

News from St. Nicholas' Church, Steventon

The Rectory, North Waltham



It is a great pleasure to contribute some items of news from Steventon, particularly so in a year which has seen a significant increase in the flow of visitors to Jane Austen's birthplace. Coach parties from far and wide have negotiated the narrow village lanes (probably little wider than they were in Jane's days) and most weekends our "welcome team" has been in action, guiding visitors round the church and answering their questions about the Austen connection. We all thoroughly enjoy entertaining our visitors.

Any church values welcoming visitors; such work is a fundamental mark of the Church's care and pastoral ministry. Yet that care and welcome is all the more important when visitors come with the intention of entering into the background and life of a celebrated writer. Steventon was the place where Jane lived longest; three of her novels were conceived (if not fully written) here, and for Jane, the Rector's younger daughter, the church would have been a dominant feature of life. Today's church and village, therefore, can do far more than merely welcome visitors. In a very special way Steventon can enable visitors to capture the mindset of Jane Austen and so appreciate the way she looked at society in her day. No great figure in any walk of life can be fully understood unless he or she is set in historical, geographical and socio-logical context. Steventon can aptly offer that context for Jane. As she herself wrote to her niece Anna, explaining the art of her writing: "3 or 4 Families in a Country Village is the very thing to work on." Sociologically, Steventon has not changed greatly since Jane's day!

Certainly in recent months there have been opportunities for appreciating that essential background of Jane's life. A performance of her *History of England* was given in the church in June, delivered with great aplomb and fun by Rebecca Blech. Part of that work, "The Battle of Prague," was given a repeat performance in September, this time by villagers playing instruments, sounding trumpets and firing cannons. The repeat performance was the highlight of a Festival Weekend involving lectures on Jane Austen, displays of drawings and old photographs together with a village quiz, and music from the time of Jane Austen. The weekend also heralded the publication of a booklet on Steventon, *Historical Notes and Anecdotes*, written circa 1949 by Henry Henshaw, agent to the Steventon Estate.

It has been a very eventful year and we are certain that the church bells have sounded more frequently and joyously than ever, thanks to their re-tuning made possible by JASNA members. Should JASNA members find themselves in England, we invite them to visit us. We will gladly welcome you.

Michael Kenning