

Dancing with Jane Austen

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Jane Austen's novels were published between 1811 and 1817, and consequently they have nearly all been dramatised in Regency Dress. The modern public perception of Jane Austen's world is thus Regency England. Nevertheless, three of her books were originally written in the 1790s and from a dancing point of view Jane retired from attending Public Assemblies in 1809. So, her personal experiences of social dancing are all pre-Regency.

This is a major question of consideration within our group, *The Jane Austen Dancers*: should we be dressing and dancing as if in the 1790s, the first decade of the 19th century, or the Regency, and are there any defining differences?

Jane's upbringing

Jane's family background was educated middle-class gentlefolk, and with eight children the Reverend George Austen had limited funds.

Shortage of money kept the family out of the top levels of society, but the children were well educated and able to take their place in Hampshire society, where everyone understood their place in the local order of rural life.

Jane and Cassandra were largely educated at home, but for reasons of economy and space, they were sent away to school between 1782 and 1786, their rooms being more valuable to accommodate extra pupils for the Rev. Austen. At schools in Oxford and Southampton and later in Reading, the girls were taught various useful accomplishments like spelling, needlework, French and certainly dancing lessons for deportment.

In 1784, a dancing master in Bath, one Monsieur Froment, taught the 'Minuet de la cour, Minuet de la Reine, Minuet Dauphine, Louvre, gavotte, allemands and cotillions'. His tutorial intention was

to make his scholars dance gracefully and in time, which is generally very little observed – he is sorry to see so many grimaces taught for graces.

At the time of the French Revolution Jane was 13 years old. By 1793, when France declares War on England, she is 'out' in society, and England then remains on a war footing almost all of Jane's adult life.

The French situation had a direct impact on some members of the Austen family. Brother Henry joined the country-based Militia to assist in the 'general

defence of the country', instead of going into the Church, while the husband of a close cousin, Elizabeth de Feuillide, was guillotined in 1794.

In all her letters and books, Jane does not mention the war or any major events until January 1809.

This is grievous news from Spain – It is well that Dr Moore was spared the knowledge of such a son's death. [24th January]

And again six days later:

I wish Sir John More had united something of the Christian with the hero in his death – Thank Heaven! we have had no one to care for particularly among the troops. [30th January]

This is interesting because it shows she is aware, and up to date with the world news. Also she does not consider her brothers, in possible sea battles, as 'troops'!

Nautical gentlemen and members of the Militia appear in several of the novels, all with very informed background detail. Jane only wrote about things she knew and understood and from this point of view, we can accept her fictional scenarios of dancing as accurate too.

She loved music and dancing and was considered a good dancer, even as a young girl. The family attended the local Assemblies in Basingstoke and, from her first ball in February 1793 to May 1801 when the family moved to Bath, Jane could have attended some fifty balls.

Dancing in the 1790s

Descriptions of all sorts of balls appear in many of Jane's letters. The letters date from 1796 onwards, and were mostly written to Cassandra when the sisters were apart. Cassandra culled many that she thought unfit for public consumption when Jane died.

In 1798 from Steverton, Jane writes of the Basingstoke Assembly:

There were 20 dances and I danced them all and without fatigue – I am glad to find myself capable of dancing so much and with so much satisfaction. [Age 23, December 24, 1798]

Apart from the Basingstoke Assemblies, the Austens had a large social circle of local Hampshire gentry. They knew each other well, and their relatives and visitors, so there was plenty of private dancing at Deane and Dummer, at Ashe (the Parsonage),

Manydown, the Vyne, Kempshott Park and Oakley Hall. Some evenings were proper balls but others just involved some impromptu dancing, as in *Emma* at Highbury:

Here ceased the concert part of the evening . . . but soon the proposal of dancing – originating nobody exactly knew where, was so effectively promoted by Mr and Mrs Cole that everything was rapidly clearing away to give proper space. Mrs Weston, capital in her country dances, was seated and beginning an irresistible waltz, and Frank Churchill coming up with becoming gallantry to Emma, had secured her hand and led her to the top – No more than five couples could be mustered, but the rarity and suddenness of it made it very delightful. Two dances, unfortunately, were all that could be allowed.

