



## Goodnestone House, Kent: Jane Austen was here



Visits to Goodnestone House in Kent inspired several of Jane Austen's novels. Picture: Alamy

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Save

Just beyond a 400-year-old sweet chestnut tree, its bark twirled into football-sized knots, Francis Plumtre 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. Even more so when one discovers it was one of Jane Austen's favourite places to walk.

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

It was her brother's wedding at this church, on the same day that his bride's sister Sophia married William Deedes, he explains, that inspired the double wedding scene in *Pride and Prejudice*, which she began to write after a six-week visit to her brother in 1796. Edward's daughter Fanny was thought to have been the model for the character of Fanny Price in *Mansfield Park*.

Visits to Goodnestone also provided the opportunity for Austen to mingle with the socially elevated company that she wrote about so incisively in her novels.

Even without the direct connection with the author, Goodnestone would make an ideal set for an Austen adaptation. The house, built in 1704 and expanded in the 1840s, is three-storey Queen Anne, with handsome Georgian features on one side and a Victorian Palladian-style portico on the other.

Views from the drawing room extend over a formal lavender-filled parterre and a haha leading to rolling parkland. There's a cricket pitch and a quaint pavilion over which roses spill; an arboretum with giant Cedars of Lebanon; lawns on which to play croquet and one of the largest and most beautiful walled gardens in southern England. Since last month, following a £2.5 million (\$4.35m) restoration, the grand house, which sleeps 24, can now be rented as a smart holiday bolthole.

When the present owner, Julian, the 22nd Lord Fitzwalter and the elder brother of Francis Plumtre, inherited the 810ha estate after the death of his mother, Margaret (the sister of Bill Deedes, the former editor of *The Daily Telegraph*, London), it was in total disrepair. ("As children, for a treat, we'd be taken away from here to a tiny caravan in the Lake District," he remarks wryly.)

Some rooms were floored in linoleum, the kitchen was dank and piled with old belongings and, although there were 15 bedrooms, the house had just three bathrooms.

Lord Fitzwalter and his wife Sally have now transformed it. Once they'd installed new plumbing, electrics, 105 additional radiators and Wi-Fi — and restored the oak floorboards and antiques — family portraits dating back to the first Earl of Sussex were rehung, and Farrow & Ball paints, Colefax and Fowler silk curtains and handpainted de Gournay wallpaper deployed to create gracious, light interiors.

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One look at that specials board gives you serious hope. No hyper-creative post-El Bulli Espanol nonsense here.

There are now 11 bathrooms and 12 bedrooms, named after family members, a library filled with leather-bound books, and grand living spaces.

The feel is of a five-star hotel — with Italian linens, OKA kitchenware and Burlington bathrooms — but with the benefits of a garden full of raspberries and vegetables to pick, rooms equipped with Roberts radios and Sonos music systems, and a concierge service to arrange staff and meals on request.

Deliveries of groceries can be organised and you can even call on chefs from Rocksalt, the sensational Folkstone restaurant, to produce feasts of lobster, herb-fed Romney lamb and hay-baked Canterbury soft cheese.

The biggest treat of all when staying here, though, is having private access to the estate and 1.2ha of flower-filled walled formal gardens, often described as “Sissinghurst without the crowds”.

When I stay, I pull back my silk curtains to be greeted by mooing cows, cooing turtle doves, and wafts of country air fragrant with mown grass and roses.

Tripping down the grand staircase, I could see 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, has made me wonderfully content.

#### CHECKLIST

Goodnestone House costs from £2900 (\$5041) for three nights for 10 guests; extra charges if meals and additional services are required.

More: [goodnestone.com](http://goodnestone.com).

#### BETWEEN THE SHEETS

No 43 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 John Betjeman’s home in the 1950s. Its current owner, The Landmark Trust, has maintained its character; even the William Morris Acorn wallpaper was specially reproduced by Sanderson. From £175 (\$304) a night, with a four-night minimum stay; [landmarktrust.org.uk](http://landmarktrust.org.uk).

The Cabin, Tenby, Wales: Roald Dahl spent every Easter holiday, from 1927 until just before World War II, in the Pembrokeshire resort of Tenby, and fondly remembered long cliff walks opposite Caldey Island and donkey rides on the beach. His mother rented The Cabin, this three-bedroom, first-floor apartment with a balcony overlooking the harbour. It’s now adorned with an English Heritage Blue Plaque and has pretty blue-and-white interiors. From £572 a week; [coastalcottages.co.uk](http://coastalcottages.co.uk).

The Cottage at Hill Top, Lake District, England: Set in the Lakeland fells, overlooking Rusland Valley, this two-bedroom stone house was Arthur Ransome’s final home (he is buried nearby in St Paul’s church). It has been totally refurbished (Wi-Fi or monsoon showers were not part of his *Swallows and Amazons* world). But it 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; [lakelovers.co.uk](http://lakelovers.co.uk).

Eilean Shona, Acharacle, Scotland: In the 1930s, *Peter Pan* author JM Barrie spent a summer in this former hunting lodge, one of eight houses for rent on the island in

Eilean Shona, Acharacle, Scotland: In the 1930s, *Peter Pan* author JM Barrie spent a summer in this former hunting lodge, one of eight houses for rent on the island in Loch Moidart now owned by Vanessa Branson. He wrote most of his play, *A Kiss for Cinderella*, here and is thought to have used the island holiday antics of his two foster sons and their friends as inspiration for *Peter Pan*. Sleeps up to 14, from £7000 a week;

[eileanshona.com](http://eileanshona.com).

Belmont, Lyme Regis, England: The last owner of this pale pink Grade II heritage-listed maritime villa in Dorset was John Fowles, who finalised proofs for *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* here in a writing room overlooking the famous harbour. Now restored by The Landmark Trust, it is fully booked until 2017 and there are scheduled open-day visits. Sleeps eight; four nights from £660; [landmarktrust.org.uk](http://landmarktrust.org.uk).

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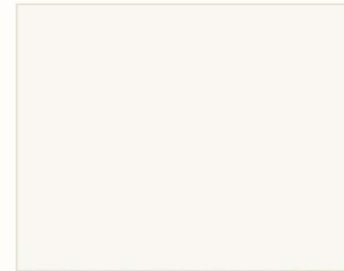
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