

BOOK REVUE

THE REAL 'PERSUASION' Portrait of a real-life Jane Austen Heroine

by Peter James Bowman Amberley £20

It is a truth universally acknowledged.....

that the Jane Austen industry goes from strength to strength, producing a relentless flow of biographies, new character interpretations, TV adaptations, films and new insights into what Jane tells us about social conditions at the beginning of the 19th century, (although many of the latter reveal more about the prejudices of their authors than they do about the world of Austen). American academics at obscure mid-western universities construct their whole careers on the shoulders of Jane. The first episode of the BBC adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice* with Colin Firth as Mr Darcy attracted some 9 million viewers, which was about the size of the population of England during Jane's lifetime. And the industry reaches out far beyond our own shores, to the Japanese for example, who make up about a third of the visitors to Jane's last home, now a museum, at Chawton in Hampshire. Car bumper stickers in the USA state: "*I'd rather be reading Jane Austen...*"

The wonder really is that Austen fanatics and addicts can still find something new to say about their beloved heroine. But Mr Bowman in this new book (2017) has achieved this with great success, providing his reader with an extremely engrossing read from very much a new angle. Using the characters, plot and social nuances contained in Jane's novel *Persuasion* as his template he has carried out very detailed research into a real-life family who were contemporaries of Jane and her world, (although not known to each other). This was the Bisshopp family of Sussex, very much members of the same social (i.e. upper) class as the Elliots in *Persuasion*. In particular the daughter of the family, Katherine Bisshopp, clever and good looking, whose life is almost a carbon copy of that of Anne Elliott. Mr Bowman has drawn on letters and journals of Katherine, as well as other family papers, to flesh out the world of the Bisshopps, most strikingly the close similarity between the love life of Anne Elliot and that of Katherine Bisshopp. Both were frustrated in their romantic intentions because of objections raised in both families that their chosen paramours were "not good enough", not because they were evil or dangerous in some way, but because they were merely of a lower social class, which for the super-snob Sir Walter Elliot and the equally snobbish parents of Katherine was the only thing that mattered. Both women only achieved fulfilment in their love lives after many frustrating years. But this is only one of the many links between the imagined world of the Elliots and the real world of the Bisshopps explored in this book. A great advantage is that through the Bisshopp papers Mr Bowman can offer a much more detailed picture of the social and political backdrop to their lives than we can glean from *Persuasion*. There is barely a reference in any of the Austen novels that much of her life was lived, for example, during the Napoleonic Wars, although her sailor brother was an active participant. Whilst reading Mr Bowman's highly recommended book, I would also suggest you have close by as reference Maggie Lane's equally outstanding *Jane Austen's World*.