



The Real Bluebeard of Bath:
A Historical Model for
Northanger Abbey

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“That is, I can read poetry and plays, and things of that sort, and do not dislike travels. But history, real solemn history, I cannot be interested in. Can you?”

“Yes, I am fond of history.”

“I wish I were too. I read it a little as a duty, but it tells me nothing that does not either vex or weary me. The quarrels of popes and kings, with wars or pestilences, in every page; the men all so good for nothing, and hardly any women at all—it is very tiresome: and yet I often think it odd that it should be so dull, for a great deal of it must be invention. The speeches that are put into the heroes’ mouths, their thoughts and designs—the chief of all this must be invention, and invention is what delights me in other books.”

—*Northanger Abbey* (109-10)

TO A SIGNIFICANT EXTENT, Jane Austen creates her novels out of the “real solemn history” so airily dismissed by her heroine, Catherine Morland, in favor of invention. Editors and readers continue to find moments in Austen’s fictions that reward knowledge of events and people from the English historical record. It seems that her plots, brimful of historically suggestive names and locations, can flow from historical fact. In other words, Austen plots confidently



S. Hooper, Farley Castle, Somersetshire (9 Apr. 1785). Private Collection.

with the tantalizing tension between truth and invention that characterizes the realist novel. This essay seizes upon one provocative example in *Northanger Abbey* of Austen's minute attentions to the local history of Bath.

Just outside of Bath survive the picturesque ruins of Farleigh Hungerford, a medieval castle with a bloody history of murder and poison, of wives locked in tall towers, of letters found in old furniture, and of mysterious coffins still on view. Already a popular tourist site in Austen's time, this location provides not only a nearby example of "an old castle . . . like what one reads of" that Catherine is so eager to see, but also a possible real-world model for the heroine's supposed flights of fancy at Northanger (83). The similarities between Farleigh fact and Northanger fiction should not be dismissed as mere coincidence. Farleigh (or Farley) Hungerford Castle features prominently in a Bath guidebook owned by the Austen family. The history reported in such guidebooks maps onto *Northanger Abbey's* plot with surprising accuracy, especially onto Catherine's darkening suspicions about the death of Mrs. Tilney. Indeed, the close resemblance between Catherine's fantasies of General Tilney as a wife-killer and the reality of the crimes committed by Farleigh Castle's most notorious resident, a Walter Hungerford, suggests that Austen finds the gothic in genuine history, slyly demonstrating that real-world events

can be as bizarre as gothic invention. By appealing to history, Austen trumps the gothic novel not only with borrowed tropes imitated from the pages of fellow novelists such as Ann Radcliffe, but with her own consistently realist approach. Farleigh Hungerford Castle, which is now a Heritage site, has simply been overlooked as another background source for Austen's first novel. With genuine historical points of reference added to the fictional models mentioned in the story itself, *Northanger Abbey* may further modify our assessment of Austen's creative method.

John Thorpe, that poseur of local knowledge, dangles the lure of Blaise Castle before the naïve young heroine, whom he takes in his gig northward on the road towards Clifton. Not only does Blaise Castle lie twenty miles northwest of Bath, an impossible distance for a daytrip in a mere one-horse gig, but Thorpe describes this destination to Catherine in false terms:

"Blaise Castle!" cried Catherine; "what is that?"

"The finest place in England—worth going fifty miles at any time to see."

"What, is it really a castle, an old castle?"

"The oldest in the kingdom."

"But is it like what one reads of?"

"Exactly—the very same."

"But now really—are there towers and long galleries?"

"By dozens."

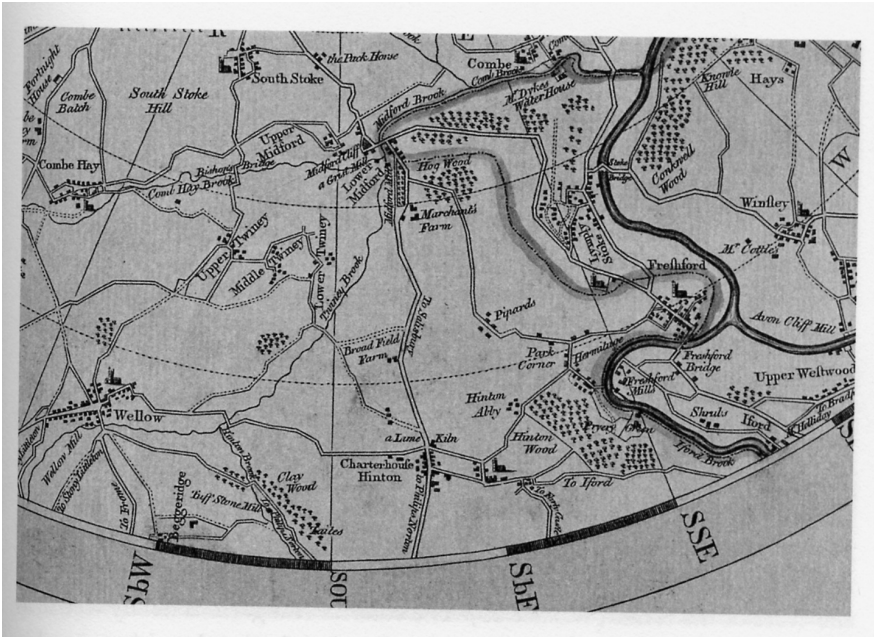
"Then I should like to see it." (83)

As Austen editors routinely point out, in reality Blaise Castle was a small garden folly built in 1766 for sugar merchant Thomas Farr. Although at least one contemporary guidebook aggrandizes the folly, describing it as "a Gothic castellated building" with "stately turrets" named after St. Blasius for his association with "an ancient chapel" formerly occupying the spot, Blaise Castle was neither *old* nor *real* and, as was typical of such follies, amounted to but one open-air room (Warner 279). The estate's neoclassical manor house, also called Blaise Castle after the quirky folly, was newer still—so much so that in 1797, the year of Austen's first recorded visit to Bath, it remained under construction for banker John Harford. However, from Catherine's starting point in Pultney Street, it is possible to set out for a genuine castle relatively nearby. One real medieval castle *does* exist within the reach of the day's outing, namely Farleigh Hungerford. The fact that Thorpe does not take Catherine to this nearby tourist destination that so perfectly fits her gothic expectations enlarges his idiocy and, consequently, emboldens Austen's irony.