Visiting relatives in Kent, Jane attended Assemblies at Ashford and Tunbridge, but her brother had a wide circle of friends there for more private evenings. Jane was there in September 1796:

We were at a Ball on Saturday I assure you. We dined at Goodnestone and in the evening danced two Country Dances and the Boulangeries – I opened the Ball with Edward Bridges, Elizabeth played one country dance, Lady Bridges the other, and Miss Finch played the Boulangeries! – We walked home at night under the shade of two umbrellas.

In Southampton public balls were held at the Dolphin Inn; at Lyme Regis in the little Assembly Rooms. But in 1797 Jane visits Bath for the first time.

In Bath, Assemblies were on a much grander scale. Jane's visit in the winter of 1797 is followed by the writing of her third novel, *Susan* in 1798, and includes several scenes in both the Upper and Lower Rooms. The book was revised in 1802 and again in 1816 and only published after her death as *Northanger Abbey*. How much was written in the early version is unverifiable today, but I am happy that her first description of the Upper Rooms is in keeping with a picture of the Assembly Rooms by Rowlandson in 1798.

Mrs Allen was so long in dressing that they did not enter the ballroom till late. The season was full, the room crowded and the two ladies squeezed in as well as they could. As for Mr Allen, he repaired directly to the card-room and left them to enjoy a mob by themselves.

[Struggling through the crowd they hoped to find seats and] watch the dances with perfect convenience, [but even when they gained the top of the room,] they saw nothing of the dancers but the high feathers of some of the ladies.

[By continual exertion of strength and ingenuity they found themselves at last in the passage behind the highest bench and Miss Morland gained a] comprehensive view of all the company beneath her. . . . It was a splendid sight and she began for the first time that evening, to feel herself at a ball: she longed to dance, but she had not an acquaintance in the room.

The picture shows the three tiered benches along one length of the room up which Catherine Morland must have climbed: Two lines of the coveted chairs face the benches. They are crowded with sitting spectators and standing people behind, and between chairs and benches is the space reserved for the dancers. High head feathers are much in abundance, and there are at least twenty players in the raised band enclosure at the top of the room. Tea was served in the tea-room.

In Chapter 3, the Allens and Catherine made their appearance in the Lower Rooms and

the Master of ceremonies introduced to her a very gentleman like young man as partner.

There was little leisure for speaking while they danced, but when they were seated at tea, she found him as agreeable as she had already given him credit for being.

[When] dancing recommenced [they walked back to the ballroom] – danced again and when the Assembly closed, parted, on the lady's side at least with a strong indication for continuing the acquaintance.

Here it is clear that Catherine has one partner, Henry Tilney, for the evening. The Master of Ceremonies was Mr King, and the Lower Rooms were long established 18th-century Assembly Rooms.

By Chapter 8 we are back in the Upper Rooms and Catherine's brother has appeared with new friends. Isabella likes to be provocative and complains:

'Only conceive my dear Catherine what your brother wants me to do. He wants me to dance with him again though I tell him that it is a most improper thing and entirely against the rules. It would make us the talk of the place, if we were not to change partners.'

'Upon my honour' said James, 'in these public assemblies it is as often done as not.'

Isabella Thorpe has raised the question of partners. In Fanny Burney's novel of 1778 *Evelina* is attended by the same partner for the duration of the ball. She is also accused of ill manners for having 'refused one partner and afterwards accepting another', but one can only applaud her good taste in the circumstances!

Henry Tilney and Catherine Moreland remained as partners in the Lower Rooms at Bath as we have heard, whereas in the local Assembly Rooms in *Pride and Prejudice*, Mrs Bennet analyses the changing of partners in great detail:

'Oh my dear Mr Bennett, we have had a most delightful evening, a most excellent Ball. Jane was so admired, . . . and Mr Bingley thought her quite beautiful, and danced with her twice. First of all he asked Miss Lucas . . . however he did not admire her at all: indeed, nobody can you know, and he seemed quite struck with Jane as she was going down the dance, . . . and asked her for the two next. Then, the two third he danced with Miss King, and the two fourth with Maria Lucas, and two fifth with Jane again, and the two sixth with Lizzy, and the Boulanger –'

'If he had any compassion for me', cried her husband impatiently, 'he would not have danced half so much! For God's sake, say no more of his partners. Oh that he had sprained his ankle in the first dance!'

From this we can deduce that Mr Bingley's partners were not booked in advance, his choice sometimes following his eyes, but he also chooses sisters in order of age: a nice social point. With six lots of two dances plus the Boulangeries, they had thirteen dances that evening.

