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Writers in residence

By Phyllis Richardson

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The Mount, Edith Wharton's Massachusetts mansion

It is a truth universally acknowledged – as Jane Austen might begin – that human beings like to look through, poke around and otherwise explore houses that are not their own. And the current recession has made house-visiting even more popular. In the UK both English Heritage and the National Trust conservation agencies report that visitors are well up on previous years, with some historic houses attracting 90 per cent more people than at the same time last year.

The houses of writers attract their own brand of tourist: fans eager to commune with the genius of the famous former occupant. These homes have particular allure when we know that they also had an impact on the writer's work. Fortunately, there are some recently restored gems that satisfy both the general obsession with peeking into private houses and the deeper interests of the dedicated reader or scholar.

The house occupied by the poet John Keats from 1818 until 1820 (shortly before his death at the age of 25) was re-opened to the public earlier this year after 18 months of painstaking refurbishment costing £500,000. Keats' House in Hampstead, north-west London, had been a museum since the 1920s and had its last makeover in the 1970s, when it was dressed in drab oranges and browns that bore little resemblance to what the young poet would have seen. A cheerful pale pink now covers the walls in Keats's bedroom and soft blue-greys and tame yellows prevail in other rooms. Geoff Pick, head of learning and access at London Metropolitan Archives, oversaw the refurbishment and says that this latest restoration is much closer to the original decoration: "Research into paint and wallpaper has moved on and we can now do microscopic analysis of paint chips and say "this is absolutely the colour of the wall when Keats lived there". Where the original designs have not been discovered there are now, for example, carpets with patterns taken from the period, as well as similarly bespoke curtains.

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Keats lived in the the house, known as Wentworth Place, for a relatively short time but during those busy months he composed such works as "Ode on a Grecian Urn", "Eve of St Agnes" and "Ode on Melancholy" and, while sitting in the garden, "Ode to a Nightingale". This was also where he fell in love with Fanny Brawne, literally the girl next door, who inspired him to write the poem "Bright Star", the title director Jane Campion chose for her film about the poet, which opens in the UK next Friday.



Keats House in north London

The house was not used as a location for the film because its narrow passageways would not accommodate the equipment, but it was used for research.

The refurbishment has certainly attracted new visitors – according to Pick, more than 4,000 since it reopened, when normal attendance is only 10,000 in a year. And the film is likely to bring even more.

Austen's life and work have an extensive filmography, with directors keen to exploit the appeal of period interiors and costumes. The houses in which she lived, and those she visited, already form a popular tourist route – and not only because she lived, died or composed stories in them. Austen also wrote explicitly about houses, making the dwellings almost as important as the characters who inhabited them.

In Austen's fiction, houses are not only great dramatic settings; they help to emphasise the relationship between marriage and property. Both *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice* turn on the issue of entailment, the practice whereby an ancestor attaches conditions to an inheritance for later generations, often stipulating that it should fall only to a male heir. It is a particularly sensitive point for Austen, who never married and spent most of her life dependent on her father and brothers for support.

This is worth bearing in mind when visiting her homes in Hampshire, southern England. Both the cottage (now Jane Austen's House Museum in Chawton village) and Chawton House belonged to Jane's brother Edward, who inherited them. In 1809, Edward offered the bailiff's cottage to his mother and sisters. When he and his large family were in residence at "the great house", half a mile up the road, his mother and sisters often visited. Jane enjoyed staying at Chawton House and the entertainment there and at Edward's other grand house in Kent provided fertile material for the social scenes of her stories.



The parlour where Jane Austen wrote

But, while the grand houses gave Austen something to write about, the small cottage in the village finally provided her with a secure home in which to do the writing. The eight years in these rooms were fruitful ones for Austen. She revised and published *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice* and worked on revisions for *Northanger Abbey*. She also wrote *Mansfield Park*, *Emma* and *Persuasion*.

This 17th-century red brick house has lately had a satisfying polish with help, as with Keats House, from the Heritage Lottery Fund. The structural and cosmetic works were two and a half years in planning and cost nearly £700,000. Carried out from January to June of this year, they were completed in time to celebrate the bicentenary of Austen's arrival at the house on July 7 1809. The spare, whitewashed interiors are gleaming and lined with period costumes, letters and trinkets as well as domestic items used by Austen and her family. The surrounding garden and outbuildings are immaculately recreated. A small pedestal table near the window of the dining parlour, which was Austen's primary writing place, gives visitors an idea of the constraints on her work; it seems hardly large enough to hold a pot of tea, let alone a manuscript.

