Thomas and Alice, also named Sir Thomas Leigh, was a fervent defender of Charles I who sought refuge at Stoneleigh for three days in August 1642 after the gates of Coventry city were barred to him. In gratitude the king ennobled Thomas who became Baron Leigh in 1643. After the Civil War he may have regretted backing the losing side as he was forced to pay a huge fine of nearly £5,000 to Parliament. He only kept his liberty after assuring the victors that he had never borne arms nor helped the monarch with men or money.

Over the years the wealth of the Stoneleigh estate grew and in the 1750s the annual income from the estate of Thomas, the fourth Lord Leigh, was counted at £6,975.10s. 6d dwarfing that of Adlestrop which in the 1720s only had an income of £1,300. The strange turn of events that led to the poorer, but senior branch of the family inheriting the larger estates from the cadet branch were played out later in Jane Austen’s own time when Stoneleigh’s worth was put at around £17,000 a year – perhaps the annual equivalent of a million pounds in today’s values. No wonder the impecunious widow of George Austen and her two unmarried daughters hoped that a few crumbs from this family magnificence might come their way.

It seems that some time after the Civil War ended William Leigh II,¹¹ a High Sheriff of Gloucestershire and leader of the local militia became the first Leigh to reside permanently at Adlestrop. It may have been the size of his family that forced this decision as he is reputed by Mary Leigh ‘to have had 23 children’ by three different wives; ‘his son Theophilus used to say he had many elder brothers’. She speculates that William was ‘perhaps drawn here by the beauties of the spot. This old house (pulled down for its want of stamina by yr father) was certainly fitted up at first in high stile; however forlorn in its latterday.’¹²

Perhaps the elder brothers did not survive Theophilus I

because he became the head of the Adlestrop branch and made an extremely advantageous second marriage to Mary Brydges, the sister of Lord Chandos. Lord Chandos had gained great wealth in his position of Paymaster General during the War of the Spanish Succession but he is chiefly remembered today as the patron of Handel who dedicated the beautiful Chandos Anthems to him. (A footnote to this distant connection to Jane Austen occurred in 1995 when Chandos House in London, a splendid Queen Anne mansion, was chosen as one of the locations for Ang Lee's film of *Sense and Sensibility*.)

The Chandos marriage also bought the name 'Cassandra' into the Leigh and Austen families from the maiden name of the second duchess: Cassandra Willoughby. The generous duke had a splendid mansion in Middlesex, known as 'Canons', and he would send for his nieces, the six sisters of Jane's grandfather, to be educated there and fix them up with marriage giving them 'dowries of £3,000 apiece'.¹³ These sort of dowries could only be dreamt of by Jane and her sister, and also all her heroines.

Only a careful look at the family tree will help to sort out the different Leighs and their cousins as so many followed family tradition in their choice of Christian names: Cassandra, Jane, Elizabeth and Mary being popular ones for the women, and James, Thomas, Theophilus, William and Edward repeating themselves over the generations. (To aid the reader I have put I, II and III after the Williams and I and II after the two Theophiluses in the text.)

Theophilus Leigh I and Mary Brydges' marriage was a happy one:

they resided almost intirely at Adlestrop, living in a very hospitable and liberal stile: nor was Charity neglected; the poor in this and neighbouring villages, with eight persons from Stow, every day after dinner, shared the remnants of the plentiful Table.¹⁴

In her history Mary Leigh sets the scene as it was during this first Theophilus Leigh's tenure of Adlestrop Park who was, by all accounts, extremely formidable and old-fashioned – perhaps reminiscent of General Tilney of *Northanger Abbey* in his rigid dining habits: 'The dinner was the same every day in each week (allowing for Seasons) & his Sons took care to ride from Oxford to meet the Thursdays boiled Rump....' The beef must have been special because although Adlestrop is only about twenty miles distant from the city it would still have taken a good couple of hours in the saddle.

Theophilus I had six sons and six daughters, but just three of the sons concern us: the eldest, William III and two younger brothers: Theophilus II and Thomas – Jane Austen's grandfather. William III would inherit the Adlestrop estate while Theophilus II and Thomas were both Oxford graduates destined for the church. Theophilus II was a high-flyer who was voted in as Master of Balliol, largely because he was the nephew of a duke, but thanks to his longevity and wit, became a notable member of the University. He also held the living at Adlestrop church but due to his position in Oxford left his parish duties in the care of a curate. This seems to have caused some friction between him and his father:

His Son, Dr Leigh had been Rector of this Place (of which Mr Parsons was Curate) many years before he ventured to ascend the pulpit: he did it unasked. Mr Leigh immediately got up, and turned his back upon the Divine; who expected a sharp reprimand awaited him; but on coming out of Church, his Father only said, "I thank you Theo, for yr discourse; let us hereafter have less Rhetoric and more Divinity: I turned my back lest my Presence might daunt you." ¹⁵

Theophilus I was a serious man given to much thought on religion and other matters of the day:

His mornings were spent in his Study (for he read much) & the evening never was perhaps so satisfactorily spent as when he could engage his Chaplain in a free and liberal dispute.¹⁶

At Adlestrop Park the chaplain or curate was held in high regard unlike the snobbish Sir Walter Elliott's opinions in *Persuasion*:

Wentworth? Oh ay! Mr Wentworth, the curate of Monkford. You misled me by the term *gentleman*. I thought you were speaking of some man of property: Mr Wentworth was a nobody, I remember; quite unconnected.

