

## An Archaeology of Letter Writing: the correspondence of aristocratic women in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century England

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In 1795 Frances, Viscountess Irwin wrote her friend, Susan, Marchioness Stafford: 'Allow me to appear before you in the only shape I can assume at the distance of two hundred miles, and though I am conscious a White sheet is a not a proper dress for a drawing room, you will admit me to your private eye and then stuff me into the fire.'<sup>1</sup> Writing from her Yorkshire home of Temple Newsam, Frances Irwin was aware of the significant distance between herself and London-based Susan Stafford. However, for her a letter could quickly close that distance, and she felt able to appear in Mayfair through the power of the post. The fact that she placed herself in the drawing room is of note. She wanted to be a party to the polite conversation associated with this room and a letter was a perfect medium for this. Sometimes described as 'talking on paper', letters were not solitary acts of writing, but rather part of a more complex dialogue.<sup>2</sup> Many letters included references to an imagined presence; for example, many of the letters between Hester Thrale and Charles Burney refer to either the writer or the recipient being in the room with the other.<sup>3</sup> Thrale encouraged Burney to write informally and to 'sate [sic] with me in your Wrapper'.<sup>4</sup> If the letter writer was, figuratively, sending themselves through the post on a 'paper visit' it is not surprising that they were concerned about how they were 'dressed'.<sup>5</sup>

This concern with dress was of particular importance for elites in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century England. In this time period aristocrats were criticised for their love of show and artificiality by radical writers, although others noted that this display was an important way for them to mark their status.<sup>6</sup> Although titles, along with their political allegiances, marriage networks and pedigree, did confer a privileged position upon members of the peerage, due to the increasing wealth of some members of the middling sort and the questioning of whether aristocratic power was indeed 'rule by the best', eighteenth-century aristocrats had to continually reassert their rank. One of the most important mechanisms used to demonstrate status was material culture. Whether it was through the decoration of their country and town houses, obtaining the most fashionable clothes or objects, or through purchasing and commissioning art,

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<sup>1</sup> The National Archives, PRO 30/29/4/2/54, Frances Irwin to Lady Stafford, 14 June 1795.

<sup>2</sup> Clare Brant, *Eighteenth-Century Letters and British Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 58; Carolyn Steedman, 'A woman writing a letter', in Rebecca Earle (ed.) *Epistolary Selves: Letters and Letter Writers, 1600-1945* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999), pp. 118-9.

<sup>3</sup> Alvaro Ribeiro, SJ 'The 'Chit-chat way': the letters of Mrs Thrale and Dr Burney', in Alvaro Ribeiro, SJ and James G. Basker (eds) *Tradition in Transition. Women Writers, Marginal Texts and the Eighteenth-Century Canon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), p. 33.

<sup>4</sup> Thrale cited in Ribeiro, SJ 'The 'Chit-chat way'', p. 30.

<sup>5</sup> Susan Whyman, 'Paper visits: the post-Restoration letter as seen through the Verney family archive' in Rebecca Earle (ed.) *Epistolary Selves: Letters and Letter Writers, 1600-1945* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999).

<sup>6</sup> Amanda Goodrich, *Debating England's aristocracy in the 1790s: pamphlets, polemic, and political ideas* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2005), pp. 71, 104.

the ownership and use of goods was important in creating and maintaining an elite identity. This was not just about the economic value of the items, but also about the ideals that those objects reflected and the networks that needed to be accessed in order to obtain them.<sup>7</sup> However, this conspicuous consumption was not just about the exotic and the exclusive, it included the everyday too. Therefore, although often forgotten about by historians of consumption, the letter was also an important part of this elite world of goods.<sup>8</sup>

While its role as a form of consumption has been largely overlooked, the role of letter networks amongst elites has been the subject to more scrutiny. Elaine Chalus has highlighted the importance of the epistolary exchange of news, and gossip was a key part of the currency of the female letters since at least the late seventeenth century.<sup>9</sup> Letter writing helped to form and cement political networks, patronage opportunities and friendships amongst elites, as well as maintain familial networks.<sup>10</sup> Amanda Vickery argues that there was a difference between the letters written by gentry women and those written by gentry men; she highlights the ways in which female letters covered a wider range of topics and were more conversational than those written by their husbands and brother.<sup>11</sup> This informal tone was in many ways enabled by the growing postal network, which, despite its traditional representation as a backwards institution before 1840, was increasingly effective and inclusive in the eighteenth century.<sup>12</sup> Letter writing was an important part of the 'work' of aristocratic women, and so provide an ideal space for their self-representation as elite. However, sometimes this display of aristocratic ideals could be subtle. In 1801 George, Viscount Morpeth, wrote to his new wife, Georgiana in response to her recent correspondence with him: 'I shall humble you with any compliment, but I am sure you will believe me when I say that I am quite delighted with your letters, so free from all affectation, so like yourself.'<sup>13</sup> George was clearly aware of the dangers, for a husband, of a fashionable wife, whose letters could be full of artifice, disingenuous sentimentality. Instead, the letters he had received were sincere and lacked the artificial show associated with members of the Bon Ton, the most fashionable members of the upper echelons of society. This remained a feature of many of the letters written by Georgiana; in her regular correspondence to her

