



COLLINS HEMINGWAY DESCRIBES THE PRACTICAL SIDE FOR CHAWTON HOUSE OF RECEIVING DEIRDRE LE FAYE'S ULTIMATE CONTRIBUTION, HER ARCHIVE

Unboxing Deirdre Le Faye

EVEN TOWARDS the end of her life and suffering greatly from illness, Deirdre Le Faye showed the resolve and precision that marked her career as the world's foremost Jane Austen scholar. In this instance, she was not writing biographies and chronologies or annotating letters by Austen and her family. Instead, she was standing in a drizzle on her doorstep, carefully directing two Chawton House employees as they backed up a moving van to her house to preserve her books, research materials, and artwork.

These donations by Le Faye, who represents the gold standard for Austen scholarship, are invaluable. Not a literary critic by training, she wrote or edited more than a dozen seminal books on Austen and her family, published more than ninety articles, and served as a member of the editorial board for the Cambridge editions of Austen's work. In 2012, she received an honorary doctorate in literature from Southampton University and, in 2014, a medal from the Royal Society for a lifetime of conspicuous service to literature. And now she was ensuring that her research and related materials would be available to the public and scholars forever.

Katie Childs, who had recently become Chawton House's Executive Director, recalls that rainy day in 2020. 'I'd never met Deirdre. She was quite unwell and couldn't speak. We had been emailing. She had said to hire the biggest van I could. It was an enormous

truck, an absolute tank. She was quite short and difficult to see, but she directed me to reverse it up this steep drive to her home so we could load. What struck me even then was just her determination that something be done right.'

In three hours between Le Faye's medical appointments, Childs and Curator Emma Yandle were able to pack and remove about eighty boxes. 'We just put it all in there, no time to look', Childs says. Despite the attendant sadness, it was, she said, a lovely experience. 'Each room was themed in terms of what was on the shelves and walls. The dining room had the 'good' books; another area had cookery and fashion; the hallway was everything not Austen, not women's writing; Hampshire was in the garage'.

Le Faye, whose motor neurone disease had caused the loss of speech, used a notepad to give them instructions. She wrote: 'take absolutely everything, including the bookshelves. Anything you don't need, sell to make money for Chawton House'. As they took one book off the shelf, Le Faye jotted a note: 'Well-written but parochial'.

Le Faye's collection was so extensive – ultimately totalling more than 150 boxes – that, in fact, it took three separate trips to take everything. Previously, Chawton's Darren Bevin had brought everything that could fit in his car, from Austen-