Austen provides further clues to distance. Thorpe's lessening efficacy over Catherine ensures that the party never reaches the fakery of Blaise. Indeed the group fails even to get halfway. After "exactly an hour coming from Pulteney-street," they have traveled "very little more than seven miles" and find themselves "within view of the town of Keynsham" (87, 86). Here they reluctantly recognize that they must abort the outing to Blaise and "turn round," back towards Bath (87). The party's "view" of the town of Keynsham already provides sufficient information to calculate just how far along the northern road the characters have travelled, making a reference to their journey of "seven miles" a bit redundant. What could be significant about a distance of "very little more than seven miles" from their starting point?

A swivel of the compass point seven miles round Bath suggests an answer. If these same seven miles had been traveled in precisely the opposite direction, to the southeast rather than northwest, it would have taken the party to a genuine castle capable of fulfilling even Catherine's ambitious expectations of gothic gore. The name of Catherine's guide may already be a clue to distance and geography, for a Mr. Thorpe was Bath's most famous mapmaker. In Austen's time, Bath's population, which swelled to about 33,000 during the season, constituted a clientele keen on works about the place itself. Due to its heavy tourist constituency, Bath's print market in local products enjoyed a lively trade in maps of all sorts. Some ladies' fans even came equipped with maps of the city center and pictures of local buildings. Even with this superfluity of Bath maps, the Thorpe brand remained dominant. In 1742, Thomas Thorpe had drawn up such a comprehensive circular "MAP of Five Miles round the City of *BATH*" that it remained the gold standard for all maps with a radius of multiple miles through the century's end. Advertisements in numerous guidebooks during Austen's day continue to insist that Bath's best maps for tourist consumption were still based upon Thorpe's well-known original, often prominently declaring this heritage in their imprints. Although Farleigh Hungerford Castle lies just beyond its radius of five miles, Thorpe's original map already marked the road to "Farly Castle"—as did later derivatives. Since the Thorpe name continued to signal a local brand of map, the presence of a fictional Mr. Thorpe might well have alerted readers to track Catherine's travels around a real landscape.

The remains of Farleigh Hungerford Castle stand in what guidebooks, then as now, describe as "one of the most rural and picturesque spots within a wide radius of Bath"—worth visiting for "its antiquity, its importance, and the beautiful romantic scenery with which it is encompassed" (Meehan 165; Ibbet-



Detail from A Map of 5 Miles Round the City of Bath On a Scale of one Inch & half to a Mile from an Actual Survey made by Tho:^s Thorpe with Alterations & Improvements to the present time 1773. *Bath in Time*—Bath Central Library Collections.

son, Laporte, and Hassell 112). At “about seven miles distant” from the city of Bath, the castle lies “within the compass of a summer day’s ramble” (Meehan 165; Tunstall [6th ed.] 405).¹ Built in the fourteenth century on a piece of land that derives its name “from the *fairness* of its *leys* or meadows,” Farleigh Castle was home to the Hungerford family for about three hundred years, from 1369 to 1686 (Collinson 3:351). Three centuries of residence at the castle by the Hungerford family ended at the close of the seventeenth century when Sir Edward Hungerford, known as “the spendthrift,” was forced to sell the family home to pay his debts (Venning). Sir Edward’s sale of the property in 1686 virtually finished the castle’s days as a habitable residence, although the sister of Lord Rochester, the notorious Restoration rake, is said to have lived there for a few years with her husband, Henry Baynton.² In 1705 the castle was “sold for salvage,” resulting in a slow dismemberment that “over the next 30 years” saw it “systematically reduced to ruin for its materials” (Kightly 29). The deteriorating ruin became a popular tourist destination for day-trippers from Bath and, after its chapel was repaired in 1779 by a distant Hungerford relation,

slowly grew into “a sort of repository of curiosities,” its walls bedecked with medieval armor and the dilapidated structure filled with fanciful furnishings of a prior age (Kightly 29-30). By 1801, one popular guidebook urges a visit to “Farley-Castle” as “a rich treat to the antiquary” (Warner 22-23). This tourist site, but a short ride or long walk from Bath, is, in fact, the only genuine “old castle” in Bath’s landscape within both a “day’s ramble” and Austen’s expressly stated range of “seven miles.”

