

Cassandra  
Duchess of Chandos  
née Willoughby



Figure 1. Cassandra Willoughby.

Cassandra was the second child of Francis Willoughby, the naturalist, and his wife, Emma, née Barnard. She had an older brother Francis and a younger one, Thomas. When her father died in 1672 she was two years old. Although she was born at Middleton Hall, which was the home used by her grandparents and her parents, she left there when she was four on the remarriage of her

mother to Josiah Child.

Little is known of how Cassandra responded to her step-father, who was the Governor of the East Indies Company, the main trading company of the period. He had amassed a significant fortune and had a large estate at Wanstead, where he 'added innumerable rows of trees, avenues and vistas'<sup>1</sup>, demonstrating his great wealth in the usual manner for the times. No doubt her observation of these works gave Cassandra her first experience of estate management, which was to become the dominant interest of her life.

Cassandra's older brother had a very bad relationship with Josiah Child. Emma was Child's third wife and he probably married her because of the value she contributed to his wealth. He became the guardian of her children and the beneficiary of their and their mother's estates inherited from the Willoughby family, until the children were old enough to claim their inheritance. He made excessive charges on them. Francis, the fourth Willoughby of that name, ran away from home when he was 12 and went to live with his father's sister, Lettice Wendy. Francis set up home at Wollaton in 1687. He was then 19 and asked his sister to join him and keep house there. She wrote in her journal *'This proposal I was much delighted with thinking it would be no small pleasure for me to be Mrs of Wollaton'*.

The house was in disrepair and the estate neglected since 1642, having been damaged by fire when Percival Willoughby, the children's great grandfather, was living there. The Hall had been built in 1588 as a house fit for the Queen to visit, and had been used to house royalty on just one night in 1603, when Queen Anne was travelling south with her son, the Prince of Wales (Charles I) to join her husband James I in London. It had remained in its dilapidated condition for two generations because the cost of building it had left the family with huge debts. The frugal lifestyle adopted by Cassandra's grandparents at Middleton had allowed the fortunes to be restored and as soon as the young Francis could gain access to his estates he planned to set about repairing the damage and renewing the estate with the help of his sister.

Francis, who had been knighted, essentially to honour his father, died in 1688, and his younger brother, Thomas, then aged 16 went to live at Wollaton, forming a partnership with his

sister in restoring the Hall.

The principal architect of the regeneration was undoubtedly Cassandra<sup>2</sup> and it must have started soon after Thomas joined her at Wollaton. There is a noted picture dated 1697 that shows the grounds close to the Hall neatly laid out.



Figure 2 Wollaton Hall and Park in 1697 by Jan Silberechts.  
Courtesy Lord Middleton

Just ten years later an engraving shows the Italianate style to have been extended with wide tree-lined avenues radiating from the Hall.



Engraving of Wollaton Hall, 1707 (Kip & Kniff from Britannia Illustrata)

Figure 3. Wollaton Hall and Park in 1707.

Thomas Willoughby married Elizabeth Rothwell in 1691, but references in her travel journal suggest that Cassandra and Thomas undertook several visits together to look at other estates, starting in 1691 and continuing for several years thereafter. Although she spent a good deal of her time visiting with relatives, her mother at Wanstead and Lettice Wendy at Haslingfield among them, Cassandra's base continue to be at Wollaton for several years.

As an able and educated woman she made use of her time in sorting out the library at Wollaton. This contained the basis for one of the most extensive family archives, the remains of which form the Middleton Collection that is held at Nottingham University.

The papers were reviewed for the Historical manuscripts Commission by W H Stevenson<sup>3</sup>, whose report was published in 1911. Among them was a history of the Willoughby family compiled by Cassandra<sup>4</sup>. The volume found consisted essentially of brief précis of documents that referred to Cassandra's ancestors but

many of the documents, including some very valuable ones were not found by Mr Stevenson, suggesting that in her tidying up Cassandra had destroyed them. A further volume of family history was later discovered that dealt mainly with her recent ancestors<sup>5</sup>. This was edited and published for Nottingham University.

Both Stevenson<sup>3</sup> and E G Cooke<sup>6</sup> of Toronto University point out that Cassandra was somewhat inaccurate in some of her transcriptions. The most notable being when she suggested that Queen Elizabeth had visited Wollaton Hall. Cassandra wrongly transcribed both the date and the location, leading to confusion about the visit that the Queen actually did make to Middleton in 1575. Wollaton Hall was not built until 1588 and Elizabeth never went anywhere near Nottingham.

Cassandra would have had only vague memories of Middleton as her birthplace. After her life at Wanstead and resurrecting Wollaton it would have seemed a mean place to her. Although she must have visited a number of times, her journals only record one visit; that being for the purpose of taking the best furniture to Wollaton.

Cassandra's maternal aunt, Elizabeth Barnard had married James Brydges, Baron Chandos. Their oldest son, heir to the barony, also James Brydges and Cassandra's first cousin, became a noted man of influence. He was appointed treasurer to the armed forces, giving him access to a lot of money, much of which he turned to his own account, becoming one of the richest men of his age. He married Mary Lake and they had two children before Mary died in 1712. A property called Cannons was acquired through the connection with the Lake family.

