

# The Worthing Society

Conserving, Preserving  
and  
Safeguarding our Heritage

Heritage Leaflet No: 2

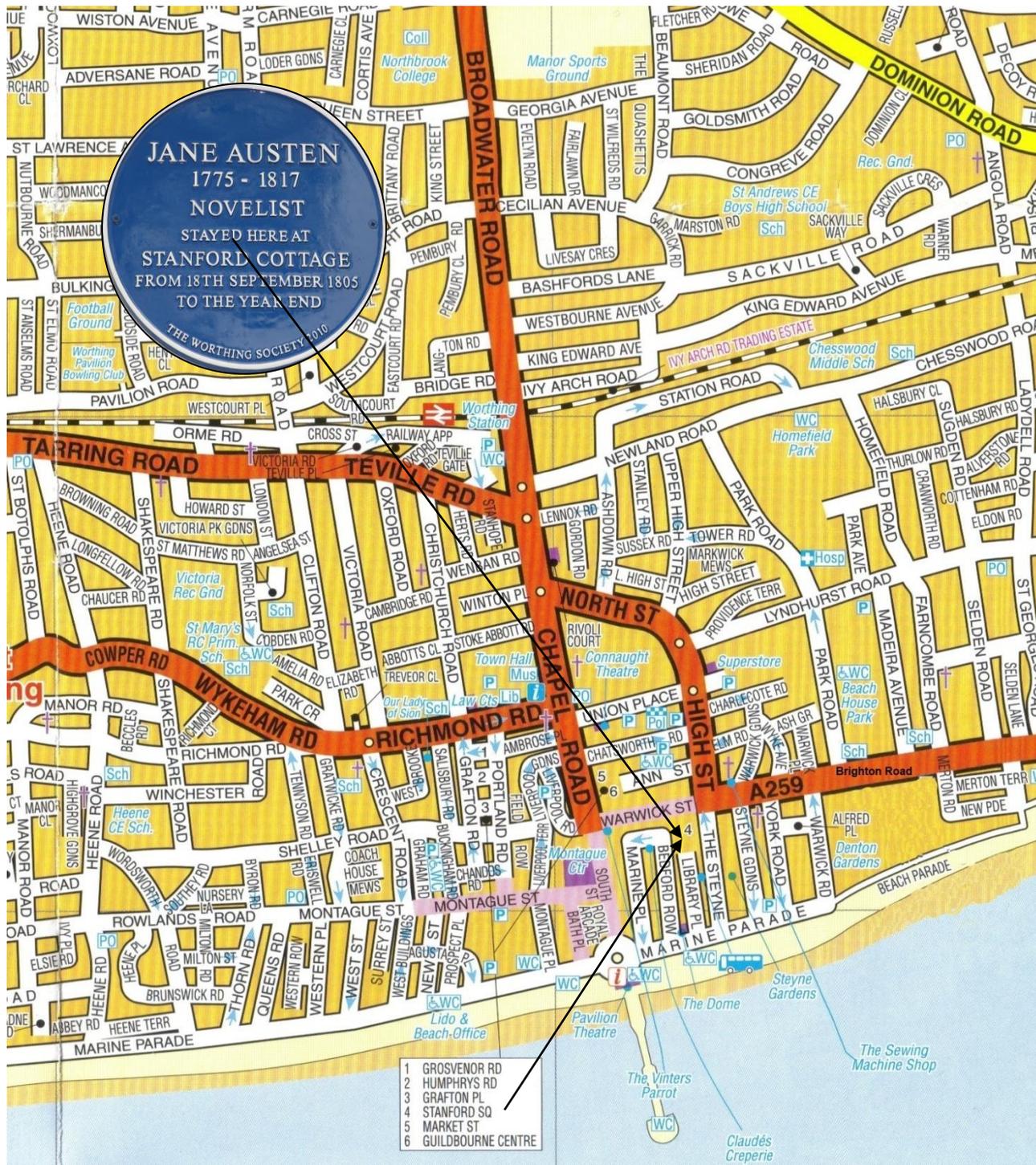
**JANE AUSTEN**



(1775-1817)

