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To Endland, with pride: In pursuit of Jane Austen

By Anne Z. Cooke
Tribune Media Services



The Bath Circus, built in 1754, by John Wood, the Elder. Bath, England. (ColorWorld / Steve Haggerty)

BAKEWELL, England -- Let me guess. If you loved the book, you probably saw the latest film version of "Pride and Prejudice." You're sorry it didn't win an Oscar, but you don't really care.

Compared to English literature's most enduring romantic novel by author Jane Austen, the Oscar ceremony was nothing more than a moment on the stage, full of sound and frenzy, signifying zip. The real testimonials were in evidence in America's movie theaters, where teary-eyed viewers spent the last half-hour blowing their noses.

Which is why, 136 years after the first Jane Austen biography appeared, devoted readers are still searching for clues to the elusive author.



Hannah Brewer, 20, poses as Jane Austen at the Jane Austen Centre, Bath, England. (ColorWorld / Steve Haggerty)

The first fans visited the places where Jane had lived: Steventon, her birthplace; Bath, where the family moved when her father retired; and Southampton after he died. Later she moved to Chawton, in Hampshire, and finally to Winchester, where she died (at age 41 of Addison's Disease).

But for American readers, it was films -- the 1940 movie and two BBC television productions, in 1985 and 1995 -- that turned "Pride and Prejudice" into an industry. Once viewers saw the Bennet family at home at Longbourn and Darcy in his ancestral home, "Pemberley," they yearned for more.

After the second BBC series aired, enshrining the famously handsome Colin Firth as the one and only Darcy, literary tours of England blossomed. The latest movie continues the tradition.



The entrance to Haddon Hall, Derbyshire, England. (ColorWorld / Steve Haggerty)

The film locations, almost entirely open to the public, are in two general areas: Derbyshire and Lincolnshire in the Midlands and southern England. An ordinary road map doesn't pinpoint the sites, the official "movie map" is a big help. For guided tours, the Internet is a great source.

We started in Derbyshire with a tour of Chatsworth, the 16th-century limestone mansion that appears in the film as Pemberley, Darcy's ancestral home. No wonder Lizzie Bennet gapes in awe as her carriage drives up to the house. You will, too. Owned by the Duke and Duchess of Devonshire (they live in one wing), Chatsworth is both museum and national treasure, decorated with fabulous murals and filled with portraits and antique furniture.

"Look for the black-and-white tiled floor in the Painted Hall and the bust of Darcy, in the Sculpture Gallery," said guide and historian Ian Weightman. "They both figure prominently in the film, and the guides point them out."

Chatsworth has an inviting cafe and museum store. Outside, you can explore the grounds while the children play in the cascading water feature, a happy reversal of the "look but don't touch" policy.

Next we toured Haddon Hall, an original manor house whose oldest portions date from the 13th century. The Inn at Lambton scenes were filmed here in the Great Hall, and Lizzie and Jane's paneled bedroom was shot in the Dining Room. You can tour Haddon Hall every day from May through October.

Remember the towering cliff edge where Lizzie stands, her cloak billowing in the wind, gazing out to distant peaks? This is Stanage Edge, in Peak National Park, a magnet for parasailers and rock climbers. You can hike to the top, too, from a trailhead below. Incidentally, the small tower barely visible below is North Lees Hall, the inspiration for Charlotte Bronte's "Jane Eyre."

In Lincolnshire, the Georgian-era town of Stamford was used for Meryton, the village where the Bennet family shops and where the Bennet sisters flirt with Wickham. The staff at the Tourist Information Office in the Arts Centre, on St. George's Square, love to describe the filming, almost a joint town venture. Nearly 200 residents played walk-on parts of soldiers and farmers.

Fifteen minutes from Stamford is Burghley House, used as the home of the character Lady Catherine de Bourg (played by Judi Dench). A vast Tudor pile, it dates from the reign of the Queen Elizabeth I and, like Chatsworth, houses a collection amassed over 500 years. Burghley has a Visitors Cafeteria, which is where we met Burghley's real butler, Harvey Pascoe, who also played

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a butler in the movie.

Other interior scenes were filmed in Southern England. Wilton House, in Salisbury, was used for several indoor scenes, and Basildon Park, an elegant Palladian manor west of Reading, became Mr. Bingley's house, Netherfield.

To my great disappointment, the Bennet's home, Longbourn -- the red brick house where so many domestic scenes are set -- isn't open to the public. Called Groombridge Place, it's a private residence in Tunbridge Wells, and was available for filming only because the owner was about to begin restoration. The award-winning gardens are open to the public, however; check the Web site for this summer's special events.

Though many Austen tours start in Bath, where the author lived, we saved this town for next to last. Jane and her sister Cassandra attended dances at the Assembly Rooms and shopped on the high street, scenes she recreated in several of her novels. We stopped in at 40 Gay St., on Queens Square, for tea and scones at the Jane Austen Centre, a book and gift store. From tea towels to refrigerator magnets and literary criticism, they sell it here.

But our search came full circle at Jane's red brick house in Chawton, now a museum, where she lived from 1809 to 1817 with Cassandra, their mother and a friend, Martha. It was here that she wrote her novels, revising, writing and publishing all six (the last two appeared posthumously).

The house, a two-story cottage with white window trim and a rear garden is furnished with her books, furniture, family portraits, letters and needlework. Visitors, whispering in reverent tones, come through nearly every day. But even here, the real flesh-and-blood Jane is an enigma. Like most writers, she lives best through her books.

IF YOU GO:

GETTING THERE: Why fly into the hurly-burly at London's airports, when you can fly on Continental, Delta, Northwest and British Airways into

Bristol's smart new international airport, 45 minutes from Bath. This is a good launch point for an Austen pilgrimage.

STAYING THERE: Want to stay where the actors stayed? In Derbyshire, Keira Knightley and Matthew MacFadyen tucked up at the Peacock at Rowsley (near Bakewell) a charming 16-room inn, nicely restored, offering fine dining, a large garden and attentive service. Call 44(0)1629-733-518; e-mail office@thepeacockatrowsley.com or visit www.thepeacockatrowsley.com.

In Stamford, Lincolnshire, Matthew MacFadyen, Donald Sutherland and Judi Dench stayed at The George, a 16th-century coaching inn, with 47 homey rooms, an ancient pub and a historic oak-paneled dining room. At 71 St. Martins, in Stamford. Call 44(0)1780-750-750 or visit www.georgehotelofstamford.com.

In Bath, live like King George III at the historic Royal Crescent Hotel, in the center of the stately Royal Crescent. The 40-room hotel, restored, enlarged and sporting a private rear garden, boasts an award-winning dining room and a first-class spa. Call (888) 295-4710, or 44(0)1225-823-333. Or visit www.royalcrescent.co.uk/.

TRAVELING:

Call Visit Britain at (800) 462-2748, or visit www.visitbritain.com. To request an official "Movie Map," e-mail travelinfo@visitbritain.org.

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