Not much is known about Jane Austen's grandfather, Thomas, the youngest son, except that like his brothers he enjoyed the fruits of an Oxford education and no doubt rode over with them to partake in the famous 'boiled rump' at his father's table on a Thursday. He missed out on the estate and the family church living, but had his moment of glory when he was

'I do not know when I have heard a discourse more to my mind...or one better delivered – He reads extremely well, with great propriety and in a very impressive manner...I own I do not like much action in the pulpit — I do not like the studied air and artificial inflexions of voice, which your very popular and most admired preachers generally have. — A simple delivery is much better calculated to inspire devotion, and shows a much better taste.' *The Watsons*

elected a fellow of All Souls College at such a young age that he carried the affectionate nickname of 'Chick' Leigh ever after. He then took Holy Orders and became the rector of Harpsden, near Henley-on-Thames, moving away from Gloucestershire. Mary Leigh describes

her uncle as ‘one of the most contented, quiet, sweet-tempered, generous, cheerful men I ever knew’. His character was in great contrast to his flamboyant brother and bombastic father.

The wife Thomas chose, Jane Walker, was a member of the wealthy Perrot family, and it was the unequal division of the inheritance of the Perrot fortune between their children: James, Cassandra (Jane Austen’s mother) and Jane (Jane Austen’s aunt) that was to cause so much friction during Jane Austen’s lifetime. In a turn of events, worthy of any novel, Jane Walker’s aunt, Ann Perrot:

...earnestly begged her brother, Mr Thomas Perrot, to alter his will by which he had bequeathed to her his estates... and to leave her instead an annuity of one hundred pounds. Her brother complied with her request, and by a codicil devised the estates to his great-nephew James, son of the Rev. Thomas Leigh, on condition that he took the surname and arms of Perrot.¹⁷

(In an almost exact parallel, Jane Austen’s brother Edward was adopted by a wealthy childless couple, the Knights, changing his surname from Austen to Knight and living in comparative luxury to his siblings.)

Cassandra Leigh and her sister, Jane, merely inherited two hundred pounds each and, although they were noted beauties, both married impecunious clergymen – George Austen and Dr Edward Cooper respectively. Cassandra did not think herself a beauty although she boasted a distinguished aristocratic profile and was noted for her sharp sense of the ridiculous, mental acuity and a facility for writing verse. A formidable woman in all respects.

Cassandra had another brother too – this fourth child was born in 1747 and named after his father, Thomas. The child was described as an ‘imbecile’ and, as customary for the age, was not cared for within the family home. History repeated

itself when Cassandra and George Austen had their own backward and epileptic son, George, who later joined his uncle to be looked after by a local family at Monk Sherborne in Hampshire. Jane mentions neither this uncle nor her brother in any of her correspondence. Her brother George lived to be seventy-two.

It was a family tradition amongst the Austens that Cassandra Leigh may have met her husband while staying with her uncle, Theophilus II at the Master's Lodge in Oxford, although we have no direct proof or information about their courtship. George Austen was a Fellow at St John's College. Cassandra would also have come into close contact with Theophilus' daughter, Mary, the author of the family history. Biographers believe that Jane's mother was more likely to have inherited her wit and incisive turn of phrase from Theophilus II than from her own father. Theophilus II was certainly a valuable family connection in the Austens' fortunes and was celebrated among his contemporaries at Oxford as a great wag and raconteur. A famous *bon-mot*, repeated at the Austen dinner table, related how, on hearing that a colleague had been 'egged on' to marriage, Theophilus commented: 'Let us hope the yoke will sit lightly upon him.'

When James Austen (Jane's eldest brother) was enrolled at St John's College he and his father had dinner, presumably at the Master's Lodge, with the old man – then eighty-six. Still as sharp as a pin, Theophilus remarked when James took off his gown before eating: 'Young man, you need not strip, we are not going to fight.'

As already noted Theophilus II was an absentee incumbent and only lived in Adlestrop during the long college vacations. He rarely took the service in the church – all its offices would have been undertaken by the curate, the aptly named Mr Parsons, who was also the domestic chaplain to the family and servants of Adlestrop Park. His elder brother William III inherited the estate but it was not to be an easy succession as

their father's death in 1724 exposed crippling debts accruing to the property. It seemed that the estate could be lost entirely. Mary Leigh gives a dramatic report of the causes and the events that then unfolded:

the unavoidable effect of a large family, and all from an estate not then [worth] more than £1300 per ann. — nothing could be more deranged than the family affairs. Longbro. Estate only was settled — therefore poor dear, devoted old Adlestrop was doomed to be sold!

“No” (said yr exemplary Grandmother Leigh) “Let not that favored Place be alienated from the family, let us give up all our income, receiving a stipend sufficient to support us properly abroad, place the estates at nurse, & reside in Holland (a country in which Mr Leigh is much known) then we can return with ease & a gay conscience into England”... Under the fostering care of the worthy old Chaplain Mr Parsons, the estate was placed, the house being let & everything put on the most economic plan from the year 27 to 32. Mr Leigh resided at Utrecht and his good wife used to say no part of her life was more satisfactory or pleasant.¹⁸

William III and his wife returned to Adlestrop from Holland with their finances on a more even footing, bringing with them their eldest son James aged about seven. Disaster had been averted. It is of course in *Persuasion* that Sir Walter Elliot is forced to let his ancestral pile, Kellynch Hall, and move to Bath to retrench and cover his debts and is cuttingly described as ‘a foolish, spendthrift baronet, who had not had principle or sense enough to maintain himself in the situation in which Providence had placed him’.¹⁹ The young Cassandra Leigh must have often heard of her cousins’ forced sojourn on the Continent and the happy ending of their successful return to Adlestrop.