The story of Farleigh Hungerford Castle and the family who resided there so long rivals any Radcliffe plot in bodice-ripping drama and murderous intrigue. Hungerford history at the castle starts with “one of the most renowned barons of the time,” whose riches at Farleigh “awakened the jealousy” of Richard II (Warner 27). “A series of heroes of the same noble family” succeeded this patriarch, including “a knight of great martial achievements” whose “romantic character” combined his reputation for piety with fearlessness in battle (Warner 27). While one Hungerford was celebrated as a hero of Agincourt, another was “tried, condemned, and executed for treason” during the Wars of the Roses (Warner 29). The colorful Hungerford family tree also includes a woman hanged for murdering her first husband and burning his body in the castle’s kitchen ovens. Another Hungerford, rumored to have killed his wives by poison, was accused of witchcraft. Coupled with a location that fits within the distance traveled by the characters, even a sketchy history of Farleigh Hungerford Castle reveals, for anyone familiar with Bath’s tourist sites, the inanity of Thorpe’s choice of remote Blaise as his destination. For such Bath-savvy readers, the comedy of Austen’s novel resides partly in its send-up of local history.³



Most descriptions of Farleigh Hungerford Castle focus on two Tudor-era scandals that fed local lore for centuries. The earlier of these took place in the castle kitchen, a domestic space that Austen mentions half a dozen times in *Northanger Abbey*. In fact, at Northanger the kitchen delineates history, marking the boundaries between old and new: “With the walls of the kitchen ended all the antiquity of the Abbey” (189). In the winter of 1518, Sir Edward Hungerford I married a widow named Agnes Cotell, who “had previously been married to a certain John Cotell, possibly Sir Edward’s steward.” Although the Cotells were, by all accounts, materially comfortable, Agnes evidently saw an opportunity to improve her situation: “On 26 July 1518, two of her servants,



Farley Chapel, Somersetshire, by S. Hooper (9 Apr. 1785). *Private Collection*.

'by the procurement and abetting of the said Agnes,' strangled John at Farleigh castle with his own linen neckerchief" (Kightly 23). Trial records show that "the body of the said John [was] put into a certain fire in the furnace of the kitchen in the castle of Farley," which "did burn and consume" his remains (Kightly 23). Six months later, by now the new Lady Hungerford, Agnes coolly received these two servants at the castle, "well knowing that they had done the murder aforesaid." Locally, the murder was an open secret, but Agnes and her hired killers remained unprosecuted while the powerful Sir Edward, her new husband, lived. After Sir Edward died in 1522, however, all three were speedily hanged at Tyburn in London for the crime (Kightly 23).

Given the kitchen-centered murder at Farleigh Hungerford, General Tilney's preoccupation with improvements to "the ancient kitchen of the convent, rich in the massy walls and smoke of former days," which he has stocked with every modern convenience, especially with efficient "stoves and hot closets," begins to sound perverse (188-89). Austen is also atypically specific when she identifies the General's "fire-place" as "a Rumford," a brand associated with the latest and most efficient stoves (165). Farley Castle's macabre history of incineration renders even "The Comforts of a Rumford Stove" rather sinister.⁴

It may be coincidental that any tour of Farleigh Hungerford Castle emphasizes, like Miss Morland's tour of Northanger, the outlines of the old kitchen and servants' quarters still visible in the vestigial remains of the castle walls, while stories of murder, oven burnings, and domestic intrigue seize the imagination. Even so, the dark comedy of *Northanger Abbey* may deepen to black in the shade of Hungerford history.

The Hungerford who received "the greatest attention of local gossip," however, was a wife-killer by the name of Sir Walter Hungerford, born in 1503 and executed, at age 37, in 1540 (Meehan 164). James Tunstall, author of a popular nineteenth-century guidebook, describes this bizarre episode in terms that closely resemble Catherine's mistaken fantasies about General Tilney, identifying Walter Hungerford as "something of a Bluebeard." "Three wives in succession complained of his cruel treatment," with the third piteously petitioning the then-king Henry VIII that she was "imprisoned" in a tower where her "lord" continued to try to "poyson" her (Tunstall [6th ed.] 403). Sir Walter, intent upon remarrying for increased wealth and political position, might have succeeded in his sequence of murderous schemes were it not for his third wife, Elizabeth, who, aided by local villagers, defied his incessant attempts to kill her by poison.

Elizabeth was the daughter of the well-connected Lord Hussey, a court favorite when Sir Walter married her in 1532. Through his father-in-law's recommendations, Sir Walter rose in the esteem of Henry VIII's court, became an agent of Thomas Cromwell, and gained the one-time title of Baron Hungerford of Heytesbury. But as Hussey's political star faded, so did Sir Walter's fondness for the daughter. Elizabeth wrote to Cromwell in 1539 that she was "continually locked in one of my Lord's towers in his castle . . . these three or four years past" (Kightly 23). She claimed that she was being poisoned upon her husband's order, had been reduced to drinking her own urine, and that, without the charity of the country women who "brought me to my great window, in the night, such meat and drink as they had," she would have starved to death (Kightly 24). Tradition says that Elizabeth remained imprisoned for four years in what consequently became known as The Lady Tower of the castle. Her imprisonment ended when Henry VIII felt Sir Walter's insolence directed at himself, and simply beheaded the nuisance. On 28 July 1540, both Cromwell and Sir Walter were executed on Tower hill, Cromwell for treason, a move Henry VIII came to regret, and Sir Walter Hungerford for the additional charges of witchcraft and homosexuality. Elizabeth, "the lady in the tower," remarried after Sir Walter's death, happily this time, to a man with whom she had at least four daughters (Kightly 24).