Right: Deirdre Le Faye





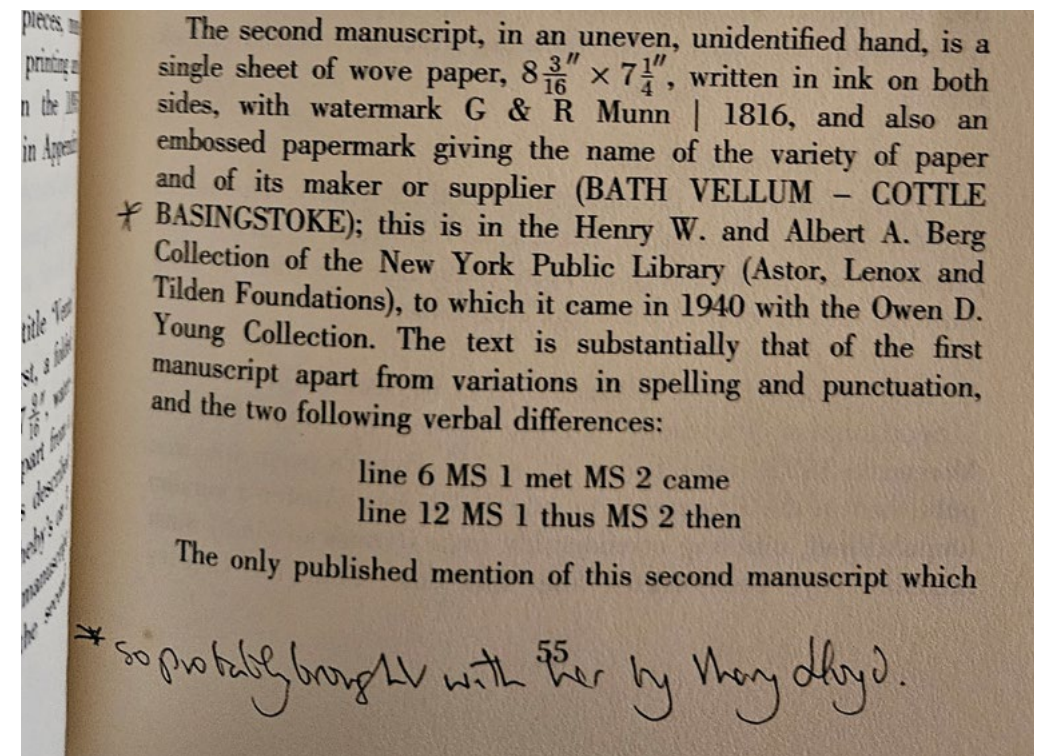
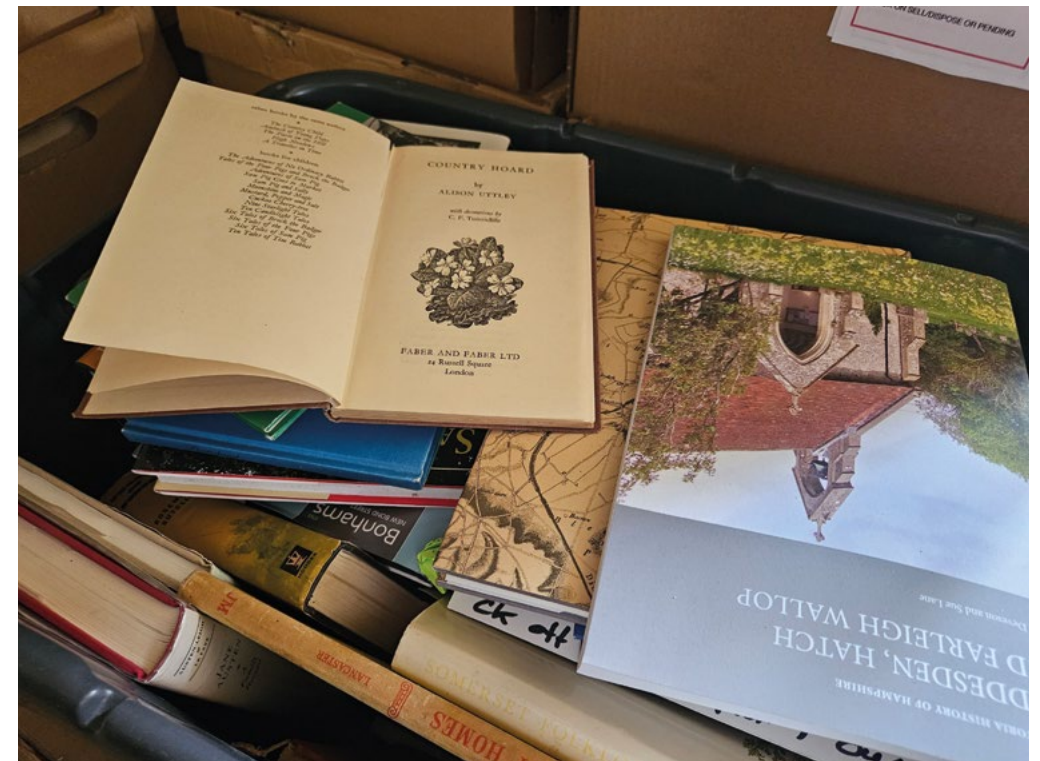
related books, pictures and every known continuation of *Sanditon* to a set of period copper kitchenware that now shines in the Old Kitchen Tea Room at Chawton House.

Next was Childs and Yandle's trip, after which Le Faye wrote how much she enjoyed their company and how happy she was with the transfer in progress. Then came the Covid lockdown. Having taken a turn for the worse, Le Faye became very anxious that the remainder should reach Chawton House while she still lived. To ensure her peace of mind, one of Le Faye's American friends paid for professional movers to pack and deliver the last of her trove in a Covid-safe way. Childs even drew a map of remaining items to aid the crew and gave guidance on

how to pack it. The boxes were carried the two-hour drive from Portishead to an office at Chawton, where they long sat untouched because of the public health closure.

Despite the hurried nature of these final major moves, Le Faye's decision to donate her collection to Chawton House was a thoughtful process going back more than a decade. She and then director Gillian Dow discussed the topic many times, Le Faye formally announced her intention in 2012 and

Above: Le Faye at her desk, Tim Bullamore, 2014.
Right, top: One of the last boxes moved; below: Le Faye's handwritten note referring to paper, 'so probably brought with her by Mary Lloyd'





began dropping off books during her regular stays from 2012 through 2016. (Dow herself collected a carload of Deirdre's books!) By 2015, Chawton House had an informally-named Deirdre Le Faye room with hundreds of books, which were catalogued, and already being used by researchers.