No retrenchment was necessary at Stoneleigh Abbey where

the family had recovered from their debts in the seventeenth century and were prosperous enough for the fourth Lord Leigh, after marrying an heiress, to build a new and magnificent West Wing to the house. It is striking that the Adlestrop Leighs did not seek any help from this quarter although they kept in contact. Jane Austen's grandfather would ride over to Stoneleigh on a summer's day accompanying his elder brother to visit their noble cousins and exchange news. All was set fair at Stoneleigh Abbey until an unexpected tragedy was to strike the whole family in the late eighteenth century, the unravelling of which would uncannily coincide with Jane Austen's last visit to Gloucestershire.

CHAPTER TWO

Country Cousins: Aristocrats and Squires

'Cassandra (the second daughter of Thomas Leigh & Wife of the truly respectable Mr Austen) has eight children: James, George, Edward, Henry, Francis, Charles, Cassandra & Jane.' **History of the Leigh Family: Mary Leigh¹**

Who were the Leighs at Adlestrop and Stoneleigh whom Jane Austen met and was familiar with? These were the descendants of William III and Mary née Lord – four of whose children play a part in this story: Cassandra, James, Thomas and Elizabeth. Jane was directly affected by their sagas of dynastic marriages, untimely deaths and mental instability, their quest for fashionable improvements, their money struggles and quarrels over inheritance.



At their home in Steventon, the Austen family were well-respected members of their community due to their father's position as vicar, but in Adlestrop Jane Austen observed her cousins enjoying total sway in the great house, as well as in the pulpit, all bolstered by the financial benefits of their landownership. The parsonage inhabited by her childless uncle and his wife and sister must have seemed quiet and a little dull after her own home crowded with her brothers and her father's pupils. But Adlestrop had the advantage of a

wonderful setting, accessible walks and rambles. There were three Leighs at the parsonage who Jane would come to know well.

The Reverend Thomas Leigh

Jane did not have a chance to meet her grand cousin, James Leigh, as he died at the relatively early age of forty-nine in 1774, but from that generation she had a close relationship with

‘Of Thomas the 3rd son of William Leigh, it becomes this flippant and well inked pen to be laconic – for of all men living he most dislikes praise.... after Evesham School to Balliol and from thence to Magdalen College (where he resided with fair fame) till the year 62. He then became Parson of Adlestrop.’ *Mary Leigh’s Family History*²

James’ brother, the Revd Thomas Leigh who held the family living of Adlestrop church for an amazing fifty-one years residing with his wife, Mary, and later with his unmarried younger sister, Elizabeth. Close and continual links with the Austens and their children were maintained between the two families. The Revd Thomas was godfather

to Jane’s favourite elder brother, Henry, and Elizabeth was godmother to her only sister, Cassandra. Jane characterised the Revd Thomas as ‘worthy, clever, and agreeable’.

Jane had come across him since she was a small child, as Thomas, when a young man, had often stayed with the family at Steventon and was much liked for giving the boys a small present of money. Another glimpse of his involvement with Jane was his visit to her and Cassandra during their schooldays at the Abbey School in Reading – Jane would have been about eight at the time. Their kindly cousin entrusted them with half a guinea each.

Whenever Jane and her family visited Adlestrop they always stayed at the handsome and well-appointed parsonage rather than at Adlestrop Park. It is unfortunate that Jane

left no record in the form of letters of her impressions or activities at Adlestrop because she always visited the village in the company of her sister and mother who were her main recipients. Another issue is that only twenty-eight of her letters survived Cassandra's bonfire from the period between 1796 and 1801.

The Leigh's parsonage was considerably grander than Steventon's with more servants and household help than the Austens enjoyed. In 1805 when the Revd Leigh was preparing his 'Statement of Property' for the Commissioners – an early form of a tax return – he appends to the accounting of the money he has, including £513 a year earned in interest from his investments, a list of 'persons resident in my house'³. His sister, Elizabeth Leigh and his niece the Dowager Lady Saye & Sele are noted and against her name he is careful to inform the Commissioners that she will be making her own statement via her own attorney later. He also lists the 'Servants in my house' which include the butler, Mr Rainbow, two livery servants, a gardener and his helper (who are not resident) and five women servants, including Rebekah Cadwallader who Jane mentions in a letter in 1809.⁴

The Revd Thomas Leigh was a huge influence on the village and always in residence, recording in his meticulous hand every birth, wedding and death that took place among his parishioners. In this he resembled Jane's father who had a similar hands-on approach and was also well-read and cultured. Thomas also took on the role of guardian to his nephew, the young James Henry Leigh who was left without his father at the tender age of nine. The other guardian was the third Duke of Chandos, James Henry's maternal uncle. After his father's untimely demise James Henry and his mother, Lady Caroline Brydges, lived largely with her relations and Adlestrop Park was let, which meant that Thomas had to take responsibility for all the Leigh affairs during this period. The stability that the Leighs gave the village and the strong roots they had there would have

met with Jane's wholehearted approval. Her fictional villages and characters are strongly drawn, but it is not the places that matter in themselves but the values of the people who live there. A fine estate like Norland in *Sense and Sensibility* and its importance in the surrounding community are jeopardised with a change in ownership – even though the hereditary rule applied – from a benevolent and well respected landlord to one who, together with his wife, was 'narrow-minded and selfish'. Here at Adlestrop was a family who knew their position carried with it responsibilities and duties as exemplified by the long years of Thomas Leigh's service.



