

## **Reunification of the Abbey farms and the end of the Knights' ownership**

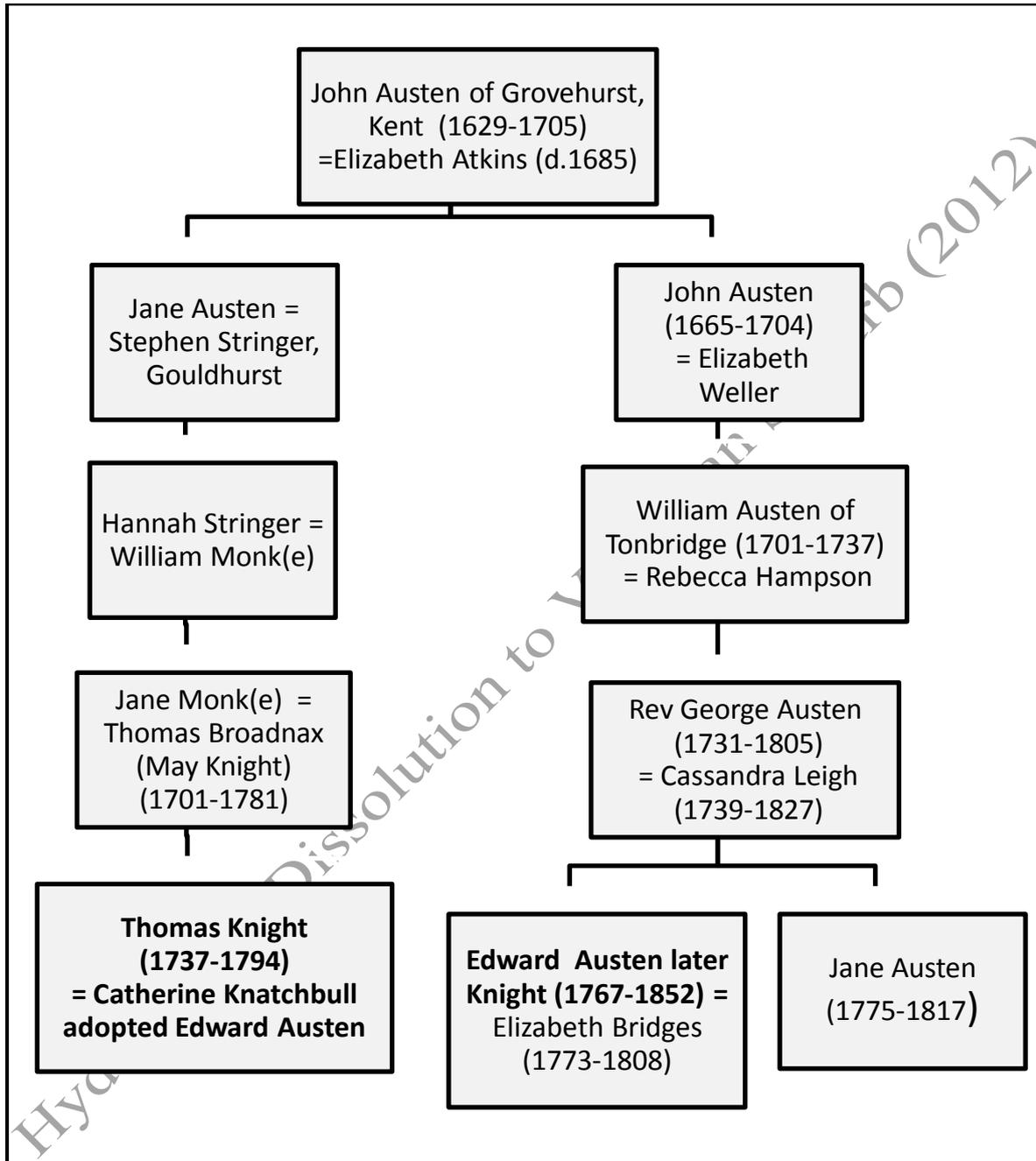
The residue of Thomas Wriothesley's Hampshire estates came under the Bedford family's control through the marriage in 1669 of Rachel, the second daughter and co-heir of the last of the Wriothesley line - Thomas, 4<sup>th</sup> Earl of Southampton - to Lord William Russell. The Wriothesley-Russell family tree is given in Figure 1.10. Families of the gentry often survived financial difficulties by selling outlying estates and in 1768, the fourth Duke of Bedford was forced to sell his Hampshire estates due to the heavy charges on his London estates.<sup>24</sup> Bedford appears to have initiated the sale in the previous year. In June 1767 the Duke of Bedford sold Abbey Farm to Thomas Knight owner of the adjacent Abbots Barton for £5,000. The property consisted of a house with outbuildings and 20 acres, the site of the Abbey, the mill and buildings and 80 acres of land and meadows. The Abbey site and its farm and Abbots Barton were reunited after 230 years and the echo of Thomas Wriothesley in the downfall of Hyde Abbey was finally extinguished.