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<sup>7</sup> For a discussion of the role of material culture in shaping elite identities see, for example Hannah Greig, *The Beau Monde: Fashionable Society in Georgian London* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) and J. Stobart, 'Gentlemen and shopkeepers: supplying the country house in eighteenth-century England'. *The Economic History Review* 64.3 (2011), pp. 885-904.

<sup>8</sup> For a study of letter writing as a form of consumerism see Konstantin Dierks, 'Letter writing, stationery supplies, and consumer modernity in the eighteenth-century Atlantic World', *Early American Literature*, 41.3 (2006), pp. 473-494.

<sup>9</sup> James Daybell, 'Introduction', in James Daybell, (ed.) *Early Modern Women's Letter Writing, 1450-1700* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001) p. 2; Elaine Chalus, 'Elite women, social politics, and the political world of late eighteenth-century England', *The Historical Journal* 43 (2000), p. 677.

<sup>10</sup> For work drawing, at least in part, on elite letters see, for example, J.S. Lewis, *Sacred to female patriotism: gender, class, and politics in late Georgiana Britain* (London: Routledge, 2003); Elaine Chalus, *Elite women in English political life, c.1754-1790* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Naomi Tadmor, *Family and friends in eighteenth-century England: household, kinship, and patronage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Katie Barclay, *Love, intimacy and power: marriage and patriarchy in Scotland, 1650-1850* (Manchester: Manchester University Press 2011).

<sup>11</sup> Amanda Vickery, *The Gentleman's Daughter* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998), pp. 10-11.

<sup>12</sup> Susan Whyman, *The Pen and the People. English Letter Writers 1660-1800* (Oxford: OUP, 2009), pp. 46-73.

<sup>13</sup> Castle Howard Archives, Carlisle MSS, J18/1 (6, Book 40), George Morpeth to Georgiana Morpeth, n.d. (1801).

husband, to her sister Harriet Cavendish, later Countess Granville, and to other family and friends, a well-educated, pious and affectionate woman emerges.<sup>14</sup> Georgiana Howard, nee Cavendish, was the eldest daughter of the fifth duke and duchess of Devonshire, and married the Viscount Morpeth when she was just eighteen.<sup>15</sup> She and her husband, who became the sixth earl of Carlisle in 1825, had twelve children, all of whom reach maturity.<sup>16</sup> By visiting family and friends, and later in her life, her married children, Georgiana lived a relatively active lifestyle, travelling across Britain and France from her main home at Castle Howard in North Yorkshire. However, she was often unwell which meant that she spent some time in spas and seaside resorts, where she wrote a good number of her letters; this may have been her following a doctor's orders, as they often encouraged patients to write while taking the waters.<sup>17</sup> Because of her parental connections the sixth countess of Carlisle was, albeit reluctantly, a member of fashionable society, especially when she was younger. Her sister teased her about her house guests, describing them as 'a string of fashionables so interwoven into family connections that it is hopeless to escape from them'.<sup>18</sup> Despite the places she visited and the people she wrote about there was little overtly aristocratic in the content of her letters; they were often simple in tone and in many ways reflected her evangelical leanings more than her elite status.<sup>19</sup>

However, letters are not just about the words; they are objects too and as such could be locations of complex forms of conspicuous consumption. Although the written content of Georgiana's letters may have been simple, the complete package did belie her aristocratic status. By taking an archaeological approach to letters, by exploring what makes them artefacts, it is possible to gain a more rounded and complex understanding of elite women's epistolary exchanges. This chapter explores the ways in which letters were, for elite women, part of their performance of aristocratic identities. In a period when the letter had been democratised, and when the numbers of people who were able to send letters increased dramatically, the need for aristocratic distinction also grew.<sup>20</sup> Drawing on case studies of a number of aristocratic Yorkshire women, but especially on the letters of the sixth countess of Carlisle, this chapter considers the different elements of letter writing and how they reflected elite ideals. It considers firstly the letter as an object, focusing especially on the use of paper, and then explores their transportation before finishing with a discussion of their preservation. By utilising the traditional archaeological method of a material approach to

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<sup>14</sup> Most of Georgiana Carlisle's letters are at Castle Howard, but some form part of the Devonshire Manuscripts at Chatsworth and are in the collection of Leveson-Gower papers at the National Archives.