The 1770s were a difficult time for both branches of the Leigh family. Disturbing news came from Stoneleigh concerning Edward, the fifth Lord Leigh. In his twenties he seemed to have been the perfect model of an aristocratic young man. After matriculating at Oriel College, Oxford in 1761 and receiving an MA in 1764, he lived at Stoneleigh Abbey where he was able to indulge his interests in literature, music and science. However he also went out into the wider world and took up his seat in the House of Lords and attended the coronation of George III.⁵ Edward's trustees were assured in a letter from the Lord Chancellor that his Oxford studies were carried out with diligence and at twenty-five he was elected High Steward of the University of Oxford and also a Doctor of Civil Law.

In his will he left his library of outstanding works on architecture and music, his scientific instruments, maps and prints to Oriel. Numbering about a thousand volumes, described as being of 'unusual magnificence' by the college, a new library (now known as the Senior Library) was built at Oriel to house the collection. A study of family papers 'show the books in a fascinating light...of the wider interests of a gentleman virtuoso and connoisseur'⁶ but, of course,

the library at Stoneleigh was left sadly empty – a fact much lamented by his successors who saw the remaining volumes in Virgil’s memorable phrase: ‘*rari nantes in gurgito vasto*’ – ‘a few figures lost in the waves’.

Edward shared the Abbey with his elder sister, the Honourable Mary Leigh, and was a superb custodian of the house undertaking imaginative modernisation and refurbishment of the interior, as well as managing all the business of the estate once he came of age. His greatest achievement was the planning of the splendid hall, now called the Saloon, decorated with beautiful plasterwork illustrating the exploits of Hercules. Edward was deeply interested in architecture and made many drawings on the subject in his own hand including ideas for altering Francis Smith’s stolid façade at Stoneleigh – one of which was a scheme to ‘Gothicize’ it, aping the frontage of Adlestrop Park by Sanderson Miller.⁷ This is interesting as it looks as if Edward studied it and appreciated it *in situ*.

Edward was keen on horse racing, hunting and other country pursuits. When he decided to round off his education by embarking on a Grand Tour of the Continent in 1767 it may be that he only made a short visit to France worried by encroaching ill health. It was then he prudently made his will in case of misadventure. All was not entirely as it seemed, as Edward consulted one of the eminent doctors of his time, Dr John Monro, who specialised in mental health. Records show that Monro was paid £49.7s. for visiting Lord Leigh seventeen times in London and six times in Warwickshire.

There are no descriptions of exactly how Edward’s mind was affected, but over the next few years he saw Dr Monro regularly and then Francis Willis who was engaged to care for him. Both Monro and Willis were prominent in their field and later involved with the treatment of King George III’s fragile mental state. Willis had a private asylum in Lincolnshire where Lord Leigh spent some three years of his life in the early 1770s and was charged £105 a month in fees. Willis with his ‘piercing gaze’ kept no notes on any

of his patients and his methods of treatment are hazy, although he claimed success for nine out of ten of his patients.

Edward Leigh's fine mind deteriorated to such an extent that his distressed family and friends applied to the Lunacy Commission for the right to manage his estates and he was declared a lunatic in March 1774 through an Inquisition into Insanity. The local papers noted: 'his Lordship was of unsound mind, and had not for several years been capable of managing his very noble estate and fortune.'⁸ His sister Mary was left as life tenant of Stoneleigh and his will stated that if she or her half-sister failed to produce an heir the estate would pass 'to the first and nearest of my kindred being male and of my name and blood that shall be living at the time of my determination of the several estates'.⁹

This rather vague and unsatisfactory wording in the will put every male Leigh connection to thinking that they might inherit at some future date although the Hon. Mary Leigh, then thirty-eight, or her half-sister might still marry and who could know how long she might live? Or Edward might recover and sire an heir. There is no doubt that the Leighs of Adlestrop, especially the Revd Thomas Leigh, in his role as guardian to his nephew, must have considered themselves very much the favourites in a claim to any inheritance. In the Austen household the nearest male kindred was Mrs Austen's brother – James Leigh Perrot – just a year younger than his cousin in Adlestrop, and both were comparatively elderly and childless, conditions that would naturally incite a certain feverish amount of hopeful conjecture. In 1787 Leigh Perrot wasted no time in voicing his demands, seemingly believing that he had the greatest claim on the estate. He first proposed that the Stoneleigh estate bequest should be split into eighteen parts with twelve-eighteenths to go to him and his heirs and the remaining six-eighteenths to Thomas Leigh.¹⁰ The Hon. Mary Leigh would not countenance breaking up the estate but still Leigh Perrot made what his cousins considered unreasonable

demands such as being paid £50,000 in ready money to give up his claim or ‘in order to accommodate the family’ was willing to accept an annuity instead.¹¹ Thomas Leigh thought that Leigh Perrot was deeply ungrateful to the Hon. Mary Leigh and wrote to James Henry on 20 February 1787 that Leigh Perrot was ‘not at all solicitous to pay that respect of gratitude, wh[ic]h her attention to our family & to himself in particular, in proposing to distribute her rights amongst us, deserved.’¹² His postscript summed up exactly what he thought of Leigh Perrot although shrewdly he advised discretion and forbearance on the issue:

