



UNTIL RECENTLY, YOU WOULD HAVE BEEN HARD PRESSED TO FIND REGENCY-RELATED ACTIVITIES IN THE NETHERLANDS. BUT OVER THE PAST COUPLE OF YEARS, THERE HAS BEEN A VERITABLE EXPLOSION OF THEM. KAREN HOLT, JA.NL CONTRIBUTOR AND SOCIETY MEMBER, EXPLAINS HOW IT ALL STARTED ROLLING

Jane leeft

COMPARED WITH countries such as the UK, the US and Australia, the Netherlands has perhaps been a bit slow to establish its own solid base of Jane Austen appreciation and celebration. But, whatever has been lacking in this area in the Low Lands, is now being more than made up for in initiative and enthusiasm.

The first seeds were sown at Hyves, a popular Dutch social networking site. The Jane Austen fan page, set up in July 2006 and now managed by Frouckje van Hijum, was probably the very first place where Austen-lovers nationwide could contact others and feel part of an Austen community (today, it has almost 900 members). But in January 2009 another, more ambitious, Hyves page was founded by Monique Christiansen. The Jane Austen Club was designed not only as a place to meet and greet, but also to encourage



the appreciation and study of Austen's life and work and the period in which she lived through a variety of activities.

The first of these was a Regency dance workshop held in the spring of 2009. Led by Maria Angad Gaur, a leading historical dance teacher, the workshop gave those who had longingly admired the beautiful dances in Austen film adaptations the chance to 'step into the set' and learn to do them themselves. One of the participants was Karin Quint who, unknowingly, was also involved with something that would play a very important role in gathering and consolidating the scattered interest in Jane Austen in Holland into an active community.

Karin, a freelance journalist, had decided to stretch her online media skills a few months earlier by creating a website. But about what? A subject that she loved, of course! www.janeausten.nl, which went online on January 19, 2009, was the first comprehensive Dutch-language website devoted to Jane Austen. Along with background information about the writer, her books and the various film adaptations, JA.NL featured an ever-changing homepage with Austen-related news, interviews, film clips and competitions. Even more importantly, it included a dynamic forum and real-time chat where fans could discuss everything to do with Jane Austen and more. The site not only drew those from the already established Hyves pages but also, thanks to careful search engine optimisation, many others in the Netherlands looking for



Left, the Jane Austen dance workshop (by Jorgen Caris); above, showing of JA.NL T-shirts at the Cobb in Lyme Regis; below, at the Festival in Bath last year

information about Jane Austen online.

It was the start of a cross-pollination that finally got the Austen snowball rolling in the Netherlands. Those visiting JA.NL read about the Regency dance workshops – and additional workshops were organised to accommodate the burgeoning interest. Meanwhile, the Jane Austen Club began stepping up and expanding its activities into other areas besides dance. These were eagerly attended by JA.NL website visitors, who also began organising and participating in other Regency-related activities of their own.

As a result, 2010 was full of Austen-related initiatives, some of which even got national media attention. As well as the dance classes they included reading groups, Regency gown-making workshops, a formal Regency ball, a presentation by Louise West from Jane Austen House Museum, a behind-

the-scenes visit to the historical Costume Depot of The Hague Municipal Museum, a literary lecture given by a leading Dutch Austen scholar and participation in an early 1800s' historical re-enactment. Amid all this, the year had two particular high points: in April the Jane Austen Club received permission to become the first official Jane Austen Society in the Netherlands (JASNL). The other was in September, when a whole delegation of Dutch fans travelled to Bath and spent an unforgettable week attending the Jane Austen Festival.

The growth of the 'Dutch Regency world' hasn't stopped yet. Today, the JA.NL website gets more than 3,000 unique visitors per month, while JASNL has also set up its own website. The fifth series of Regency dance workshops (sold out within 24 hours) is now underway, as well as new sewing workshops in which fans can create or expand their Regency wardrobes. JASNL is busily organising another Regency Ball, along with literary lectures, film screenings and more. And both JASNL and JA.NL are participating in various cultural and historical re-creation events to give the public the chance to learn more about Jane Austen and the clothes and dances from her time.

It's also safe to say that this year's Jane Austen Festival in Bath will welcome a record-breaking number of Dutch fans. It may have taken a while to find each other, but when you're talking about the Netherlands you can now say 'Jane leeft' (Jane lives). ☑

www.janeausten.nl
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