

## VILLAGE ECHOES

### THE DUBIOUS JANE AUSTEN CONNECTION

In the year celebrating the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Jane Austen's birth on 16<sup>th</sup> December 1775, it would seem the apt opportunity to bring up her connection to Goudhurst. The title reveals that this is not a close connection as the Austens were a large family, not just in Jane's native Hampshire but in Kent, where they were involved in the wool trade, land ownership in Horsmonden and Tonbridge. This family lineage played a significant role in the social and economic fabric of Kent, with estates and connections that influenced both the local gentry and the background to Jane Austen's life and writings. Jane Austen's father, George Austen, was a member of the Tonbridge-based Austen family. Several of Jane Austen's relatives, including her brother Edward Austen Knight, had significant ties to Kent, residing at estates like Goodnestone Park and Godmersham Park.

We start with the Austens of Horsmonden, particularly a clothier named John (1629 - 1705), the only son of Francis Austen (1600-1688) of the manors of Broadford and Grovehurst in the parishes of Goudhurst and Horsmonden. Broadford became the home of Jane Austen's great-grandfather, John Austen IV (1670-1704), also a clothier, who lived there with his wife, Elizabeth Weller Austen. Grovehurst was the home of earlier members of Jane Austen's family. Many of the family's graves can be seen in the church yard of St. Margaret's Church, Horsmonden.



**John Austen IV – 1629-1705, buried at St Margaret's Church, Horsmonden**

John IV wrote his will in May 1705 not long before his death in November at the age of seventy-six. He left bequests to his children and numerous grandchildren, which included the children of one of his two daughters, Mrs Jane Stringer. This is our connection, as Jane (née Austen) was the wife of Stephen Stringer of Goudhurst who were married in Goudhurst on 11<sup>th</sup> May 1680.

The Stringers were another notable Kent family originally from Ulcombe. However, following a marriage between a William Belcher and Catherine Stringer of Goudhurst, that branch of the family adopted the name of Stringer. John Stringer of Triggs became part of that line followed by his son Stephen who succeeded during the reign of Charles II. He was followed by his son, another Stephen

Stringer (1650 - 1717), during the reign of Queen Anne. A 17th-century trade token issued by Stephen Stringer in 1661 indicates his involvement in local trade.



Stephen Stringer 1661 half penny token

In 1708 he was the High Sheriff of Kent. According to Historic England, Triggs building dates from the 16<sup>th</sup> century or earlier and was historically the seat of the Stringer family and apparently there is a window pane recorded there inscribed – “God Bless King William, Hannah Stringer 1695”.

Stephen and Jane had no surviving male heirs but five daughters – Jane was born in 1681, Hannah (the window etcher) 1683, together with Ann 1694 and Mary 1699. Jane Stringer the younger married Thomas Weston, of Cranbrook, Hannah married William Monk, of Buckingham in Sussex, Elizabeth married Edward Bathurst of Finchcocks and Anne married John Kirrill of Sevenoaks. Their daughter Mary married John Austen, (1696-1728) grandson and heir to John Austen IV, who were both buried in Horsmonden. A son, John, was born and christened in January 1687 but died at the age of four.

Stephen died aged 70 in July 1717 and his will, written in the previous January, left £2,000 each to his daughters plus a bequest for the poor of Goudhurst. Jane Stringer was buried with her husband in St Mary’s Church in 1725 aged 69



the graves in St Mary’s Churchyard of Stephen Stringer senior died 1670 together with brothers Edward died 1680 and Thomas died 1699

The name Stringer has an occupational origin from the Middle English *strenger or stringer* 'man who worked at a string-hearth or furnace'. The name occurs frequently in districts where iron was smelted in medieval times, which suggests that the Stringers came from humble beginnings. However, another translation from 16 century Norfolk translates it as a 'maker of bow strings'.

While Jane's main literary influences stemmed from other locations, visits to her brother Edward in Kent are rumoured to have inspired some of her works, and the general atmosphere and social circles of Kentish families likely informed her observations and characterizations. We don't know if she ever visited Goudhurst.