In the few months between the final tranche and her death, Le Faye continued to chat with Childs over email. They talked about how difficult and weird the lockdown made things. They worked together on a press release about the donation. Le Faye's curiosity never flagged. She wanted to understand the mechanics of how a press release came together and how Chawton House generally worked.

Given minimal staff and the hectic efforts required to restart Chawton House after Covid, it was not until 2022 that anyone could begin to think of addressing Le Faye's last major deliveries. At times, a member of

staff would indulge in a 'little bit of treasure hunting' and open a random box. These dives turned up such things as maps and a pair of banknotes from Henry Austen's bank. One item was a delicate print of actress Sarah Siddons dressed as Isabella, one of the tragic characters for which she was famed. Chawton has made a small, cropped digital print of the image for display in the Jane Austen 250 exhibition, *Sisters of the Pen*, but the original, on a wooden frame, is fragile and requires conservation.

Once in a while, a volunteer or an Oxford intern would also open and document the contents of a single box. One such independent scholar, Azar Hussain, has, since 2023, been regularly visiting from London to assist.

This group effort led to another wonderful find: an envelope of thirty-three fashion plates, all numbered and dated on the back. Some are currently displayed in reproduction;

others will go up in the servants' passage of the House. They might even make for a book on Regency fashion. Other prints, which depict people Austen saw on the stage, are now professionally framed and viewable by the public for the first time.

One box Le Faye had pointed out to Childs with her typical sardonic humour, contained materials from meetings of the Jane Austen Society in the 1970s: 'They're all dead, so am I, read through it and have a giggle. It will keep people entertained'.

According to friends, Le Faye was keen to finish a new edition of her book on Austen's cousin, Eliza de Feuillide. She was also corresponding with many friends and with several Austen scholars encouraging follow-up on other topics.

About a month before her death, according to Susan Allen Ford, Le Faye emailed her correspondents in groups to tell them of her inevitable end. She included

lines from a poem she identified as the work of 'that prolific gentleman Mr Anon'. One recipient identified the attribution to Anna Laetitia Barbauld. 'That's what scholarship is all about!' Le Faye told later recipients of her missive. 'And I am grateful for the correction'.

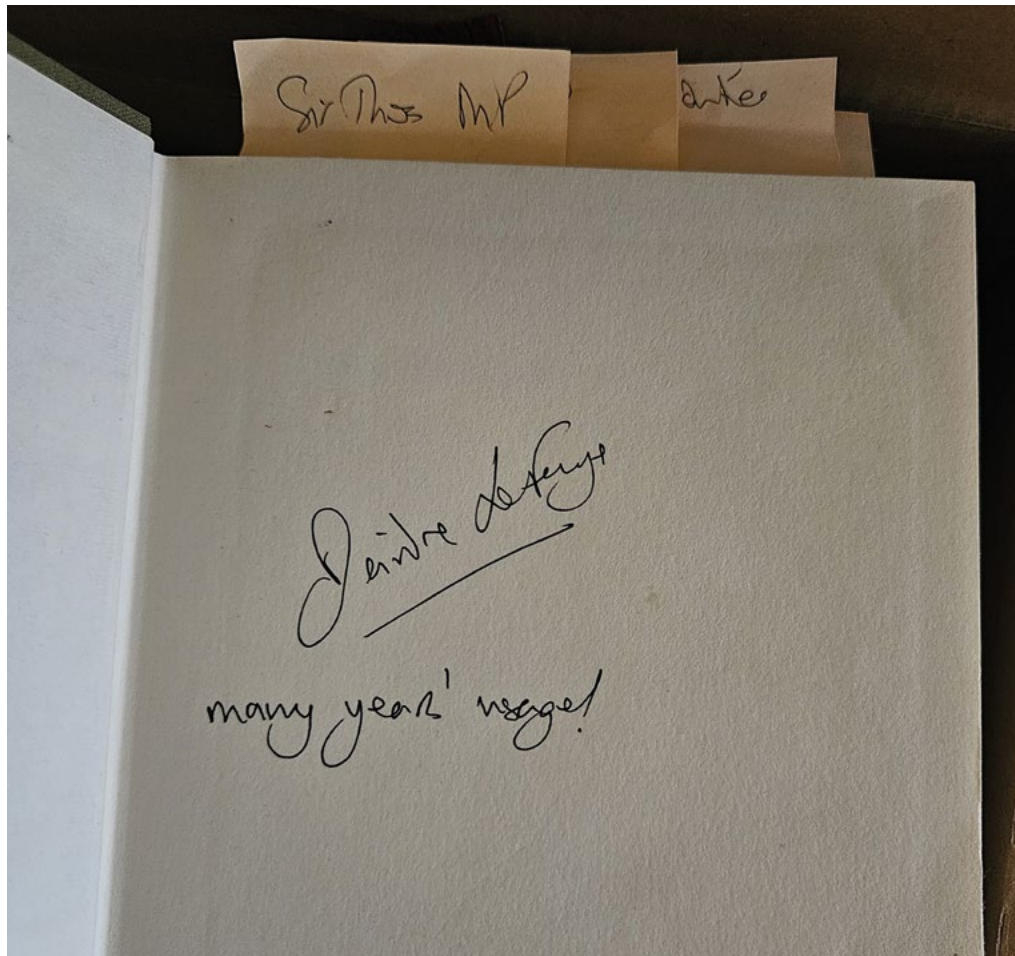
She kept firing off emails till the very end. 'I imagine many people received nuggets of information and things they'd need for research', Childs says. To her many friends, Le Faye signed off her final emails 'Love and Freindship forever', spelling friendship with an 'ei' as Austen did.