Pride and Prejudice has a dating difficulty like *Northanger Abbey*. Originally written in letter form in 1796 it was revised in 1811 for publication.

News of balls appear in many of Jane's letters to Cassandra. In 1796 about a coming evening at Ashe, she says 'I understand that we are to draw for partners.' But at Kempshott Park in 1799 it is more complex:

I spent a very pleasant evening, chiefly among the Manydown party – There was the same kind of supper as last year and the same want of chairs – There were more Dancers than the Room could conveniently hold, which is enough to constitute a good Ball at any time – ... There was one Gentleman an officer of the Cheshire, who I was told wanted very much to be introduced to me: – but as he did not want it quite enough to take much trouble in effecting it, We never could bring it about. [She names four partners, dancing twice with one of them and adds] One of my gayest actions was sitting down two Dances in preference to having Lord Bolton's eldest son for my Partner, who danced too ill to be endured.

Elizabeth Bennet had similar difficulties with a partner at the Netherfield Ball in *Pride and Prejudice*.

The first two dances . . . were dances of mortification. Mr Collins, awkward and solemn, apologising instead of attending, and often wrong without being aware of it, gave her all the shame and misery which a disagreeable partner for a couple of dances can give. The moment of her release from his was ecstasy.

Sitting out was the only way to avoid dancing with him again, but his assiduous attendance prevented her from dancing with other partners.

Perhaps this is a reminder of the subservient position of women at the turn of the century. Men held the purse strings, and made all major decisions in a family – women had little real choice.

Sometimes the young ladies did take matters into their own hands at balls, as in late October 1800:

There was a scarcity of Men in general, and a still greater scarcity of any that were good for much – I danced nine dances out of ten, five with Stephen Terry, T. Chute and James Digweed, and four with Catherine. – There were commonly a couple of ladies standing up together, but not often any so amiable as ourselves. [Letter, Oct. 1800]

It is noticeable that in *Northanger Abbey* there was no suggestion that Isabella should dance with her brother, rather than dancing with the same partner. She

and Catherine, dancing with each other's brothers, could easily have swapped to change partners. It seems that that was not acceptable. Emma confirms this in her novel (written in 1814-15 at the ending of the Wars), in a conversation with Mr Knightly:

'Whom are you going to dance with?' asked Mr Knightly. She hesitated a moment and then replied – 'With you, if you will ask me!'

'Will you?' said he offering his hand.

'Indeed I will. You have shown that you can dance, and you know we are not so much brother and sister, as to make it at all improper.'

'Brother and Sister! No indeed.'

Surely Emma shows more independence of spirit than our earlier heroines?

The dance repertoire

Before analysing more dance scenes from Jane's world, I think we should consider what sort of dances she is talking about. In all her scribblings she mentions very few dances by name, La Boulangere or pluralised as the Boulangeries appear a few times. In love and friendship the older Laura writes:

I can neither sing so well or dance so gracefully as I once did, and I have entirely forgot the Minuet de la Cour.

I suspect Jane was made to learn that one in the 1780s when it was much in vogue.

In 1793 one of her friends is consoled by her mother:

I am glad for your sake there are not Minuets at Basingstoke. I know the terror you have in dancing.

Minuets were certainly on their way out. One of the Bath balls in *Northanger Abbey* is named a 'Cotillion Ball', and at the Lucas' party in *Pride and Prejudice* sister Mary played "Scotch and Irish airs" for some impromptu dancing.

Scottish dancing is important enough in the 1790s for all of the Bath dancing masters to advertise their expertise and special knowledge of the steps and dances.

At Netherfield Hall we have a strange conversation about reels:

After playing some Italian songs, Miss Bingley varied the charm by a lively Scotch air and soon afterwards Mr Darcy, drawing near to Elizabeth, said to her 'Do not you feel a great inclination, Miss Bennett, to seize such an opportunity of dancing a reel?'

Elizabeth's delayed reply – 'You wanted me, I know, to say Yes! that you might have the pleasure of dispising my taste' – makes one ask if Scotch reels were somehow considered rather common dances?

A late letter of 1817 mentions Quadrilles:

Much obliged for the Quadrilles which I am grown to think pretty enough, though of course they are very inferior to the Cotillions of my own day.