Walter Hungerford's first wife, and probably his initial victim, had been named Susan (Ashton; Collinson 3:356). Austen's original title for her manuscript, for what became known as *Northanger Abbey*, was, of course, also *Susan*. A coincidence? Or was the initial choice of name for the heroine intended to signal her vulnerability? Susan is a common enough name and one that Austen seems to have favored, as she used it also in *Lady Susan* and again in *Mansfield Park*, for Fanny's little sister. As Maggie Lane and John Wiltshire have urged, a ubiquitous first name may or may not be interpretively significant. But surnames in *Northanger Abbey* are a different matter. Just as the name of Thorpe gains significance when looked at in the light of Bath's history, so do several other surnames cry out for more extensive analysis in relation to Farleigh Hungerford's high-profile events during the reign of Henry VIII. Mrs. Tilney's maiden name, Drummond,⁵ conjures up another medieval family of nobility. The history of the Drummond family during this early period is likewise packed with political intrigue and sexual scandal (Boardman). Similarly, the name of Tilney also reached the zenith of its political currency in the reign of Henry VIII, when a series of calculated "marriages allied the Tilneys to virtually every important family in the country, including the royal family" (Dutton). Given Farleigh Hungerford's history, the family names of Tilney and Drummond may allow Austen to balance her novel's mock-gothic dimensions with a quiet set of historical references to genuine political mayhem. Indeed, Austen's imagined General Tilney may combine the criminal lore of Farleigh Hungerford with the political cunning of the powerful Tilneys in order to set their associations with the Tudor court against the allegiances of the real-world Drummonds, a family historically allied with the claims of the Stuarts.

In the extended context of English political history, to marry a Tilney to a Drummond is to ignore the internal strife and religious conflicts between the houses of Tudor and Stuart. From a young age, Austen showed Stuart sympathies, as evidenced by her "History of England." Her choice of historically-evocative names may flag her sympathies for the off-page character of Miss Drummond and even mark the union between the General and his wife as ill-fated and antagonistic from the outset, a mismatch between opposites. Whatever the implications, by imagining a loveless marriage between a "cruel" Tilney and a rich Drummond (185), a union designed to maximize wealth and social position, and which ends tragically in an abbey confiscated by Henry VIII, Austen does not stray far from the history books.

Of course, by virtue of being an abbey, *Northanger* already conjures up

the violent dissolution of the monasteries that passed such buildings into private hands. The fictional Tilneys, as well as being linked to Tudor courtiers through their historical name, are tied to Henry VIII through their home's history. Catherine learns of

Northanger Abbey having been a richly-endowed convent at the time of the Reformation, of its having fallen into the hands of an ancestor of the Tilneys on its dissolution, of a large portion of the ancient building still making a part of the present dwelling although the rest was decayed, or of its standing low in a valley, sheltered from the north and east by rising woods of oak. (144)

Austen's cryptic history of her imaginary Northanger Abbey teasingly matches in certain details the genuine history of the buildings on the Farleigh Hungerford estate, which included, in addition to the castle, a medieval abbey acquired in the wake of the dissolution as well as a manor house built from the stones of its ruins. The abbey land owned by the Hungerfords also included portions of a famous stretch of wood visible even in Thorpe's map, where it is labeled Hinton Wood and shown lying just "north and east" of the abbey. This was just the type of so-called hanger of wood from which the name "North-hanger Abby," as Cassandra spelled it, is ostensibly derived (qtd. in *NA* xxv).

The genuine abbey annexed to the Hungerford estate after the dissolution of the monasteries was nearby Hinton Abbey, or Hinton-Charterhouse, two miles closer to Bath along the route that leads south from the city to Farleigh Hungerford Castle. Warner in 1801 and Tunstall in 1847 both describe how the abbey was originally founded in the early thirteenth century by Ela, Countess of Salisbury, to honor the memory of her husband, William Longsword (Tunstall 143; Warner 24). It became the residence of a "very severe" order of Carthusian monks, who "abstained entirely from flesh" and lived "in silence, solitude, and prayer" (Tunstall 144). General Tilney's eating of meat with virtually every meal, and even "cold meat" on a Sunday "between morning and afternoon service," may comment wryly on the monastic abstinence and self-denial associated with the generic histories of many abbeys, irrespective of the possible link to Hinton Abbey (195). That Northanger Abbey designates, specifically, a Carthusian Charterhouse is suggested by the "traces of cells" pointed out to Catherine (188). Architectural historian Nikolaus Pevsner seizes upon this detail, even though he judges Austen "without exception vague, when it comes to describing buildings" (404). Nonetheless, it is Pevsner who points out that the evidence of cells "would indicate a Charterhouse" since non-Carthusian orders of monks used dormitories, but only, he hesitates, "if

Jane Austen knew archaeology” (407). Austen may not have been an archaeologist, but she was a keen historian of location with, in this instance, access to the specific history of Farleigh Hungerford, where the abbey was a Charterhouse whose “Carthusian monks” did indeed sleep in cells (Warner 24).⁶

Austen’s historical allusions sometimes blend into the mimetic landscape of the realist novel so as to become virtually untraceable. As Thomas Lister noted as early as 1830, Jane Austen’s strategy of self-effacement means that she may be “too natural” for those critics who demand that artistry show itself (Southam 20). Then again, how subtle are Austen’s historical allusions to the tumultuous medieval period that culminated in the reign of Henry VIII, when she houses characters named Tilney and Drummond in a medieval abbey obtained during the dissolution of the monasteries? When she names her heroine’s female companions Eleanor and Isabella, using old-fashioned spellings of names associated with medieval queens?⁷ Or, when her plot culminates in the marriage of a Henry to a Catherine? Critical agreement about how *Northanger Abbey* spoofs, specifically, Radcliffe’s gothic recipe for novel-writing has possibly prevented us from looking for other sources of inspiration.⁸ Radcliffe’s exotic and historically remote settings permitted, even fostered, a reader’s complacency about the relative security of modern English life (although comically not for Catherine Morland). Perhaps Austen gestures to the history of this genuine locale in Bath to respond to the implied social smugness of Radcliffe’s treatment of old and new—foreign violence juxtaposed with an English reader’s domestic safety—by warning of the internal, rather than external, threats to polite society.