James (Figure 4) planned to follow the practice of displaying his excessive wealth by building himself a palace and he knew where to turn for help. In 1713 he married his cousin, making her Lady Chandos on her marriage, Lady Carnarvon a year later and Duchess of Chandos in 1717. Their wedding portrait (Figure 5) was painted by the most fashionable artist of the day, Godfrey Kneller. Cassandra had brought a marriage portion of £23,000, then a large sum but modest in comparison to Brydges estimated wealth of £600,000. Cassandra was 43 and was marked by smallpox. It is evident that James did not marry his cousin for money or any obvious female charms but his sons needed a mother

and she would be especially helpful in helping him to build his palace,



Figure 4 James Brydges, Duke of Chandos

There seems to have been some reluctance to make the marriage known generally. Cassandra had written to a relative that she was not marrying for love but because she felt that it was time to do something for others. In her journal she wrote, '1713 I was married August 4<sup>th</sup> in Chelsea College Chapel so privately that none of my Mother's family except herself knew of it, and kept my being married private till October 5<sup>th</sup>, and then I went with Mr Brydges from my Mother's house in Soho to Canons'.

The house and park at Cannons became one of the wonders of the age. Brydges behaved like royalty, employed the most fashionable designers, architects, painters and gardeners in building and equipping his property. He employed the leading entertainers, in particular George Frederick Handel, who was organist and composer to the Duke and played the organ in the house chapel and at the nearby St Thomas church in Stanmore. Handel composed the Chandos Anthems while in the Duke's employ.

Godfrey Kneller  
James Brydges (later 1st Duke of Chandos) and his Family. (1710)



Figure 5. James, John, Cassandra and Henry Brydges.

Cassandra died in 1735, James in 1744 having married for a third time to Lydia, Lady Davall. Having speculaed in the South Sea Company, Brydges lifestyle was somewhat curtailed after 1720 to be revived by the £50,000 that his third wife brought to their marriage. His profligate second son, who inherited the title, was forced to sell off anything of value that he had inherited, which resulted in the destruction of Cannons.

The monument built in St Lawrence's Church is the main item that remains in its original position. However there is a fine memorial to Cassandra's taste and the decoration of Cannons in the Church at Great Witley built by Lord Dudley. The case of the organ played by Handel is there (Figure 6).



Figure 6. The organ at Witley Parish Church.

The stained glass windows are remarkable, one of them is shown in Figure 7. The ceiling decoration by Louis Laguerre was celebrated by Alexander Pope in the lines,

*On painted ceilings you devoutly stare  
Where sprawl the saints of Verrio and Laguerre*

Cassandra's legacy is in the Hall at Wollaton and fragments are to be seen in Witley Parish Church. Perhaps there is also a little in the writings of Jane Austen. There is a tradition that Cassandra's character was drawn on for the Grande Dames in Jane Austen's books. Perhaps she was Lady Catherine de Bourgh in *Pride and Prejudice*. She certainly had that Lady's attitude to marriage. When her nephew contracted a marriage to a Mary Edwards she wrote of a letter from her brother about Mr Edwards 'I was surprised at his letters telling me that the person which I always took for a country gentleman was no better than an attorney ...'.

There was a family connection linking Jane Austen to the Brydges and the Barnards, shown in Figure 9.



Figure 7. Windows from Cannons chapel.



Figure 8. Tableau from the ceiling of Cannons chapel.

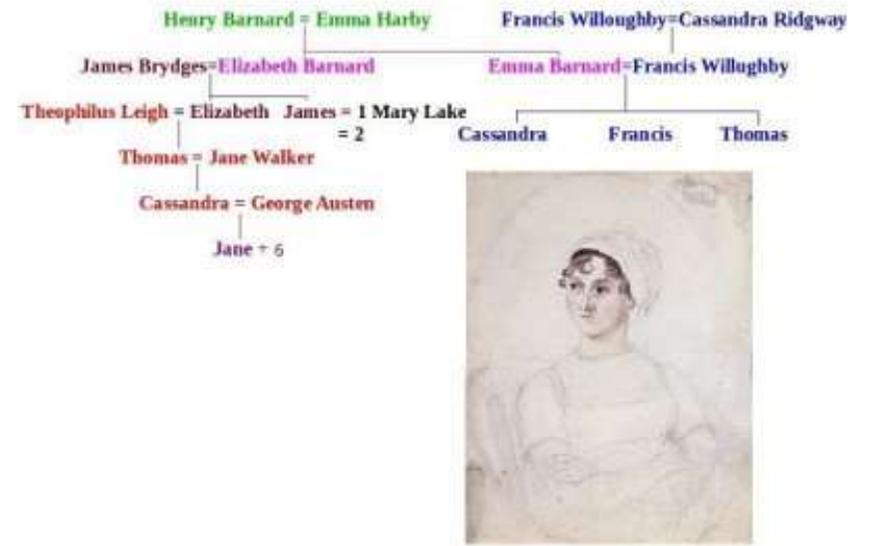


Figure 9. Family connections to Jane Austen.

#### References

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