When Thomas Knight died in 1781, his son Thomas inherited his estate. As his father was 80 when he died, the son may have had control of the management for some years. Edward Hasted writing in 1798 described how Thomas':

Eminent worth is still remembered by many now living; whose high character for upright conduct and integrity, rendered his life as honourable as it was good, and caused his death to be lamented by everyone as a public loss.<sup>25</sup>

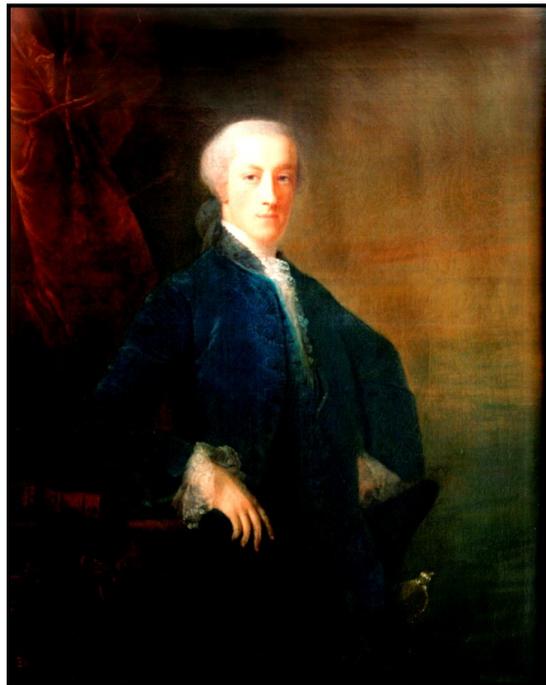
Like his father, Thomas Knight was highly educated and also active in Kentish society and Parliament. He was educated at Eton and Magdalen College, Oxford. He was MP for New Romney in Kent and a Baron of the Cinque Ports. He married Catherine Knatchbull in 1779. However, like many of the families who owned the Abbey lands, there were either no children born or none surviving, and so no direct heirs to the estate. The newly married Thomas and Catherine visited Jane Austen's family at Steventon. They took a fancy to Jane's twelve-year old brother Edward, the third son of the Reverend George Austen and his wife Cassandra Leigh. George Austen shared a great-grandfather with Jane Monk (Thomas Knight's mother). Edward Austen accompanied the Knights on the remainder of their wedding tour of their estates (Abbots Barton must have been on their itinerary) and they asked for him to spend his summers with them in Kent. The relationship flourished and, since they produced no children, Edward was soon regarded as their son. It is not surprising that in 1783 at the age of 16, they officially adopted him.<sup>26</sup> The Austen family tree is given in Figure 3.8. A portrait of Thomas Knight is given in Figure 3.9 and of Edward (Austen) Knight in Figure 3.10.

**Figure 3.8: Austen Family Tree**

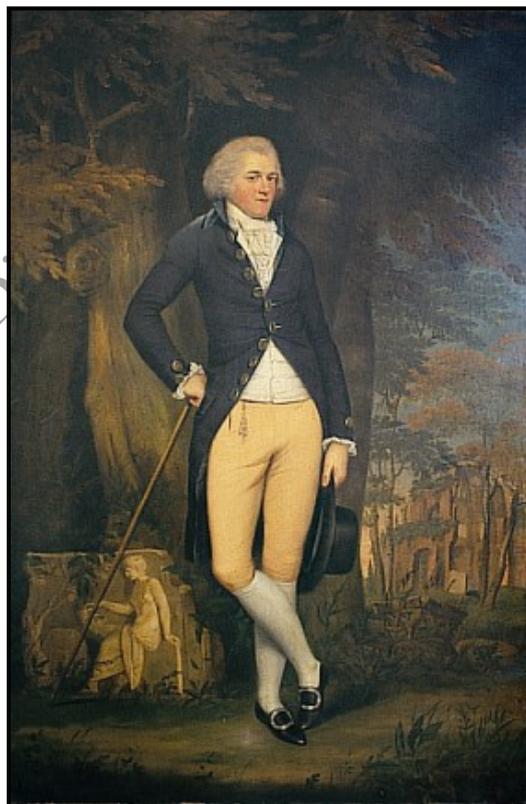


**Sources:** Burke (1835) and Leigh and Knight (1911).  
 Those who inherited Abbots Barton are emboldened.  
 Not all children are included in family trees.

