

STRANGE CONNECTIONS: THE AMBASSADOR OF CONSTANTINOPLE, JANE AUSTEN AND TOASTED CHEESE

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History often throws up some bizarre links, but one of the most unlikely must be the connection between a seventeenth century ambassador in Constantinople (now Istanbul) and the novelist Jane Austen.



Fig. 1 Jacques-Antoine Arlaud, portrait of James Brydges, 8th Baron Chandos, Turkish Ambassador 1781-84. Photography: Simon Bevan.

In researching the fascinating portrait of James Brydges, 8th Baron Chandos [Fig.1/2], I came across a letter said to have been previously owned by Cassandra Austen [Fig.3]. Dated 1686, the letter was written from Constantinople by James's wife Elizabeth to her twenty-one year old daughter, Mary. Clearly living a life of high extravagance with her parents abroad, rumours had obviously reached Turkey which had alarmed her parents. In a tone familiar to all parents Eliza vents her rage on her daughter's spending and the fact that it has reported that she looks like a 'bartlemew-babby' (a 'Bartholomew baby' refers to the cheap dolls sold at the famous annual Bartholomew Fair). As Mary had been left behind to find a good match in a husband (and hope to solve some of the financial issues which had compelled her father to take up his role as ambassador in the first place) she was in a great deal of trouble.



Fig. 2

British School, Sir James Brydges (1642–1714), 8th Baron Chandos, Turkey Company Ambassador to Constantinople-Government Art Collection

Luckily, Mary did marry – Theophilus Leigh (1643-1725)– an ancestor of Cassandra Leigh, Austen’s mother. Mary was the great-grandmother of Jane Austen – her maternal grandfather being the Reverend Thomas Leigh, rector of Harpsden in Berkshire. His daughter married the Rev. George Austen and among their seven children were two daughters, Jane, the writer, and Cassandra.

Not only do the Leigh and Austen family maintain a strong connection during Jane’s lifetime (her mother possibly enjoying the social status that a link to a once noble family would bring), but Jane’s writing is peppered with names which relate to Leigh/ Chandos family. James Brydges’s first wife was named Cassandra (née Willoughby 1670–1735) [Fig.4] and his third wife Lydia Vanhatten (bap. 1693, d. 1750) (Cassandra becoming a popular Austen name).

Fig. 3

A copy of the 1686 letter in the British Library (Add MS 42180) from Elizabeth Brydges, Lady Chandos, wife of James Brydges, which was once in the possession of the Austen family. The letter is accompanied by a note of authentication in the hand of Cassandra Elizabeth Austen, sister of Jane.

Other names from the Brydges/ Leigh line make appearances in Jane’s works - the name Lydia was of course used in *Pride and Prejudice*, while John Willoughby appears in the 1811 novel *Sense and Sensibility*. It was not just the names from the family which influenced her prose, but also the personal experience of being the ‘poor relations’ – so close to wealth and influence, yet never quite benefitting from it (many of Jane’s novels explore this theme - from *Sense and Sensibility* to *Mansfield Park*). Even more specifically, *Northanger Abbey* reflects a storyline from Mary Brydges’s own life – when her mother wrote to her in 1686, she was recovering from her thwarted love for the wealthy future Lord Tilney. This is echoed in chapter ten of *Northanger Abbey*, where Catherine has discovered that Henry Tilney is to be at the cotillion ball the following day. Frustratingly she cannot dress to impress, as her great aunt had lectured her ‘Dress is at all times a frivolous distinction, and excessive solicitude about it often destroys its own aim. Catherine knew all this very well; her great aunt had read her a lecture on the subject only the Christmas before...’.

Places found in Jane’s novels also connect to the family – we know that the novelist visited her Leigh family in Adlestrop several times, with some believing that the setting of *Mansfield Park* is partly drawn from the Gloucestershire village.



James Brydges (1674–1744) is shown with his wife and their two sons- National Gallery of Canada 4295

Kneller's 1713 portrait of the Chandos family is believed to show Cassandra, rather than the Duke's first wife, who was the mother of the two children in the picture.

A final connection can be found in a name which will be well-known to Austen devotees. Brook Edward Bridges (a modernisation of the name Brydges), was also a descendant of the Chandos line – and he formed a romantic attachment to Jane. His feelings were made clear to Jane through a simple act of knowing kindness when he made ‘a point of ordering toasted cheese for supper entirely on my account’ (Jane Austen to Cassandra Austen, 27 August 1805), during a visit to Godmersham, Edward Austen's estate in Kent. Knowing the author's favourite dish was a way to her heart, the Austen scholar Deirdre Le Faye, in *Jane Austen: A Family Record*, states, ‘it seems possible that Edward Bridges proposed or attempted to propose to [Austen during her visit], . . . a proposal which she had no difficulty in politely rejecting.’

The century which separates the Chandos family link with Jane Austen throws up some intriguing links between the two – and connects elements of Austen's writing and personal life which are little known. I have a feeling she would have enjoyed seeing the seventeenth century portrait miniature of her bearded relation dressed in an incongruous blend of a turban and ermine-trimmed robes.