Welcome back home, Jane!
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A complete set of Jane Austen's novels from the Knight family library has just this week returned home—as a surprise gift to Chawton House Library from collector Sandra Clark.

It is not known when this set of the first edition by Richard Bentley of Austen’s six novels, dated 1833, was sold out of the Knight family or how far or how circuitously it roamed the globe. But a little research has already proven that these books sat on a shelf at Chawton Manor through at least 1908. Eventually, they journeyed all the way to south Texas before returning home at the start of what is a special anniversary year for Jane Austen. This set is noteworthy not merely as an association copy from the Knight family library but because Richard Bentley’s republication of Jane Austen as part of his “Standard Novels” series in 1833 marks, as it were, an early and necessary step towards the literary canonization of Austen. Bentley’s 1833 edition was the first English reprinting since Austen’s death and made her novels widely available to the Victorian audience that would first champion her talents.

The Knight family copy of the 1833 Bentley edition contains, in each of its five volumes (*Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion* were published in one), the book plate of Montagu George Knight (1844-1914).
Montagu Knight was the son of Jane Austen’s nephew, Edward Knight (1794-1879), and the second generation to make Chawton House his main residence. Montagu’s father, Edward, had been the first of the Knight patriarchs to prefer Chawton to Godmersham, renting out his Kent estate starting in 1853. The Godmersham estate was sold off altogether in 1874 and Montagu Knight inherited Chawton on his father’s death in 1879. This means that many of the Knight family books recorded in the Godmersham Library Catalogue, that important inventory of the family library from 1818, were moved to Chawton at any time between 1853 and 1874, the years the estate was let to tenants. Whatever the timing of such a shift, many Godmersham books eventually joined those already at Chawton, with Montagu, starting in 1879, enthusiastically pasting bookplates to mark all the volumes he inherited.

All five Austen volumes are bound in a rich dark brown (nearly black) uniform leather binding, with gold toothing on the spines, in the corners, and around the cover edges. This binding style does not, according to Librarian Darren Bevin who took a quick look round the shelves of the vault, match any book still in the Knight collection on deposit at Chawton House Library, and so we consulted bookbinding expert Stuart Bennett, author of _Trade Bookbinding in the British Isles, 1660-1800_ and former president of the ABAA, on the probable date. He agrees that the binding looks contemporary, and certainly dates to earlier than 1879, when Montagu began pasting plates into the Chawton books. Bennett recalls seeing “similar” bindings on other Bentley volumes and suspects it to be a trade binding. Bibliographer David Gilson records the copies in plum-colored, glazed linen boards, for Bentley’s series were part of the first generation of books to be sold with permanent bindings made of cloth. But Bennett cautions that the cloth option was just the cheapest available binding and that Bentley and his retailers would certainly have also sold the volumes in uniform leather (or half or quarter calf) to clients who preferred and could afford such luxuries. The Knight family
investment in a high-end, tooled, leather binding surely constitutes a gesture of respect for Aunt Jane.

Although this matching Knight set contains all five 1833 volumes in their first “Standard Novels” issue, Gilson’s bibliography confirms that Bentley did not publish them at the same time (D1-6). These particular volumes appeared over the course of seven months, from December 1832 through July 1833, interspersed with other Standard Novel titles. Saving Pride and Prejudice for last, Bentley’s order of publication for Austen was: Sense & Sensibility (on 28 Dec 1832) as No. 23 in the Standard Novels series; Emma (on 27 Feb 1833) as No. 25; Mansfield Park (on 29 April 1833) as No. 27; Northanger and Persuasion (on 29 May 1833) as No. 28; and Pride and Prejudice (31 July 1833) as No. 33. When the five Knight volumes were bound in leather, the binder removed the series half titles which contained Bentley’s volume numbers and announced the next forthcoming title in his series. All advertisement pages at the back were also removed. The absence of these features unifies the Knight volumes, elevating them to look more like a set of Austen’s complete works than like volumes pulled out of a much larger series. Bentley himself began advertising a separate five-volume set of Austen on 26 October 1833, reusing many of the plates from the Standard Novels but making some textual changes (recorded by Gilson), changes that confirm these five Knight volumes were purchased before the earliest states of the individual volumes were supplanted in booksellers' stocks by the later revised texts issued at the end of 1833.

Four of the five volumes still have their old shelf tickets on the inside, with letters and numbers neatly penned in black ink. Only the Northanger Abbey/Persuasion copy lacks this familiar family feature. These wee labels are themselves telltale marks of belonging and match those found in many other books from the Knight collection. The numbers on these little library tickets reflect the shelving system deployed at the library at Chawton Manor during Montagu’s time. The fact that the four surviving tickets are in sequence (A 8 28 through A 8 31) and do not correspond to the interrupted numbers of Bentley’s series volumes already suggests these books were shelved together—and apart from other volumes
in Bentley's series. The final piece of the puzzle came when Director Gillian Dow checked the 1908 Knight family catalogue, a typescript inventory from Montagu’s day currently on loan to Chawton House Library. And indeed, the Bentley set of Austen’s work in 5 volumes is proudly listed there:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Book</th>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Where printed</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Case</th>
<th>Shelf</th>
<th>Vols.</th>
<th>No.</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Austen's Novels</td>
<td>Austen Jane</td>
<td>London</td>
<td>1833</td>
<td>A – 8 – 5</td>
<td>27-31</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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The 1908 catalogue entry confirms all 5 volumes of the Bentley set were kept in bookcase A of Chawton Manor on the 8th shelf.

An addendum slip dated 14 January 1853 and inserted at the front of the 1818 Godmersham Park catalogue also mentions a full run of Jane Austen novels “belonging to the Library Catalogue, now in the drawing room.” But that earlier Godmersham set of Austen’s novels in 1853 could not have been these same Bentley editions. The Godmersham Park catalogue gives the dates of the Jane Austen novels “removed to the drawing room” as 1811, 1813, 1814, 1816, and 1818—thus making them first editions. The Godmersham run of “firsts” reached the Jane Austen House Museum in Chawton in 1983, as a bequest from Charles Beecher Hogan (1906-1981) via a similarly circuitous journey to America. Family
inscriptions in those first editions suggest Edward gave them to his sister Marianne for her birthday in September 1858, an occasion for which they were rebound as a uniform set (incidentally, these bindings, touched up in 1980, do not resemble those on the Bentley set). Marianne Knight’s copies lack her nephew Montagu’s bookplates because they stayed with her during her itinerant life as a spinster and never joined the Bentley set in bookcase A at Chawton Manor. Only the Bentley set of Austens, therefore, can be said to have come “back home.”

The story of the serendipitous rediscovery that prompted Ms Clark to donate this special Jane Austen set to Chawton House Library is too delicious not to share. It may also inspire other bibliophiles to re-peruse their shelves and those of book dealers for the hundreds of missing Knight family books that have strayed from home. Ms Clark, who lives in Texas, has been collecting Austen editions for over forty years, encouraged by her late husband Robert. She generously invited me to take a look at a few of them for a project on Austen that I am researching. She was showing me some of her favorite finds when, after I mentioned an interest in the Bentley reprintings, she pulled this 1833 set off a shelf for me to study during my stay. She had not remembered it being an association copy and reached for it without much preamble or fanfare. But when we opened up the first volume in the set, we both grew quiet at the sight of the book label. We quickly inspected all the other volumes to confirm that every volume was a Knight-family copy of Austen. For me, the recognition felt like an exciting (re)discovery that I was privileged to witness. Here was a family copy that had, miraculously, found its way to the shelves of a collector in Texas. That’s when Sandra smiled at me and said, “this one really should go home.”