Knowledge of Farleigh Hungerford Castle and its local history, including its annexation of Hinton Abbey, was widespread in Austen’s day, with many Bath guidebooks describing the castle grounds as a popular destination for day-trippers from the city. Mentions of “Farley Castle” as a local curiosity and tourist destination are ubiquitous at the turn of the century, with different aspects of a visit emphasized in different books—from seasonal pocket companions such as *The New Bath Guide* to Reverend Richard Warner’s elegant *Excursions from Bath* (1801). For example, while *A Picturesque Guide* (1793) stresses the site’s “savage state of desolation,” other summaries, such as *The History and Antiquities of the County of Somerset* (1791), detail the tombs and monuments significant to the antiquary (Ibbetson, Laporte, and Hassell 113).

One issue of *The Weekly Entertainer*, with a relatively late date of 11 March 1816, even offers up a poem inspired by a visit—the aptly named “Lines suggested on viewing Farley Castle, in Wiltshire” signed “W.B.T.”—that points to the “ruin’d edifice, in ivy bound!” as a *memento mori*.⁹ A guidebook listed among those in the *Godmersham Park Library Catalogue* similarly stressed in 1792 the site’s picturesque appearance: “the gateway, and three towers, covered with ivy, still rear their ruined heads” (Robertson 2:151). When recorded history reveals close similarities between Sir Walter Hungerford’s poisoning of his wife (indeed probably all three wives) and Catherine’s morbid fantasies about the General, local knowledge lends additional irony to Catherine’s supposed flights of imagination.

In the year Austen began *Susan*, dated by Cassandra to 1798, *The New Bath Guide* records a curiosity at Farley Castle not unlike the one that her heroine imagines awaits discovery in the “immense heavy chest” at the abbey, that is, a secret stash of letters hidden in a particular piece of castle furniture (NA 167). “In the chapel,” states the guide, “stands a chest of old armour, brought from the castle, on opening of which were found three original letters written by Oliver Cromwell” (*New Bath* 55). The guide also mentions that two of these letters were “lent to a gentleman who never returned them,” while the last was “preserved in a frame by the woman who shews the chapel” (*New Bath* 55). Although Cromwell’s framed letter no longer hangs there now, Tunstall’s guidebook confirms that it still remained on display at the ruins of Farleigh Castle as late as 1876 (Tunstall [6th ed.] 402). *The New Bath Guide* is not the only guidebook to include a full transcription:

SIR,

I am very sorye my occasions will not permit me to return to you as I would. I have not yet fully spoken with the gentleman I sent to wait upon you; when I shall doe itt I shall be enabled to be more particular, being unwillinge to detaine youre servant any longer. With my service to youre Lady and family, I take leave, and rest

Youre affectionate servant,

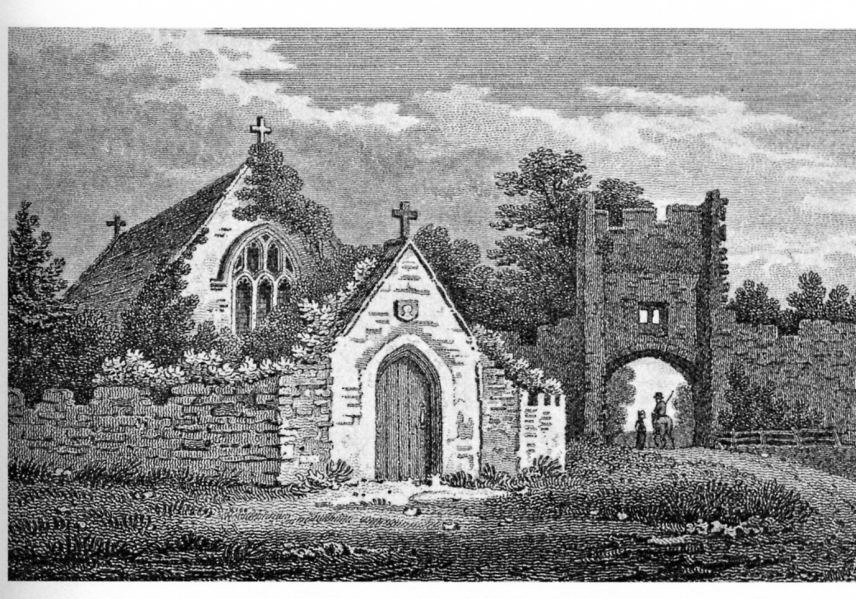
July 30, 1652.

O. CROMWELL

For my Honnerd Frind Mr. Hungerford the Elder, These. (56)

The disappointingly dull domestic nature of the note, an empty thank-you carried by a waiting servant, suggests that Cromwell’s signature alone, rather than the letter’s substance, prompted its preservation and guidebook hype.

As Austen’s contemporaries would have known, however, this author is not the Cromwell whose political connections with Farleigh Hungerford



Farley Castle & Chapel (Jan. 1823), for Sir R. C. Hoare. *Bath in Time*—Bath Central Library Collections.