When her own research travels diminished years before, Le Faye, in *Persuasions* in 2010, urged other scholars to carry on. Use the names in the biographical index of her Austen's Letters, she said, to check county record offices to see whether any of these people left family archives. Continue to search the Austen-Leigh and Knight archives in the Hampshire Record Office, the Brabourne archive in Maidstone, and Mrs Austen's Leigh family archive at the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust. Do general research of newspapers, tradesmen's order books, banking accounts, and town rating books, the last of which track property and other taxes. Keep going and share your finds.

This essay was 'a call to arms for other researchers to pick up in the archives where she had left off...'. Dow wrote in her obituary of Le Faye. 'She had thoroughly enjoyed her own research trips over the years and wanted others to have that same thrill of the chase.' Her donation to Chawton House had the same purpose, encompassing 'a strong sense of her own legacy, and an even stronger wish to further the Austenian scholarship of the future'.

Dealing with Le Faye's donation highlighted Chawton House's need for a modern cataloguing system. Not only because of the volume and range of material but also, a personal archive includes complicated issues such as data protection and the creation and handling of digital assets. Le Faye's collection will one day be the source of new books and doctorate dissertations. Before then, an enormous amount of sorting, documentation, and cataloguing is required to enable the

Above: Copper pots in the Old Kitchen Tea Room



systematic use of the archive for research and exhibitions. (Just one example: what to do with correspondence tucked inside books?)

Ultimately, the richest source material may be Le Faye's marginalia in about 150 academic books on Austen or women's writing. Le Faye believed in 'facts as crisp as lettuce leaves'. Thus, she annotated, often line by line, problems and errors she found, even in her own books. She crossed things out, added context, provided additional information, or made declarations such as 'rubbish' or 'ignorant!' along with handwritten corrections. The wrong date of birth for Austen elicits a big X and three exclamation marks. Real-time fact-checking, all done with a red pen. Some comments are so caustic that 'the red ink must have been steaming', Childs

says. Yet occasional passages are lined in the margin and assented to with a small tick, like a teacher's.

One scholar has already asked to see Le Faye's comments, however biting they might be, on their own work.

Chawton's problem with this treasure: how do you extract such detailed commentary and make it searchable – just one aspect to the massive cataloguing and organising required of Le Faye's huge collection? The House is now raising funds to 'unbox Deirdre Le Faye' and to hire a curator to carry out the task. This is the cornerstone for Chawton's broader goals to make other strategic acquisitions, support emerging research, scholarly collaboration, and educational outreach, and make Chawton's collections available in new ways.

Her collection supports the outreach



effort because many of her things, individually, are neither rare nor fragile. Chawton can take a box of Le Faye's materials for a 'show and tell' event at the House, in the gardens, in Godmersham or other Austen locales, or in 'pop-up museums' anywhere. A sampling of the fashion prints, for example, was a hit at the 2024 annual general meeting of the Jane Austen Society of North America.

'Her collection is even richer than she realised', Childs says. 'Every item provides a different way to tell a story. What makes her collection so interesting is that it is about the social life of Austen and her family, how they lived. Deirdre viewed her donation in the context of opening up that life to the public for everyone to appreciate, to enjoy, and to learn from'.

Further details on how to support

the Chawton House project to 'unbox Deirdre Le Faye' are available from chawtonhouse.org/get-involved/ja250-unbox. ✨

Collins Hemingway begins most research on the Regency period by reaching for a book by Jane Austen or Deirdre Le Faye.

Top left: R W Chapman Oxford edition, *Mansfield Park*, 'many years' usage'. Above: Just a few files: more than 150 boxes remain to be sorted.