



The Abbey Gateway in 1804

Jane Austen attended school here from 1785 to 1786

(Museum object no. 1947.22.1)

Jane Austen, the author, went to school in Reading. She and her sister Cassandra attended the Reading Ladies' Boarding School from 1785 to 1786. It was located in the former Abbey Gateway. Jane was 9 ½ years old when she arrived. The girls had no formal lessons in the afternoon which was unusual for a boarding school at that time. Instead, they could play in the nearby open ground, which later became the Forbury Gardens. Jane had ample time to read and it was said that there were more novels than Bibles in the school.

The schoolhouse proper adjoined the Abbey Gateway and was over 70 feet long, on two storeys plus attics. Some of the smaller rooms were dormitories with four or six beds. Each bed was shared by two girls and Cassandra and Jane almost certainly slept together. The schoolroom may have been on the ground floor; breakfast and dinner were served there.

The school was run by a Mrs La Tournelle. Another pupil, Mary Martha Butt, described her as a good matron who was stout, plain and active, despite having a false leg made of cork. She shared the latest gossip from the London theatre with the schoolgirls. She was born Sarah Hackett but changed her name to Mrs La Tournelle to improve her credentials as a French teacher.

Source:

Corley T.A.B. 'Jane Austen's schooldays' in *The Jane Austen Society, Report for 1996*, pages 10-20

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