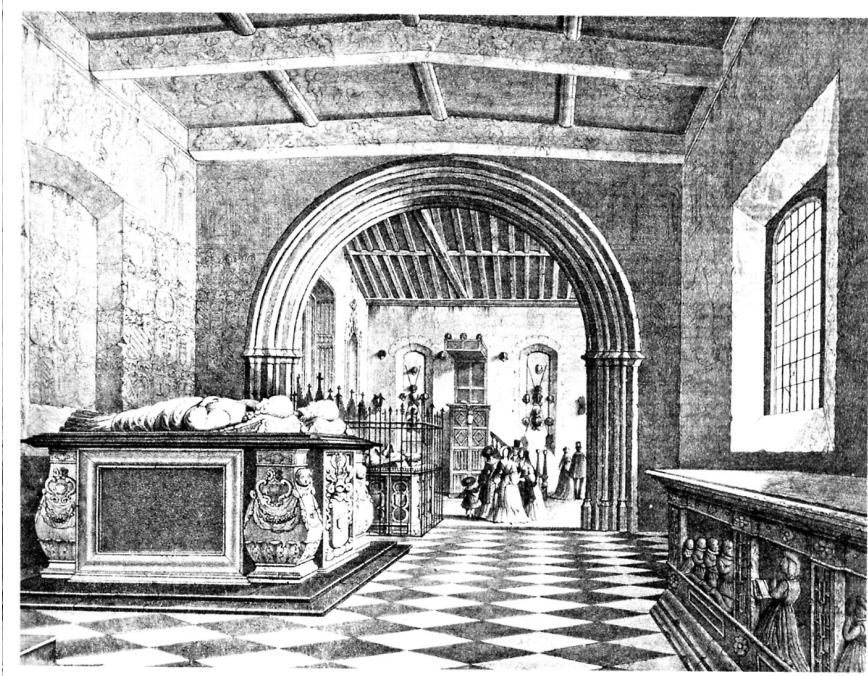
Castle tie him to the dramatic imprisonment of Elizabeth Hungerford. This letter is not signed by *Thomas* Cromwell, that much-feared and cruel minister of Henry VIII who was executed with Sir Walter Hungerford, but by *Oliver* Cromwell, the regicidal leader of the Commonwealth over a century later. Since both Cromwells were controversial, the orthography by either would be worth preserving. And yet the discovery of “old letters” in a chest of this medieval castle seems distinctly less dramatic when written by Oliver rather than Thomas Cromwell. Similarly, Catherine’s “fearful curiosity” about a mysterious chest and her wide-eyed delight in finding inside a “precious manuscript” end in disappointment about the presumed newness of the documents (168, 174). The paper found by Catherine in Northanger furniture proves to be nothing more than a contemporary washing list that, in terms of humdrum content, comically resembles Oliver Cromwell’s note. Austen’s scene, with its parallel discovery of documents that prove more modern than anticipated, not only borrows a generic gothic trope from another novelist but also re-enacts real events at Farleigh Castle—as if Austen sets history up to compete with Radcliffe. Austen could have read about the Cromwell letter in a guidebook such as *The New Bath Guide*. Or, perhaps, as a tourist led round “by the woman who shews the chapel,” she saw the original firsthand.

If Austen toured Farleigh Hungerford Castle, when might she first have visited? As Austen lived in Bath for several years before the sale of *Susan* in 1803, indeed had visited as a tourist in 1797 and 1799, she could easily have been inspired by an outing to Farleigh Hungerford Castle, which Meehan explains was accessible from Bath even by foot, especially if “shortened by way of ‘Brass Knocker’ Hill” (165). Most significantly, the Austens actually owned the popular guidebook which introduces a visit to Farleigh Hungerford Castle as “a rich treat,” judges some of its monuments as “most choice,” and provides further details that closely resemble Catherine’s fantasies about the dead Mrs. Tilney: Richard Warner’s *Excursions from Bath* (1801), published in the year that the Austens moved permanently to Bath (22, 33). A copy of Warner’s guidebook acquired during the Austens’ residence in Bath survives, inscribed “Geo: Austen 4 Sydney Terrace 1802” and also “J. Austen Southampton 1807” (Chapman 38 n1). The volume contains the additional rarity of a marginal comment in, quite possibly, Jane Austen’s own hand.¹⁰ Perhaps Austen’s father purchased one of Bath’s latest guidebooks to orient his daughters, so fond of walking, to the countryside around their new home. Whether gift or purchase, the book is a definitive link between Jane Austen and the tourist industry around Farleigh Hungerford during her time in Bath.

In the more than ten pages that Warner devotes to Farley Castle, he emphasizes how a visit can become an important history lesson when “remains of ancient days awaken curiosity” and “entice the mind to sober reflection, and to a fair estimate of our present state” (23). He lauds the “chapel of the castle” as “nearly perfect,” stressing some of the site’s “curious monuments,” particularly “the magnificent monument which stands in the center of the chapel, and is, perhaps, one the finest *morsels* of the kind in England” (33). The monument consists of white marble effigies of Sir Edward and Lady Margaret Hungerford (1596-1648 and 1603-1672), which also featured in several early-nineteenth-century prints. In the novel, Austen sets one scene in the family chapel where Catherine focuses one Sunday morning on

the sight of a very elegant monument to the memory of Mrs. Tilney, which immediately fronted the family pew. By that her eye was instantly caught and long retained; and the perusal of the highly-strained epitaph, in which every virtue was ascribed to her by the inconsolable husband, who must have been in some way or other her destroyer, affected her even to tears. (195)

In possible imitation of Warner then, Catherine constructs a pathos of place through the inscriptions and monuments of her surroundings.

