

## Edward Brook Bridges: The Jane Austen connection

*By Henny Shotter*

The old vicarage in Lenham is today divided into three homes.



For generations, this building was home to Lenham vicars, many of them from very well-heeled families. One of them, Edward Brook Bridges, son of Sir Brook William Bridges and Fanny Fowler, was vicar in Lenham, Goodnestone and Wingham. Edward had 13 brothers who were all called "Brook". It is said that his father, who owned Goodnestone Park, was responsible for giving the vicarage, a Wealden Hall House, its Georgian outer walls. However, inside the building the blackened King Post in the loft is a give-away that this building is much older than it first appears.

Edward Brook Bridges's sister had married Jane Austen's brother and Edward and Jane met socially on many occasions. In the 2007 BBC production, *Miss Austen Regrets*, Edward Brook Bridges played a pivotal role, skillfully portrayed by Hugh Bonneville.<sup>i</sup>

In 1796 Jane was at a ball in Goodnestone, the splendid home <sup>ii</sup>of the Bridges family. She writes : *We were at a ball on Saturday, I assure you. We dined at Goodnestone, and in the evening danced two country-dances and the Boulangeries. I opened the ball with Edward Bridges;.....'* <sup>iii</sup>

In 1805 she writes: '*We were agreeably surprised by Edward Bridges company...He had been, strange to tell, too late for the cricket match , too late at least to play himself, and, not being asked to dine with the players, came home. It is impossible to do justice to the hospitality of his attention towards me: he made a point of ordering toasted cheese for supper entirely on my account.*

Researchers into Jane Austen's life are divided in their opinion whether Edward Bridges proposed to her or not. When she heard about Edward Bridge's engagement to Harriet Foote in 1808, she was surprised. Harriet Foote seemed to have been a wife who was 'ailing' a lot and preferred to stay in the fresh sea air in Ramsgate when her husband became vicar in Lenham. In a letter dated September 25, 1813, Austen observes that Edward Bridges



*The image shows the estate as it was in 1704*

and his wife had been in Ramsgate all summer because of her health. She writes about several occasions when Edward Bridges dropped in at Goodnestone or Godmersham, sometimes in the company of friends, on his way to Lenham. She writes in October 1813: *Edward Bridges and his friend did not forget to arrive. The friend is a Mr. Wigram, one of the three-and twenty children of a great rich mercantile, Sir Robert Wigram, an old acquaintance of the Footes, but very recently known to Edward B. The history of his coming here is, that, intending to go from Ramsgate to Brighton, Edward B. persuaded him to take Lenham on his way, which gave him the convenience of M.W's gig, and the comfort of not being alone there; but probably thinking a few days at Godmersham would be the cheapest and pleasantest way of entertaining his friend and himself, offered a visit here, and here they stay till to-morrow.*

Edward Bridges was also rector of Wingham and stayed in Lenham only for a short time: he was followed by a curate. The parish and the vicar were arguing about the tithe which he should have received. In 1823 the matter seems to have come to a resolution about which he wasn't too pleased. In a letter<sup>iv</sup> to his solicitor in Charing, Mr. Norwood, he writes: ...but I must candidly own that after the treatment I have received at the hands of the Parish after the expense to which they have driven me, after the menacing and taunting language they have used and the high and crowing attitude they assumed, they have no right to expect the lenity that has been shown them...'

We don't know the exact reason for the fallout between vicar and parish but perhaps he just spent too many summers in Ramsgate. Edward Bridges died in 1825 in Wingham. His 'ailing' wife survived him by forty years. Their youngest son became the 8th Baronet Bridges. As he remained unmarried, the family line ended upon his death.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://janeausten.co.uk/blogs/jane-austen-life/reverend-brook-edward-bridges-and-the-bridges-of-goodnestone-park?srsltid=AfmBOoow05aBMj75aPYnVEPBxlouobFyYJ2VOLv7fqcdJmezjJqZMOBG>

<sup>ii</sup> Image from Wikipedia

<sup>iii</sup> Letters of Jane Austen

<sup>iv</sup> in private ownership