‘Tho we can but think very unfavourably of Mr Perrot’s behaviour, we had better keep our sentiments to ourselves, lest an open rupture ensue; which can answer no good end; will only exasperate; & obstruct any possible future negotiation; or embitter a lawsuit, shd such arise.’¹³

It was left until the Hon. Mary Leigh’s death in 1806 for a resolution between Jane’s relatives but in the meanwhile the dispute simmered dangerously in the background for all concerned.



For the last thirteen years of his unhappy existence, Edward was brought back to Stoneleigh Abbey to live under restraint and, cared for by a full-time resident surgeon-apothecary, James Butler, who was the brother of the estate’s agent.¹⁴ Here right at the heart of the Leigh family was a plot from a sensational Gothic novel – but an event that Jane Austen never alluded to. Madness or mental incapacity such as that found even nearer home with her own brother and uncle characterised as ‘imbeciles’ was too dark a subject to be aired.

The news of Edward’s tragic condition was greeted with sadness at Adlestrop as both Theophilus II and his brother, Revd Thomas, had known the young aristocrat well, had visited him

Catherine as she crossed the hall, listened to the tempest with sensations of awe; and when she heard it rage round a corner of the ancient building, and close with sudden fury a distant door, felt for the first time that she was really in an Abbey...they brought to her recollection a countless variety of dreadful situations and horrid scenes. *Northanger Abbey*

at Stoneleigh, certainly as early as 1767, and kept in regular touch with him.¹⁵ Elsewhere the loose framing of the will led to many attempts of other more distant Leighs to claim their being 'kindred' and would cause litigation well into the nineteenth century. Jane herself was born in 1775 and her

lordly cousin's condition and the conditions of the will were part of family lore – a perpetual murmur during her upbringing.

Is it any wonder that the issue of inheritance and the fairness of wills and the sharing of family wealth are major themes in both *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice*?



There was no time for distractions at Adlestrop Rectory where Revd Leigh, in contrast to his eminent father-in-law, was a man that Sir Thomas Bertram might have approved of. In *Mansfield Park* Sir Thomas lectures the cynical Henry Crawford on the lifestyle of the ideal clergyman:

...a parish has wants and claims which can be known only as a clergyman constantly resident, and which no proxy can be capable of satisfying to the same extent. Edmund might, in the common phrase, do the duty of Thornton, that is, he might read prayers and preach, without giving up Mansfield Park; he might ride over, every Sunday to a house nominally inhabited, and go through divine service; he might be the clergyman of Thornton Lacey every seventh day, for three or four hours, if that would content

him. But it will not. He knows that human nature needs more lessons than a weekly sermon can convey, and that if he does not live among his parishioners and prove himself by constant attention their well-wisher and friend, he does very little either for their good or his own.¹⁶

It was the Reverend who led the way in the changes and improvements to the grounds of his rectory (see pages 66-68), helped his brother, James, to do the same and later encouraged his nephew to undertake further upheavals. This was not an unusual preoccupation for a clergyman – at least sixteen of his contemporaries put pen to paper on the subject of the ideal garden, which most likened to the Garden of Eden veering away from the formalised structures of the previous century.¹⁷

Like Edmund Bertram and Jane's own father here was the younger son of an eminent family becoming a clergyman with the gift of a family living – not with reluctance but embracing it as a calling. He was perhaps in a minority. An amusing spoof in James Austen's university magazine, *The Loiterer*, mocked how many of his undergraduate acquaintances had become ordained and how bleak their lives would be afterwards:

The rector of a parish has much to do.— In the first place, he must make such an agreement for tythes as may be beneficial to himself and not offensive to his patron. He must write his own sermons; and the time that remains will not be too much for parish duties, and the care and improvement of his dwelling, which he cannot be excused making as comfortable as possible.

Pride and Prejudice

Mr Collins on his duties

Young men in the bloom of life, and the Heyday of their blood, cut off from all that renders life agreeable, removed for the Scene of their triumphs... condemned to pass many years in solitary obscurity and insipid quiet... for in spite

of all the fine things which Poets, both ancient and modern, have said on the charms of Solitude, and the happiness of Country Life, an impartial examination of the matter will convince us, that a dirty Village is not half so good a place to lounge in as the High Street.¹⁸

Thomas was lucky in that the ‘dirty Village’ he ministered to was his home and he undoubtedly had a strong sense of duty to his parishioners. Many of Jane Austen’s fictional clergy seemed to have an incredible amount of leisure time and indeed they were a lot less busy than their modern counterparts. Even on a Sunday the number of church services they were expected to officiate at had diminished over the eighteenth century. In the 1700s prayers were required to be read twice on Sunday probably around ten in the morning and mid-afternoon with a long sermon during at least one of these services. In between times the clergyman would be involved in the churching of women after childbirth, hearing the children go over their catechism and preparing them for Confirmation. However as pluralism grew, the giving of two sermons became difficult and one of the services was discontinued. Holy Communion was unlikely to be practised more than once a month in a country parish. In Adlestrop the population was growing in the period of the Revd Leigh’s tenure and there were many baptisms, weddings and funerals to be attended to.