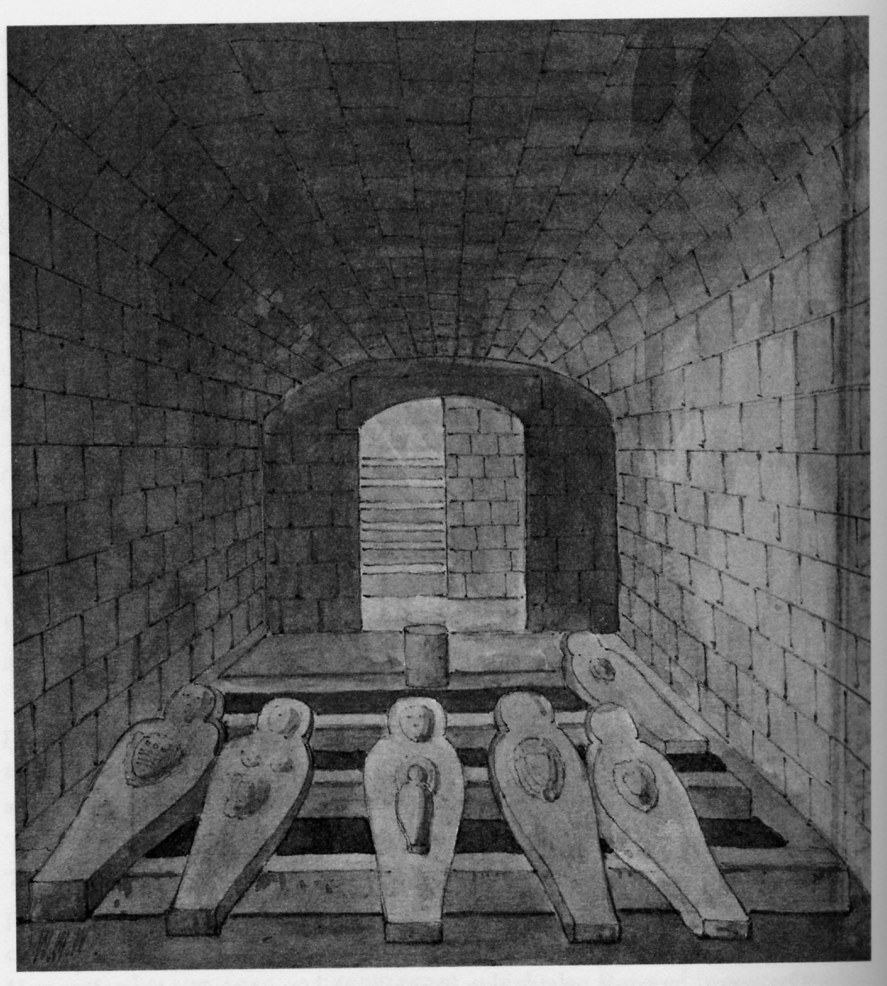


The Chapel at Farley Castle near Bath (early 19th c). *Bath in Time*—Bath Central Library Collections.

Even more uncanny is the manner in which the “ruined chapel” of Catherine’s imagination, where she hopes to find evidence of “some traditional legends” and further “awful memorials” at Northanger (143–44), resembles the spooky and crumbling crypt under the ruined chapel at Farleigh Castle as described by Reverend Warner in this same guidebook on the Austens’ shelves:

The crypt, or vault, under this chapel, exhibits a very extraordinary family party, the pickled remains of eight of the Hungerfords, ranged by the side of each other, cased in leaden coffins, and assuming the forms of Egyptian mummies, the faces prominent, the shoulders swelling out into their natural shape, and the body gradually tapering towards the feet. (34)

Most of these curious family coffins, what one 1816 visitor termed “the cold relics of an ancient clan,” still remain on view today for visitors who similarly descend the stairs into the lower crypt (*Weekly Entertainer* 56: 220). After identifying the Hungerford family members thus on display, guidebook veteran Warner recommends one macabre activity:



The crypt at Farley Castle (1848). *Bath in Time – Bath Central Library Collections*.

One of the full-sized leaden coffins has a perforation on the right shoulder, through which a stick may be introduced, and the embalming matter extracted; this appears to be a thick viscous liquid, of a brown colour, and resinous smell and consistence; the flesh is decomposed by the admission of the air, but the bones still retain their soundness. (34-35)¹¹

Catherine also imagines inspecting the coffin of Mrs. Tilney, which she conjectures may be occupied by a mere “waxen figure” (196). She demands the physical proof of death that, according to Warner, awaited visitors to Farleigh

Hungerford:

Were she even to descend into the family vault where her ashes were supposed to slumber, were she to behold the coffin in which they were said to be enclosed—what could it avail in such a case? Catherine had read too much not to be perfectly aware of the ease with which a waxen figure might be introduced, and a supposititious funeral carried on. (196)

Is Catherine following the directive in Warner's book when she thinks of descending, with determined step, into the Tilney vault to put her suspicions to the test?

Thankfully, there is no proof that Austen herself poked the decomposing Hungerford remains with a stick during any visit to Farleigh Castle, but her signature and marginalia in the family copy of Warner's guidebook suggest she surely knew of this "choice" sight for any fan of the gothic, located about seven miles from Bath. Austen's satire of the gothic resonates therefore with genuine history. Catherine's gothic fantasies may not be, after all, utter nonsense. Instead, their resemblance to actual historical events and relics at Farleigh Castle may expose Austen's ironic project, elevating the ambitions of her early fiction. Resemblances to these real situations would also add to the humor of her story. If Austen bests the fantasy of a Radcliffe novel with her own characteristic brand of hyper-realism, she may be showing readers that the choicest truths make for the strangest fictions.



Only a few pages after Catherine's mental descent into the "family vault," Henry Tilney reacts in revulsion when he catches her in his mother's former bedroom, where Catherine is self-indulgently brooding on her evolving suspicions that his father murdered his mother. Henry appeals first to her common sense and then to British history: "If I understand you rightly, you had formed a surmise of such horror as I have hardly words to——Dear Miss Morland, consider the dreadful nature of the suspicions you have entertained. What have you been judging from?" (203). The obvious implication is that Catherine, like Don Quixote, misjudges the world through the lens of fiction.