I suspect the quadrilles mentioned were copies of the music, sent to her by her niece Fanny, because Jane



Fig. 2. 'Lumps of Pudding' (cartoon by Bunbury, 1811)
Private collection

enjoyed playing dance music for her young relations. However, for the dance scenes in the novels, I believe they are all conceived around the longways Country Dances. The characters 'take their place in the set', though that could apply to a cotillion, or are 'delighted to see the respectable length of the set as it was forming', and 'they went down their two dances together'. Many other similar statements confirm the idea of a longways set.

The Austen music books at Chawton have pieces in them that could be used for dancing, but only one has any dance instructions, and there are no indications to suggest they were so used. Country dances of Jane Austen's time can be found in many collections. The Jane Austen Dancers have been working on the so-called caricature dance fans of the 1790s, particularly the one in Manchester's Gallery of English Costume dated 1791. It has topical delights such as "Westminster Election", "The Ultimatum" and "No Taxes".

Bath Library Archives have been useful, and of special interest is a small handwritten book of dance tunes circa 1800. While this is a tune-only musician's book, the user managed to add the simple dance figures below each dance, for which we are extremely grateful. We have used a few of these dances, but 'Charity Boy' has become very special: a strathspey, originally copied from a collection of dances of 1797, it is the same music as a piece in the Chawton Music books called 'Glenfiddich'. We were delighted to make the connection.

Dancing in the early 1800s

In 1801 Jane was uprooted from Hampshire and moved to Bath with her parents and sister – residing there until after her father's death in 1805. Mrs Austen and daughters then settle in Southampton from 1806 until 1809, when rich brother Edward finds a permanent home for them on his estate at Chawton – back in the Hampshire countryside.

Jane droops in a town environment. She attends the Assemblies in Bath and Southampton, but she has lost much of her bubbling enjoyment of these occasions.

May 1801, last ball of the Season:

Before tea rather a dull affair . . . only one dance danced by four couple. Think of four couple surrounded by about a hundred people dancing in the Upper rooms at Bath!

Southampton is better, as in December 1809: 'Yes I mean to go to as many balls as possible that I may have a good bargain.' The season was booked in advance and money was precious! But it was Jane's last chance to dance before moving to Chawton where:

Yes, Yes, we will have a pianoforte – as good a one as can be got for 30 guineas. And I will practise my country dances, that we may have some amusement for our nephews and nieces, when we have the pleasure of their company. [28th December 1808]

In his *Companion to the Ballroom* of 1816 Thomas Wilson gives very detailed instructions on the correct running of the country dances at a ball – mostly a long list of what not to do without the Master of Ceremonies' permission. In simple terms, the dance was led by the lady of highest social standing – the leading lady or couple 'calling' or choosing the dance.

When the couple calling the dance has gone down three couples, then the second couple should begin, and so on with all the couples in succession [till the leading couple regains the top and goes down 3 couples again,] when the dance is finished.

The second couple (next in social standing) is then in position to call the next dance. It is worth wading through Wilson – when you have time and patience!

While considering how far Jane and her characters dance within Wilson's rules, we like to study some characters from a cartoon by Bunbury of 1811 (Fig. 2, opposite). The gentlemen are in a mixture of 18th- and 19th-century outfits, but the ladies are all more or less up to date. The whole scene, named "Lumps of Pudding" is enough to make all dancing masters despair!

Jane, in November 1800, about a Hampshire private ball, writes that her last partner was a 'Mr Mathew, with whom I called the last'.

In *Emma*, at the private ball at the Crown Inn:

Emma must submit to standing second to Mrs Elton though she had always considered the ball as peculiarly for her. It was almost enough to make her think of marrying.

Emma was also aware of some social unpleasantness at the ball because –

She was not yet dancing: she was working her way up from the bottom, and had therefore leisure to look around. When she was only halfway up the set, the whole group were exactly behind her, and she would no longer allow eyes to watch.

Staring was obviously bad manners, but this scene also suggests that couples lower down the set did not start dancing until the leading couple reached them. Altogether a country dance could take a long time, if there were many couples – cousin Elizabeth writes of life in Cheltenham in 1797:

There are plays three times a week, which are exceedingly well attended, and Balls twice. At the last I danced every dance which was taking a tolerable degree of exercise, considering there were above thirty couple.

She was 36 years old at the time!

Strange manners sometimes occur in the ballroom as in the famous dance scene in *Pride and Prejudice*:

at that moment Sir William Lucas appeared close to them meaning to pass through the set to the other side of the room - but on perceiving Mr Darcy, he stopt with a bow of superior courtesy to compliment him on his dancing and his partner. [*P & P*, Chapter 18]

Such an interruption would be thought poor taste today,

and it must have caused serious complications for the other dancers, as Sir William talks for a full paragraph!

