

TALES FROM THE HILLS

(Ashmansworth and Crux Easton)



Many places in England claim 'Good Queen Bess Slept Here.' At Ashmansworth we claim that 'Jane Austen Danced Here!' We feel it is something to boast about that Jane, a penetrating observer of country dances, actually attended a dance here at Ashmansworth, and no doubt took background notes for her novels!

Everyone wants to claim Jane Austen for their own. Our tale of the dance is a longstanding tradition in the village, and it is also recorded in print by a former Professor of Music at Birmingham University. The dance was held at Steeles Farm. We know from the written record that Jane frequently stayed with her friends, the Lloyds, at Ibthorpe near Hurstbourne Tarrant, so the story of the dance is easy to believe.

Does she ever mention Ashmanworth? Well, sharp-eyed readers will remember the passage in *Pride and Prejudice* where Mrs Bennett is foolishly fantasising about possible houses in the neighbourhood where the runaways, Lydia and Wickham, might live once they are married.

Mrs Bennett talks of a "Haye Park" and "the great house at Stoke". Then she says, "Ashworth is too far off! I could not bear to have her ten miles from me ..." Ashworth must be Ashmansworth. (The distance from the Austens' house to Ashmansworth is exactly ten miles). She means us of course. We rest our case.

Thanks to Peter and Joan Fisher (who both sadly died last year) and their family, who have run the farm since 1952, Jane would recognise many things about Steeles Farm today. It is still a family farm with cows; it still has an old flint barn and a listed farmhouse. In fact it is the only large milk herd left for many miles around. In the present difficult times for dairy farms it is thanks to the Fishers that we still see these wonderful animals out of doors, grazing the fields, as Jane Austen would have seen them 200 years ago.

Agricola