Yet, when Henry's chastising mini-sermon maintains his father's innocence through an appeal to history, his argument that Christians (by which he means British Protestants) do not murder their wives is neatly contradicted by Bath's local history:

“Remember the country and the age in which we live. Remember that we are English, that we are Christians. Consult your own understanding, your own sense of the probable, your own observation of what is passing around you—Does our education prepare us for such atrocities? Do our laws connive at them? Could they be perpetrated without being known, in a country like this, where social and literary intercourse is on such a footing; where every man is surrounded by a neighbourhood of voluntary spies, and where roads and newspapers lay every thing open? Dearest Miss Morland, what ideas have you been admitting?” (203)¹²

Admittedly, Henry argues a “now versus then” as well as a “reality versus fiction” position. Even so, the passage where Catherine, her cheeks wet with “tears of shame,” reacts to Henry’s speech by running to her room, “completely awakened” and sensible of the “absurdity of her curiosity and her fears,” looks different in the light of parallels with Farleigh Hungerford Castle’s history and its resulting touristic appeal (203, 204). I agree with the critical consensus that recognizes how “touches of irony” separate Austen’s point of view from her hero’s (Knox-Shaw 111). The novel, after all, eventually comes round to validate Catherine’s assessment of the General: “Catherine, at any rate, heard enough to feel, that in suspecting General Tilney of either murdering or shutting up his wife, she had scarcely sinned against his character, or magnified his cruelty” (256). Long before her narrator’s closing gloss, however, Austen can rely upon local knowledge of Farleigh Hungerford Castle to place a wedge between Henry’s speech and her larger satire.

NOTES

1. Bath guides differ only slightly in their assessment of the distance between Bath and the castle. Cruttwell’s *The New Bath Guide* for 1798, the year Austen began *Susan*, measures the distance as “Six miles from Bath” (55). So too does *The Picturesque Guide* of 1793 (Ibbetson, Laporte, and Hassell 112). Meehan allows that the walk over Brass Knocker Hill “considerably” shortens a journey by road, while “even shorter cuts are known to the initiated” (165).

2. Although Kightly describes Henry Baynton’s wife as Rochester’s “daughter,” Jackson identifies her as Lady Anne Wilmot, the Earl’s sister (15).

3. For locals during the late 1790s, Farleigh Castle’s associations with things gothic may even have included the recent death of a madman. The *Courier and Evening Gazette* of 10 November 1795 reported: “On Saturday se’nnight Henry Kandall, a poor lunatic, was found dead in the Park of J. Houlton, Esq. at Farleigh Castle. He had broke out of a mad-house in Wiltshire, and had strayed to the above spot, where, lying concealed under hedges for two days and nights, his death was occasioned.”

4. This is the title of a James Gillray caricature, published on 12 June 1800, satirizing Rumford’s

advertising campaign.

5. In the novel, Mrs. Allen tells Catherine how she learned the maiden name of Mrs. Tilney from a Mrs. Hughes: “Mrs. Tilney was a Miss Drummond, . . . and Miss Drummond had a very large fortune; and, when she married, her father gave her twenty thousand pounds, and five hundred to buy wedding-clothes” (65). After a few more details about clothes and jewelry, “Catherine inquired no further” and dismisses Mrs. Allen’s intelligence as insignificant: “she had heard enough to feel that Mrs. Allen had no real intelligence to give” (66). Catherine’s dismissal of these facts as empty information may well be ironic.

6. The Cambridge editors of *Northanger Abbey* attribute Northanger’s “cells” to outright error, speculating that Austen meant to refer to study “carrels” instead, which would then imply that “Northanger Abbey was originally a Benedictine foundation” (344, n3). Still, Austen uses the term “cells” four times in describing features at Northanger.

7. The Oxford *Dictionary of National Biography* gives seven entries for famous British women known simply as “Isabella” and eight for “Eleanor”: all are famous medieval historical figures born before the turn of the fifteenth century, including seven Queens of England and four princesses. See also Lane’s discussion of the “Eleanor crosses” (59).

8. Gillian Dow also calls for an expanded view of Austen’s influences in “*Northanger Abbey*, French Fiction, and the Affecting History of the Duchess of C***,” in this volume of *Persuasions*.

9. *Weekly Entertainer*, 56: 219-20, quoted at 219. Farleigh Castle’s popularity as a tourist destination continued into the Victorian period. In 1846, “Prince Louis Napoleon . . . being at Bath, visited the ruins of Farleigh Castle,” where he “made a sketch of the picturesque tower” (*Historical Associations* [3]).

10. Chapman observes:

On p. 332, at a mention of a woolen works “called New-Mill belongs to Messrs. Austin,” is a note (I believe) in J. A.’s hand: “A haunt of the Austens—the Gray Coats of Kent.” (38)

Gilson includes this copy of Warner’s book in his own list of “Books Owned by Jane Austen” although he tempers Chapman’s enthusiasm by allowing that this marginal note (and one more such) might have been penned by either Jane Austen or her father (445-46, K20).

11. A Victorian pamphlet about Farleigh Castle elaborates upon, and warns against, Warner’s suggestion: “experimentalists had been known actually to insert a stick, and taste the embalming liquor. In order to prevent further mischief, an iron-barred gate (originally there) has been restored, through which all that is within can be seen perfectly well” (*Historical Associations* [8]).

12. Coincidentally, Harris hears in Henry’s words an echo from yet another Warner guidebook, namely his *New Guide through Bath* (1811): “As Bath has little trade, and no manufactures, the higher classes of people and their dependents constitute the chief part of the population; and the number of the lower classes being but small, there are consequently few whose avocations are not known, and whose persons and characters are not familiar; a notoriety that necessarily operates with them as a powerful check upon all attempts at open fraud, violence, or breaches of the peace” (qtd. in Harris 182-83).

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