

Susan Civale: Chawton House fellowship

WSG member [Susan Civale](#), Senior Lecturer in English Literature at Canterbury Christ Church University, just finished a month at [Chawton House Library](#) researching the poet and actress [Mary Robinson](#) (1757-1800). She reflects on her experience below.



Chawton House Library

I spent the month of April on a Visiting Fellowship at [Chawton House Library](#), the one-time home of Jane Austen's brother, Edward, and now a research centre specialising in women's writing 1600-1830. For the entire month, the three other Visiting Fellows and I had free rein over the library's collection and reading rooms, its 275-acre grounds (which include a Walled Garden and a '[Wilderness](#)'!), and its 'Stables', the modest 7-bedroom 'cottage' which was our place of residence for the month.

We had at our disposal the expertise and support of the Chawton House Head Librarian and the exclusive use of the upper reading room. We were also invited to attend evening lectures, to join the Chawton monthly reading group, and to give presentations on our own research topics. Needless to say, the collection, location, and research culture at Chawton House Library made for a period of study marked by productivity, creativity, and sociability.

My research at Chawton was focused on one of Jane Austen's more scandalous contemporaries: the poet, actress, and royal mistress, [Mary Darby Robinson](#), whose stunning 1782 portrait beamed out at me from the wall of the Library's Great Hall on a daily basis. I was devoting my time at Chawton to a chapter of my monograph that examines the impact of Robinson's life writing on her posthumous reputation. My argument is based around the idea that Robinson's Victorian readers found her *Memoirs* seductive, perplexing, and sympathetic, a contradictory mix that is often borne out in complex affective nineteenth-century responses to her. I found exciting evidence for this argument in the archive at Chawton, where I discovered an original subscription copy of Mary Robinson's *Poems* (1791), which had been bound and inscribed with the personal insignia of Victorian poet and memoirist Violet Fane, the pseudonym of Mary, Baroness Currie (1843-1905).



Susan in front of the
Mary Robinson
portrait at Chawton
House

Apparently, there are only three other books known to feature this same personalised design of the gold violet: Lady Currie's own *Collected Verses* (1880) and the two

volumes of her Poems (1892). However, the bound copy of Robinson's Poems is unique in bearing the inscription of her pen name, 'Violet Fane,' on the front and back [covers](#).

That Lady Currie took such pains to personalise her copy of Robinson's Poems in this way suggests she felt an affinity with her eighteenth-century predecessor. The similarities in their private lives are certainly striking. Both writers were known for their loveless marriages, affairs, and scandalous reputations. Lady Currie, like Robinson before her, was nicknamed 'Sappho' by her contemporaries, and the thinly veiled satire of her marriage, Edwin and Angelina (1878), may be a gesture toward Robinson's 1796 novel Angelina. Finally, Lady Currie's unfinished manuscript memoir was written on the reverse sides of menus and other cards retained from social visits, a choice of writing material that recalls Robinson's decision to draft her Memoirs on the backs of envelopes, many of which had enclosed letters from subscribers to her Poems (1791). Lady Currie seems to have been styling herself as a late-Victorian Robinson, a strain of self-fashioning that speaks to Robinson's own highly skilled self-construction and her enduring literary afterlife.

Besides offering such exceptional opportunities for research, Chawton also fostered a scholarly camaraderie among the 'Fellows.' As we traipsed into the reading room every morning, chatted about our work over lunch, and walked to a country pub in the evening, we settled into a routine of research and leisure that was productive, enjoyable, and empowering. One of the nicest aspects of the Fellowship was engaging with three other academics who shared so many of my own research interests, but who each had her own unique area of expertise. With so much to talk about, and so many opportunities to discuss questions big and small, we got to know each other both academically and personally. By the end of my stay at Chawton I felt I had gained not only three new colleagues but three new friends.

Although it was sad to say goodbye to this idyllic Hampshire home at the end of April, I left Chawton inspired. In a letter written to her friend and fellow writer Jane Porter in 1800, Mary Robinson had articulated a particular wish:

"Oh! Heavens! If a Select Society could be formed, – a little Colony of Mental Powers, a world of Talents, drawn into a small but brilliant circle, – what a splendid sunshine would it display."

I couldn't help thinking, as I left the light-filled conservatory of the 'Stables' on my final morning there, that at Chawton House Library I had participated in just the kind of "small but brilliant circle" of inquiring minds and lively discussion that Robinson had imagined 200 years ago. The trick, now, would be to take that "splendid sunshine" back to Canterbury with me, and amidst the paperwork and exam boards, find time for the illuminating conversations with colleagues and students that are the heart and soul of every university campus.

The deadline each year for applying for a Chawton House Visiting Fellowship is usually April. You can learn more about Chawton's Fellowships [here](#). Susan tweets as [@susancivale](#). (Update: Chawton House Visiting Fellowships have been temporarily suspended)