This is the second of a series of leaflets being produced by the Worthing Society to accompany the plaques erected throughout the Town to commemorate notable people, buildings, and events in the town's history. For more information about the Society and its activities go to our Web Site at: [www.worthingsociety.org.uk](http://www.worthingsociety.org.uk)

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Jane Austen, one of the greatest writers in the English language, arrived at Stanford Cottage Worthing, on Wednesday 18th September 1805. Aged 29 and as yet unpublished, the future famous novelist had journeyed with her brother Edward from his Godmersham estate in Kent, together with her sister Cassandra, Edward's wife and daughter Fanny, and governess Ann Sharp. Mrs Austen and family friend Martha Lloyd were already settled in Worthing to complete the family party. Notably absent was Jane's beloved father, Reverend George Austen, whose unexpected death earlier in January had left the Austen ladies facing an uncertain future. The lease on their home in Bath having expired, they left the city to visit family and friends before taking up temporary residence in the newly fashionable health resort of Worthing.

The advent of sea-bathing in the 18th century had a transforming effect on the fortunes of the former fishing and agricultural hamlet. Worthing's magnificent coastline, firm sands, safe bathing and mild climate attracted wealthy visitors in search of a sea-cure. Moreover, in 1798 the successful six-month visit of Princess Amelia, youngest daughter of George III, gave the town the royal seal of approval. Demand for suitable visitor accommodation soon outstripped supply and by 1805 the population had increased to c.2000. Elegant terraces and marine villas were springing up seemingly everywhere, to the amazement of older locals. The town's ongoing rapid expansion came under the watchful gaze of newcomer Jane Austen, as she absorbed the air of excitement, optimism and feverish industry around her.

Stanford Cottage, the Austen ladies' Worthing residence, is a late 18th century property, built of local creamy-yellow brick (now painted), set in its own grounds, with accommodation on three floors. Jane Austen's carriage would have drawn up outside the wooden gates in Warwick Street, which opened onto a large courtyard with a feature sweet chestnut tree.

Downstairs, a central hallway divided four square rooms, whose attractive south-facing bow-windows remain in place today. A central staircase led to four, possibly five bedrooms on the first floor, having uninterrupted sea views to the south and downland to the north. Four smaller rooms occupied the attic space, whose chimneys and side windows can be seen from the twitten (passageway) running along the east side of the house. Stanford Cottage may have resounded with Jane Austen's piano playing since Edward Stanford, the property's owner, was a piano dealer by trade.

The Austens' home was very well situated close to all amenities, the twitten being particularly useful as a direct short cut through open land to the circulating library on the seafront. Today's Stagecoach office is all that remains of the once elegant 4-storey Stafford's Marine Library, which in 1805 served as Worthing's post-office. It may have been here, or at the Colonnade library on the north-west corner of Warwick Street and High Street, that Jane Austen attended a raffle, where as Fanny's diary records, 'Aunt Jane won and it amounted to 17/s' (shillings).

Jane Austen, an enthusiastic sea-bather, would no doubt have soon joined Fanny in a 'delicious dip' from one of Worthing's 30 bathing-machines, which were, according to the 1805 town guide, segregated, so that 'every proper attention is paid to decency'.

On Sundays, the Austens attended St Mary's, Worthing's parish church in Broadwater, a mile's walk through fields dotted with cows. A record of Jane's meeting with the rector on November 4th indicates that she would have been here when news of the Battle of Trafalgar broke, bringing joy but also concern for her two naval brothers who were both officers serving overseas at that time.

Austen scholar Deirdre le Faye suggests that perhaps it was during these autumn evenings that Jane made a fair copy of her early work, 'Lady Susan', adding the Conclusion as she did so. It is possible that the Austen ladies remained in Worthing until after Christmas, as the next definite news of their movements is in January 1806.

What is certain is that Jane Austen later drew on her observations of early Worthing, for her final, but unfinished novel 'Sanditon', the story of an up-and-coming seaside resort in Sussex. This precious fragment of 12 chapters, written only a few months before her untimely death in 1817, celebrates not only Jane Austen's literary genius, but also the little town which unwittingly hosted and inspired England's best-loved female novelist.



*Stanford Cottage (Now Pizza Express in Stanford Square, off Warwick Street) showing the position of the commemorative plaque erected by the Worthing Society in 2010*

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