But I will leave the last word on country dances to Henry Tilney – in the Upper Rooms in Bath:

That gentleman would have put me out of patience had he staid with you half a minute longer. He has no business to withdraw the attention of my partner from me. We have entered into a contract of mutual agreeableness for the space of an evening and all our agreeableness belongs solely to each other for that time. . . . I consider a country-dance as an emblem of marriage. Fidelity and complaisance are the principle duties of both, and those men who do not chuse to dance or marry themselves have no business with the partners or wives of their neighbours. [However, Catherine points out that] People that marry can never part, [but] People that dance only stand opposite each other in a long room for half-an-hour. [N.A., Chapter 10]

There are a few other nuts and bolts needed for a ball besides the rooms, the music, the dancers and the company. The mechanics of how they travelled, what sustenance was provided, how long would it last? – all needed sorting out before the evening.

In November 1800 Charles is home to go to a ball with Jane:

We walked down to Deane to dinner . . . It was a pleasant evening – the Ball began at 10, we supped at 1, and were at Deane before 5.

Jane frequently dines and stays with friends, to be able to travel with them to a Ball in their carriage. On one occasion she had three offers of transport and a bed for the night and was therefore ‘more at the ball than anyone else’!

However, when she was going off visiting, the timing of her departure was a serious matter of careful manners. When a Ball was in the offing:

If I do not stay for the Ball, I would not on any account do so uncivil a thing by the Neighbourhood as to set off at that very time for another place. [21st November 1800]

Soup was often considered a necessity as a warming welcome at winter Assemblies, because travelling by carriage could be extremely chilly. So in *Pride and Prejudice* Mr Bingley says:

as for the ball, it is quite a settled thing; and as soon as Nicholls has made white soup enough I shall send round my cards.

At Public Assemblies tea was provided to break up the evening and refresh the participants, but at private balls a supper was expected. Jane gives us a lovely glimpse of the thinking that goes into planning a ball in *Emma*. Mr and Mrs Weston wonder if they can fit enough couples into their house – ‘five couples would be at least 10’ – by using two receptions rooms with doors ‘just opposite’ and ‘dancing across the passage’. A not impossible suggestion, given that Georgian doors

were usually double ones. But it would be too awkward – ‘What could be worse than dancing without space to turn in’ – so they decide to investigate the Crown Inn.

At the time of the ballroom being built suppers had not been in question, and a small cardroom adjoining was the only addition.

Mrs Weston's proposal of having ‘no regular supper, merely sandwiches etc set out in the little room . . . was scouted as a wretched suggestion’ and was not the little room wanted as a cardroom?

A Private dance without sitting down to supper was pronounced an infamous fraud upon the rights of men and women; and Mrs Weston must not speak of it again.

There was another large room, but it was at the other end of the house and there was

a long awkward passage must be gone through to get to it. . . .

Mrs Weston was afraid of draughts for the young people in that passage, [but] neither Emma nor the gentlemen could tolerate the prospect of being miserably crowded at supper. . . .

Eventually Mrs Weston like a sweet-tempered woman and a good wife, had examined the passage again, and found the evils of it much less than she had supposed before – and here ended the difficulties of decision! . . . All the minor arrangements of table and chair, lights and music, tea and supper – were left as mere trifles to be settled at any time.

The ‘trifles’ are all still essential requirements that need to be organised when planning a ball today.

For our last Jane Austen words we turn to *Mansfield Park*, the other novel (written and published during the Regency) with a dance scene:

[Fanny took] a last look at the five or six couple, Who were still hard at work – and then, creeping slowly up the principal staircase, pursued by ceaseless country dance, feverish with hopes and fears, soup and negus, sore-footed and fatigued, restless and agitated, yet feeling, in spirit of everything, that a ball was indeed delightful.

To summarise, I would say that Jane Austen does not seem to contribute much to the concept of the Great Divide. Her English society seems to evolve steadily rather than jeté forward with new ideas. Perhaps the clearest historical point that she give us is the change from one partner for the evening, to having several different partners, which is indicated in her letters of 1799-1800. The change from Cotillion to Quadrille is also noted, but otherwise evidence about dancing is largely circumstantial. The thoughts and development of her characters were more important to her than the history of dance.