Thomas was certainly as a man of great energy, perhaps impatient at being confined to a small parish, a scholar yet one also concerned with practicalities. The secular matters of tithes, rents and roads all took up his time as well as his clerical tasks. It is doubtful that he ever had an idle hour and in his seventies, when he might have enjoyed a peaceful retirement, he had to wrestle with the vexed issue of the Stoneleigh inheritance (see pp. 113-126).

When he died Jane wrote about him with great affection in a letter to her brother Frank on HMS *Elephant* on 8 July 1813:

...the respectable, worthy, clever, agreeable Mr Tho. Leigh who has just closed a good life at the age of 79 & must have died the possessor of one of the finest Estates in England & of more worthless Nephews and Neices (sic) than any other private man in the united Kingdoms.¹⁹

Perhaps the barb at the end of the sentence about the more 'worthless Nephews and Neices' heightens the fact that nothing of his inheritance came down to them, although he was a cousin rather than an uncle. Or, if meant literally, it could refer to James Henry Leigh and his wife, but that is probably not what Jane Austen intended.

There is a memorial tablet to him in Adlestrop church honouring his long contribution as rector and he is buried with his wife, Mary Leigh.

Reverend Thomas Leigh, formerly of Magdalen College, Oxford and 51 years rector of this parish. B. July 1 1734 d. June 26 1813. Also in same vault, Mary Leigh daughter of Rev Dr Leigh, master of Baliol College and the Affectionate wife of said Rev. Thomas Leigh, youngest son of William Leigh Esquire b. 20 July 1731 d. 9 February 1797 and in family vault adjoining Elizabeth Leigh d. of William Leigh b. November 17 1733 d. 18 April 1816

Mary Leigh

'She wrote some novels highly moral & entertaining.' **Note by her husband²⁰**

Jane's first hostess at Adlestrop Rectory was Mary Leigh, a first cousin and old friend of her mother's. It was not until she was in her early thirties in 1762 that Mary Leigh, the daughter of the Master of Balliol, was to marry her cousin, Thomas, who was three years her junior. We do not know if it was a love match or simply a convenient one for both sides of the

family but judging from her husband's comments after her death (see below) it seems to have been a happy one. They had no children and because of this took a very close interest in all their other relatives – especially the young heir to Adlestrop Park, James Henry Leigh.

To both Mary and Thomas, Adlestrop would have already been familiar and felt like home but one wonders how Mary, after the bustle of Oxford and college life felt about removing to such a small and quiet place. On their marriage, her father, Theophilus II, gave up the church living which James Leigh duly passed to his brother and the newly-weds moved into the parsonage. Dr Leigh meanwhile took up another living in Somerset but according to his daughter 'spent much of his time with them in a darling abode amid a social neighbourhood'.²¹ Just before he died in 1785 Mary wrote from Balliol to her nephew's wife, Julia who was then staying at Bath, about her father,

Dr Leigh is free from all bodily complaints. That in his 92nd year his intellects are perfectly clear, but that he is weak and infirm, and at times his fine spirits a little flag.²²

Mary's family history is an interesting compilation that must have taken her at least a year or more to research and complete. It demonstrates her clear and intelligent mind and also a garrulous propensity for amusing old stories; her love of Adlestrop and the Leigh family shines through. I daresay she may have bored all her guests with readings from it – or certainly presented them with the volume to look through. I wonder what Jane thought of Mary's description of her own family:

Cassandra (the second daughter of Thomas Leigh & Wife of the truly respectable Mr Austen) has eight children: James, George, Edward, Henry, Francis, Charles, Cassandra & Jane. With his sons (promising to make figures in

life) Mr Austen educates a few youths of chosen friends and acquaintances. When amongst this liberal society, the simplicity of hospitality & taste which commonly prevailed in affluent families among the delightful valleys of Switzerland, even recur to my memory.²³

This looks as if Mary had visited the household at Steventon and formed a firm opinion of their ménage. Why does she compare them to families in Switzerland? Did Mary travel there in her youth and experience a more open way of living – a more ‘liberal society’ – than was customary in England? As the daughter of the Master of Balliol, brought up in the hot house environment of Oxford, Mary had enjoyed an unusual upbringing and the opportunity to meet many of the wits and thinkers at the university and perhaps had a more open mind than some of her contemporaries.

In Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* written a generation later in 1818, the heroine Elizabeth writes warmly of Swiss society and its egalitarian nature:

The republican institutions of our country have produced simpler and happier manners than those which prevail in the great monarchies that surround it. Hence there is less distinction between the several classes of its inhabitants; and the lower orders...²⁴

Mary Leigh’s observations on the family are intriguing and chime, in some respects, with the mean-spirited remarks made in 1869 by one of Jane Austen’s nieces, Fanny, brought up in the rich household of Edward Austen Knight at Godmersham and later married into the aristocratic Knatchbull family:

...it is very true that Aunt Jane from various circumstances was not so refined as she ought to have been from her talent...The [Austens] were not rich & the people around

with whom they chiefly mixed, were not all high-bred, or in short anything more than mediocre & they of course tho' superior in mental powers & cultivation were on the same level as far as refinement goes...both the Aunts [Cassandra and Jane] were brought up in the most complete ignorance of the World and its ways (I mean as to fashion &c) & if it had not been for Papa's marriage [Edward Austen Knight] which brought them into Kent...they would have been... very much below par as to good Society & its ways.²⁵

Mary Leigh was more generous in her appraisal of the Austen family seeing their lack of 'refinement' as a positive quality – 'simplicity of hospitality and taste'.

Claire Tomalin, a perceptive biographer of Jane Austen, commented on Fanny's put-down, looking at Jane's experiences within her elevated brother's house:

For an author who took social discomfort as one of her main themes, it meant that Godmersham was precious as a place in which to observe and record...No one observes the manners of a higher social class with more fascination than the person who feels they do not quite belong within the magic circle.²⁶

Only at the end of Mary's history do we find any information on the author herself as she was too modest to provide any. It was penned by her husband, presumably after her death:

But of herself some just account shd be added by her surviving husband... She wrote some novels highly moral & entertaining. But her favourite amusement was drawing and painting in miniature...the withdrawing room at the Parsonage was hung with her paintings, as was likewise her dressing room with a paper of Chinese landscape all of her composition and painting. ... one of the most affectionate

of wives & most agreeable cheerful and entertaining of companions.²⁷

Perhaps these ‘moral and entertaining novels’ were circulated among the family as was common – it was certainly a habit in the Austen household as we know from Jane’s letters. Her own novels were read aloud by the flickering of the fire and candles in the evenings before they were published and later her favourite niece, Anna would send her own work to Chawton for the family to read and discuss. Caroline Austen fondly recalled her Aunt Jane entertaining the family:

She was considered to read aloud remarkably well. I did not often hear her but once I knew her take up a volume of *Evelina* and read a few pages of *Mr. Smith and the Brangtons* and I thought it was like a play. She had a very good speaking voice—this was the opinion of her contemporaries—and though I did not then think of it as a perfection, or ever hear it observed upon, yet its tones have never been forgotten—I can recall them even now—and I know they were very pleasant.²⁸

I cannot imagine after reading the family history that Mary’s novels were not entertaining and it is a pity that nothing of them survives.

Elizabeth Leigh

Jane Austen’s other hostess during her stays at Adlestrop rectory was Elizabeth Leigh, the elder sister of the Revd Thomas and godmother to Jane’s sister, Cassandra. Her name rarely appears in family trees or is noticed by the biographers of Jane Austen, but from Jane’s letters it can be seen that Elizabeth was in frequent touch with the Austens and she was important in the chain of communication between the Austen-Leigh network of cousins. The Austens’ letters are always

directed to the inhabitants of the rectory rather than to their grander relations at Adlestrop Park.

Elizabeth never married and did not live with her brother and Mary until 1788. Her presence at the parsonage was noted by their neighbour Agnes Witts in her diary:

Tuesday Feb 10th 1789

...dropped Mr Witts at Chip:& went to Adlestrop to make a visit to Mrs Thos Leigh, more agreeable than usual by the addition of Mrs Elizabeth Leigh, a very chearfull pleasant old maid²⁹

Elizabeth remained a spinster perhaps because she spent some years looking after an elderly aunt, Elizabeth Wentworth, in Hendon or as Mary Leigh puts it ‘rocking the reposing cradle of Mrs Wentworth’s great age’. When Mrs Wentworth died at ninety-two she divided her ‘affluent property’ between her nephew, Revd Thomas and niece, Elizabeth. During her lifetime she had supported her other nephew, James Leigh, helping him to rebuild a part of the front of Adlestrop Park and giving him a sum ‘sufficient to build two farmhouses’ – perhaps Fern Farm and Hillside Farm (formerly called Parsonage Farm) which lie just outside the heart of the village on the western side.

The largest marble memorial tablet in Adlestrop Church is to Elizabeth Wentworth and recognises her benevolence to the Adlestrop Leighs – you can see it behind the pulpit. This lady not only had a pivotal role to play in the prosperity of the Leigh family but her own romantic story may have sown the seed of a plot theme for *Persuasion*.

Who was she exactly? Her maiden name was Elizabeth Lord and she was, as noted, the aunt of James, Thomas, Cassandra and Elizabeth Leigh – their mother’s sister. The sisters’ mother, a strong-willed widow, Rachel Lord was adamant that the two heiresses should both make an advantageous match and, when Elizabeth fell in love with a lowly Lieutenant Wentworth with

no fortune to his name, Rachel vetoed his proposal. Daringly, the two lovers married in secret in 1720, before the dashing suitor departed with his regiment to France. When Rachel Lord discovered the deception she threatened to cut Elizabeth off and leave everything to Mary.

Returning from the wars with money and rank – now as Lieutenant-General Wentworth – William and Mary Leigh introduced their brother-in-law to Rachel under an assumed name and this time round she was charmed. The secret came out and Elizabeth was forgiven.³⁰ The Wentworths long loyalty to each other, despite family disapproval, remind Jane Austen's readers of Anne Elliott and her Captain Wentworth. The couple's happiness was cut short with the Lieutenant-General's death in 1747 at Turin, where he had been sent as British envoy. Elizabeth 'survived her husband 41 years and having no issue, proved a second parent to the children of her excellent sister and brother-in-law Wm and Mary Leigh'.