**Figure 3.9: Thomas Knight (1737-1794)**



**Figure 3.10: Edward Austen Knight (1767-1852)**



Courtesy: The Knight Collection, Chawton House

Thomas Knight died in 1794 and in his will he left Godmersham and his other estates, which included Abbots Barton, to his widow, Catherine, and confirmed Edward as his adopted heir.<sup>27</sup> He added the clause that if Edward did not have any children, then the estates should pass to his brothers in succession. Four years after her husband's death Catherine decided that the estate was best passed over to Edward and his family to run, than for him to wait for her to die before inheriting. When Mrs Knight died in 1812, Edward as a long standing condition of the inheritance changed his name to Knight. In a letter to Jane Austen, Edward's daughter Fanny comments 'We are therefore all Knights instead of dear old Austen, How I hate it!!!'<sup>28</sup>

Thomas Knight's estates had been tied up in trust between William Deedes (the elder and younger) and Nicholas Cage, of whom only William Deedes (the younger), was still alive.<sup>29</sup> However:

Catherine Knight out of her love and affection for Edward Austen and in order to advance him to their present possession of the estates which were settled on him and his issue in remainder under the will agreed to convey all the estates unto and to the use of Edward Austen during the joint lives of him and her Catherine Knight subject to a rent charge or clear annual sum of £2,000 clear of all deductions and taxes to be reserved and made passable.<sup>30</sup>

Jane Austen did not hold back in her opinions of her brother's benefactor and in a letter to her sister Cassandra in 1798 comments:

Mrs Knight giving up the Godmersham estate to Edward was no such prodigious act of generosity after all it seems, for she has reserved herself an income out of it still; this ought to be known, that her conduct may not be over-rated. I rather think Edward shews the most magnanimity of the two, in accepting her resignation with such encumbrances.<sup>31</sup>

There are no details of Edward Knight's involvement with Abbots Barton which continued to be let out to tenants. Edward visited Hampshire often and moved his family there when Godmersham was being redecorated. Edward and Elizabeth had eleven children before she died in 1808. Edward's sons attended Winchester College and Edward made frequent visits to his mother and sisters, who had moved into a cottage on the Chawton Estate after Rev. George Austen's demise. Possibly Edward visited the Hyde estate when he took his sons to school. As the nearest city, the family was likely to have visited Winchester frequently for shopping excursions, although the only mention in Jane's letters is in 1800 when her brother James went to the Winchester fair and bought a horse. The Austens purchased books from Burdon's bookshop (now Wells) in College Street and Jane may have combined a visit to her nephews with a browse at Mr Burdon's.<sup>32</sup>

Winchester residents did feature in the Austens' circle of friends and acquaintances. In a letter to Cassandra in 1778 Jane tells how her father, George Austen, had applied to Mr May, a brewer of Basingstoke and Mr Deane of Winchester for an alehouse on behalf of John (known as Robert and the husband of Nanny Hilliard, née Knight). Jane continues:

This was my mother's idea, who thought he would be proud to oblige a relation of Edward in return for Edward's accepting his money. He sent a very civil answer indeed, but had no house vacant at present.<sup>33</sup>

Catherine Knight still had an interest in Abbots Barton although she had left the management to Edward. Catherine had moved to Canterbury leaving Edward the pleasure and worries of Godmersham Park. Thomas Knight's trustees who included William Deedes (the younger) still monitored the legalities. Edward's stewardship lasted for 13 years before the decision was made to sell this more remote part of the Knight's lands and his future inheritance.

The economy was buoyant during the earlier part of the nineteenth century. Edward was able to release capital to meet financial demands and cut costs by selling land which was expensive and difficult to maintain. In February 1811 Abbots Barton Farm, extending to 501 acres of uplands and water meadows, was sold for £33,670 to William Simonds of Priors Barton Farm in St Cross. The Simonds were a Reading malting family, whose main outlet in the late 1700s was the London markets. The Hampshire branch of the family had moved into farming and taken the tenancy of Priors Barton Farm from the Dean and Chapter in the 1760s.

To meet the cost, Simonds raised a mortgage of £10,000 from his relative William Blackall Simonds.<sup>34</sup> There was a quit rent due for £2 2s. 7d. p.a. to the manor.<sup>35</sup> This was payable to the Bedford family who still owned the manorial rights of Abbots Worthy, part of which - Bullbridge meads - was included in the sale to Thomas Knight in 1767.

Deeds often contain the history of the estate to provide legal provenance of title. Before compulsory land registration, proof of title required details of the chain of conveyance from the initial grant. A challenge to any link in the chain could undermine the title. The owner was merely the person in possession with the best claim to title, who could at any time be ousted by a superior claimant. The schedule of the land provides key events and dates of transfer. Commencing in 1659 when Anne Mynne died, ownership is traced through the Lewkenors, Elizabeth Knight and her two husbands, then to Thomas (Broadnax) May, his son Thomas, and finally to the adopted Edward Austen. The right to sell was reiterated. Whereas the estates of Godmersham and Chawton could not be sold or exchanged because of a deed of trust, this stipulation did not apply to Abbots Barton. Simonds was required to pay 10s. to Deedes to surrender the remainder of the 99-year lease created in 1798 in order to merge it with the freehold of the property.