

Britain



Goodnestone House and its rooms have recently been transformed, creating the feel of a five-star hotel

A new chapter for Jane Austen's retreat

After a £2.5 million restoration, Goodnestone House, which inspired the novelist, can be rented as a holiday home. *Lisa Grainger* follows in her footsteps

Just beyond a 400-year-old sweet chestnut tree, its bark twisted into football-sized knots, Francis Plumtree stops and points to a neat path cut through the forest foliage. The scene, all lacy cow parsley, tangles of blackberry flowers and glistening green leaves, is quintessentially English and romantic – more so when one discovers it was one of Jane Austen's favourite places to walk.

We are in the grounds of Goodnestone House, deep in rural Kent. "Jane's brother, Edward, married Elizabeth Bridges, whose father was Sir Brook Bridges, the third Baronet and owner of Goodnestone," Plumtree explains. "So she would often walk back here with them from their marital home in Rowley."

It was after a six-week visit to her brother's home, with no doubt some excursions to Goodnestone, that Austen started work on *Pride and Prejudice* – and it was Edward's daughter Fanny who was thought to have provided the inspiration for

A path through the trees at Goodnestone House was a favourite walking haunt for Jane Austen, right



Fanny Price in *Mansfield Park*. Even without the direct connection, Goodnestone would make an ideal set for an Austen adaptation.

The three-storey house, originally built in 1704 and expanded in the 1840s, is in Queen Anne style, with handsome Georgian features on one side and a grand Victorian Palladian-style portico. Views from the drawing room extend over a formal lavender-filled parterre and a ha-ha leading to rolling parkland. There's a cricket pitch and a quaint pavilion over which

Goodnestone House costs from £5,760 for three nights for 24 people; there are extra charges if meals and other additional services are required (01227 806 987; goodnestone.com).



roses spill; an arbutum with giant cedars of Lebanon; lawns on which to play croquet and one of the largest and most beautiful walled gardens in southern England. Now, following a £2.5 million restoration, the grand house – sleeping 24, can be rented as a smart holiday bolt-hole.

When the owner, Julian, the 22nd Lord FitzWalter and the elder brother of Francis Plumtree, inherited the 2,000-acre estate after the death of his mother, Margaret (sister of Bill Deereke, the former editor of *The Daily Telegraph*), it was in total disrepair. "As children, for a treat we'd be taken from here to a tiny caravan in the Lake District," he remarks wryly. "Some rooms were floors-in-lino, the kitchen was dank and piled with old belongings – and although there were 15 bedrooms, the house had just three bathrooms.

Now, Lord FitzWalter and his wife, Sally, have transformed it. Among the improvements are new plumbing, electric, 10x additional radiators, Wi-Fi and restored oak floorboards. Family portraits dating back to the time of the first Earl of Sussex were rehung; Farrow & Ball paints, Colefax and Fowler silk curtains and hand-painted de Gournay wallpaper were deployed to create light interiors.

There are now 11 bathrooms and 12 bedrooms – all named after family members – a library and grand living spaces. The feel is of a five-star hotel, with Italian linens, OGA kitchenware and Burlington bathrooms, but with a garden full of raspberries and vegetables to pick, rooms equipped with Roberts radios and Sonos music systems, and a concierge service. Groceries can be delivered and you can call on chef from Rock-hack, the sensational Folkestone restaurant, to produce feasts of lobster, herb-fed Romney Marsh lamb and hay-baked Canterbury soft cheese.

The biggest treat here, though, is having private access to the estate and three acres of flower-filled walled formal gardens, often described as "Sissinghurst without the crowds." "When I stayed, I pulled back my silk curtains to be greeted by morning cows, coating turtle doves, and wafts of country air fragrant with mown grass and roses. Tripping down the grand staircase, I could swear why Jane Austen might have written "I must learn to be content with being happier than I deserve" after a trip to Goodnestone. Being the Lady of the House, even for a short time, made me wonderfully content.

OTHER LITERARY RENTALS BETJEMAN, BARRIE, RANSOME AND DAHL

No 13 Cloth Fair, City of London. This one-bedroom apartment – in the only row of medieval houses in the City to escape the Great Fire in 1666 – was once John Betjeman's home. Current owner The Landmark Trust has maintained its character; even the William Morris "Acorn" wallpaper was reproduced. From £175 a night, with a four-night minimum stay (01628 825925; landmarktrust.org.uk).

The Cabin, Tenby, Wales. Roald Dahl spent every Easter holiday,

from 1927 until just before the Second World War, in the Pembrokeshire resort of Tenby, and fondly remembered cliff walks and donkey rides on the beach. His mother rented The Cabin, this three-bedroom, first-floor apartment with its balcony overlooking the harbour. It now has a Blue Plaque and pretty blue-and-white interiors. From £272 a week (01437 765 765; coastalcottages.co.uk).

The Cottage at Hill Top, Lake District. Set in the stunning Lakeland fells, overlooking

Rusland Valley, this two-bedroom stone house was Arthur Ransome's final home (he is buried nearby in the graveyard at St Paul's Church). It has since been refurbished (Wi-Fi and monsoon showers were not part of Ransome's *Swallows and Amazons* world) and is near several recognisable settings from his books – as well as the former homes of John Ruskin, William Wordsworth and Beatrix Potter. Sleeps four; from £575 a week (015394 88855; lakelovers.co.uk; property/the-cottage-at-hill-top).

Eileen Shona House, Acharacle, Scotland. In the Thirties, JM Barrie, the author of *Peter Pan*, spent a summer in this former hunting lodge – one of eight houses available for rent on the island in Loch Moidart, now owned by Vanessa Ransome. Barrie is thought to have used the holiday adventures of his two foster sons and their friends as inspiration for the ever popular *Peter Pan*. Sleeps up to 14. From £7,000 a week (01967 431 249; eileanshona.com).

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