No romance brightened Elizabeth Leigh's life, her inheritance came too late to encourage any marriage prospects, although Jane always refers to her as Mrs E. Leigh – the Mrs was purely a mark of respect due to her age. The initial 'E' distinguishes her from 'Mrs Leigh' – the Hon. Mary Leigh of Stoneleigh Abbey – also mentioned in the collected letters. Elizabeth became a permanent companion to her younger brother after his wife died in 1797 both at Adlestrop and Stoneleigh and would have welcomed the Austens in their two later visits to the rectory.

Sometimes Jane just mentions as an aside in a letter to Cassandra: 'I have written to Mrs E. Leigh too...' – without specifying why but perhaps to save Cassandra the trouble of doing so.³¹ In 1799 Jane is obviously trying to avoid a visit to Adlestrop as she writes to Cassandra from Bath:

I wonder what we shall do with all our intended visits this summer?—I should like to make a compromise with

Adlestrop, Harden [or Harpsden home of her cousin and rector, Edward Cooper] & Bookham [home of Samuel Cooke, also rector and Jane's godfather] that Martha's spending the summer at Steventon should be considered as our respective visits to them all.³²

Rather than getting news direct from the family at Adlestrop Park it seems to always come via Elizabeth: 'My Mother has heard from Mrs E. Leigh—Lady S & S- and her daughter are going to remove to Bath.'³³ This refers to Lady Saye & Sele and her wild and divorced daughter, Mary-Cassandra Twisleton, Julia's sister – of whom more later.

When all the difficulties of the Stoneleigh inheritance were in full swing she makes a point of telling Cassandra, 'Mrs E. Leigh did not make the slightest allusion to my Uncle's Business as I remember telling you at the time but you shall hear it as often as you like. My Mother wrote to her a week ago.'³⁴

In her mid-eighties Elizabeth fell ill and Jane was quick to send news of this to Cassandra with all the close detail that the sisters liked to exchange:

This post bought me two very interesting Letters, Yours & one from Bookham, in answer to an enquiry of mine about your good Godmother, of whom we had lately received a very alarming account from Paragon. Miss Arnold was the Informant there, & she spoke of Mrs E.L.'s having been very dangerously ill & attended by a physician from Oxford.—Your Letter to Adlestrop may perhaps bring you information from the spot, but in case it should not, I must tell you that she is better, tho' Dr Bourne cannot yet call her out of danger.

It is interesting that Elizabeth is still at Adlestrop Rectory at this time rather than at Stoneleigh. Jane goes on to more particulars:

Her disorder is an Inflammation on the Lungs, arising from a severe Chill, taken in Church last Sunday three weeks;—her Mind, all pious Composure, as may be supposed.—George Cooke was there when her Illness began, his Brother has now taken his place.—Her age & feebleness considered, one's fear cannot but preponderate—tho' her amendment has already surpassed the expectation of her Physician.

She adds a further titbit of news about Elizabeth's maidservant, Rebekah Cadwallader, 'I am sorry to add that Becky is laid up with a complaint of the same kind'. In the same long letter — written over the course of two days from Southampton — Jane ends by adding: 'As we have no letter from Adlestrop, we may suppose the good Woman was alive on Monday, but I cannot help expecting bad news from thence or Bookham, in a few days.'³⁵

Two weeks later she writes with happy tidings of Elizabeth's recovery:

'She, good Woman, is I hope destined for some further placid enjoyment of her own Excellence in this World, for her recovery advances exceedingly well.—I had this pleasant news from Bookham last Thursday.'³⁶

A few days later she remarks: 'Mrs E.L. is so much recovered as to get into the Dressing-room every day.'³⁷

In fact Elizabeth did not die until she was ninety-three. Jane wrote to her niece, Caroline Austen on this occasion:

The note to your Papa, is to announce the death of that excellent woman Mrs Elizth Leigh; it came this morning enclosed in a Letter to Aunt Cassandra.—We all feel that we have lost a most valued old freind [sic], but the death of a person at her advanced age, so fit to die, & by her own feelings so ready to die, is not to be regretted.—She

has been so kind as to leave a little remembrance £20 — to your Grandmama.³⁸

In fact, it is rare that Jane spoke so warmly about her relations but every time she mentions Elizabeth it is to point out her goodness, her excellence and her value as an old friend. Elizabeth is buried in Adlestrop Church in the family vault adjoining her brother and his wife. The tablet on the south of the chancel simply states ‘Elizabeth Leigh daughter of William Leigh born 17 November 1733 died 18 April 1816’.

Elizabeth outlived both her brothers, James and Thomas. After Thomas’ death in 1813 she left Stoneleigh and returned to the rectory while James Henry and Julia took over the abbey. But before we turn our attention there we should go back a little to James Leigh in the forthcoming chapter and his tenure at Adlestrop Park. The history of his changes to the house and garden must have been very familiar to Jane Austen’s mother and are important in appreciating the drive towards major improvements to the Leigh estate. Some of the changes that are described will ring a bell for any reader of *Mansfield Park*.

Adlestrop village and its parkland