Chawton, by contrast, is a large Elizabethan manor house built in the late 1580s. In 1993, US philanthropist Sandy Lerner, co-founder of Cisco Systems, set up a charitable trust to buy the lease of the house and pay for its restoration. Ten years and £10m after it was initiated, Lerner's project to

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restore the disintegrating structure to its original 16th-century designs was complete. Lerner also set up a library of women's writing in English from the late 1500s to 1830, which is open to the public by appointment.

Austen's red brick house in Hampshire

"The village of Chawton was Austen's home, where all of her six novels were published," Lerner says. "Her associations with Chawton House are strong and it now makes a fitting 40 'rooms of their own' for our early women writers."

Far removed from the dependencies of Regency spinsterhood, American novelist Edith Wharton not only had the means to pursue the life of a single woman and writer, she also had strong opinions about architecture and design, which she clearly set out in her first book, *The Decoration of Houses*. When she came to build her own house in the Berkshire mountains of Massachusetts, it was certain that she was not going to follow the old traditions that she disparaged in her writing.

The Mount, designed by her co-author, the architect Ogden Codman Jr in 1902, is the apotheosis of Wharton's design vision, which was to break with the Victorian past. There are no "black walnut dining-rooms", such as the one belonging to the Van der Luydens in the *Age of Innocence*. Nor are there any of what Wharton called "the sumptuary excesses" of the Victorian style. Wharton and Codman advocated a restrained style with classical features that married the interiors with the architecture to form a harmonious whole. Given the *mélange* of Italian, English and French elements of the main house, it can be difficult for a modern-day visitor to see much restraint. Henry James was a close friend and stayed with the Whartons at the Mount on a few occasions but he snidely described the house as "a delicate French château mirrored in a Massachusetts pond".

The Mount was a place of retreat but also of creative activity. Wharton wrote her first bestseller, *The House of Mirth*, while in residence, and entertained distinguished friends there. Her love of an uncluttered, light-filled room is certainly in evidence.



Wharton at The Mount

After the breakdown of her marriage in 1911, Wharton left the Berkshires and lived most of the rest of her life in France. The house was owned privately until 1942, after which it became a school and then a drama centre before being purchased by the charity Edith Wharton Restoration in 1980, which raised more than \$13m to renew and preserve it. Renovation work began in 1997 and continued through to 2002, when the house, with its 42 rooms and 50 acres of land and formal gardens opened to visitors.

Restoration is an expensive business and the recession is making it difficult for charities to repay loans, even those with a large estate for backing. In 2008 the Mount nearly had to shut its doors for lack of funds but it was able to renegotiate loans and now attracts crowds of visitors, readers keen to catch the air that inspired a masterpiece – or perhaps just to have a peek in the bedroom cupboards.

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Other authors' houses to visit ... and to buy

#### Maison Victor Hugo, Paris

The city of Paris maintains two houses lived in by the literary giant. The second-floor apartment of the Hôtel de Rohan-Guéméné on the tree-lined Place des Vosges, is where he lived for 16 years from 1832 until 1848 with his wife Adèle and four children. He wrote a number of works here including *Les Misérables*.

Luigi Pirandello's house, Agrigento, Sicily

The birthplace of the Sicilian novelist, dramatist and poet is a country house in Agrigento, Sicily. The writer's quarters occupy the top floor while the rest of the house has displays of family photographs, memorabilia and autographed works.

#### Dostoevsky Literary Memorial Museum, St Petersburg

From October 1878 to January 1881 Dostoevsky lived at this, his last address in St Petersburg, on the corner of Kuznechny Lane and (now) Dostoevsky Street. Here, in a nondescript apartment building where he spent his last days with his family, he wrote his last novel *The Brothers Karamazov*.

#### A E Housman's home, Highgate, London

This literary home, aptly named Byron Cottage, was where Housman penned his most famous cycle of verse, *A Shropshire Lad*, first published in 1896. The grade II listed building in Highgate, north-west London, has four bedrooms, three reception rooms and two bathrooms. It is listed at £2.1m by estate agency Winkworth, +44 (0)20 8341 1988.

#### Bleak House, Broadstairs, Kent

Charles Dickens spent the summers of 1849-51 at this six-bedroom property, then called Fort House. The grade II listed home, formerly a Dickens museum, was being sold at £2m earlier this year and is due to come back on to the market in the spring.

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