<sup>15</sup> For an account of their courting see J.S. Lewis, *In the family way: childbearing in the British aristocracy 1760-1860* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1986), pp. 21-3

<sup>16</sup> Venetia Murray, *Castle Howard. The Life and Times of a Stately Home*, (York: Castle Howard, 1994), p. xviii.

<sup>17</sup> For example: Castle Howard Archives, Carlisle MSS, J18/2/19-21 Georgiana Carlisle, St Leonard's, to sixth Earl of Carlisle. Alaine Kerhervé, 'Writing letters from Georgiana spas: the impressions of a few English ladies', in Annick Cossic and Patrick Galliou (eds) *Spas in Britain and in France in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2006), pp. 264-5.

<sup>18</sup> Lady Harriet Cavendish. *Hary-O. The Letters of Lady Harriet Cavendish, 1796-1809*. Edited by Sir G. Leveson Gower and I. Palmer (London: James Murrar, 1940), p. 183.

<sup>19</sup> Castle Howard Archives, Carlisle MSS, J18/74, Georgiana, sixth Countess of Carlisle, Writings on Religious Topics.

<sup>20</sup> Whyman, *The Pen and the People*, pp. 3-6.

the past, this chapter moves beyond a simple text-based understanding of the letter to one where its value can be, tentatively, weighed and measured.<sup>21</sup>

Although historians have long highlighted how letters play an important role in understanding social and cultural history, until recently much of the scholarship on eighteenth century correspondence was focused on literary letters and on the epistolary novel.<sup>22</sup> Much of the early scholarship on the material culture of letter writing was often focused on the objects associated with writing, such as the desk, the pen and inkwell, rather than with the letter itself.<sup>23</sup> However, more recent work has highlighted the importance of the letter as an object. In his work on the material letter in early modern England James Daybell argues that 'the material rhetorics of the manuscript page were central to the ways in which letters communicated'.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, Lindsey O'Neill argues that the combination of the folds, seals, postmarks, the handwriting, spaces and salutations in letters work together reflect the 'material reality' of epistolary exchanges.<sup>25</sup> Alison Flint has shown how by taking a materialist approach to nineteenth-century gentry women's letters it is possible to learn much more from them than treating them as just written texts.<sup>26</sup> These writers have all shown the real importance of thinking of letters as objects and have either directly or indirectly drawn on the techniques used by archaeologists and anthropologists. As Andrea Pellegram reminds us in her chapter on the use of paper in a local government office in the 1990s, 'we ignore the latent and incidental message of objects at our peril, because what is not overtly intended can also be revealing'.<sup>27</sup> This is as important to those studying the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as it is to those studying the recent past.

This interest in the letter as an object is not just a result of the 'material turn' in the study of history; it was shared by those who originally wrote and received the letters. It is important to remember that the physical aspects of the letter would have been 'read' by the original recipient before they encountered the words it

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<sup>21</sup> For a discussion of the archaeological approaches to understanding past identities see Adrián Maldonado and Anthony Russell. 'Introduction: Creating Material Worlds', in Elizabeth Pierce et al, *Creating Medieval Worlds. The Uses of Identity in Archaeology* (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2016), pp.1-16.

<sup>22</sup> Marie Cross and Caroline Bland, 'Gender politics: breathing new life into old letters' in Caroline Bland and Marie Cross (eds) *Gender and Politics in the Age of Letter Writing, 1750-2000* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), p. 7; Whyman, *The Pen and the People*. For works on fictional or literary letters in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries see, for example, Amanda Gilroy and W.M Verhoeven (eds) *Epistolary Histories: Letter, Fiction, Culture* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000); Brant *Eighteenth-Century Letters*; James How, *Epistolary Spaces. English letter writing from the foundation of the Post Office to Richardson's Clarissa* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003).

<sup>23</sup> For example, Deena Goodman's work was more focused on the purchasing of times, including paper, to write letters rather than the letters themselves. Deena Goodman, *Becoming a Woman in the Age of Letters* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009), chapters five and six.

<sup>24</sup> James Daybell, *The Material Letter in Early Modern England Manuscript Letters and the Cultures and Practices of Letter Writing, 1512-1635* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p. 11.

<sup>25</sup> Lindsay O'Neill, *The Opened Letter. Networking in the early modern British World* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), p. 16.

<sup>26</sup> Alison Flint, *'To the Ladies of Ogston Hall': the epistolary cultures of Nineteenth-Century gentry women of Derbyshire*, (Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Derby, 2017).

<sup>27</sup> Andrea Pellegram, 'The message in paper', in Daniel Miller (ed.), *Material Cultures: Why Some Things Matter* (London: UCL Press, 1998), p. 103.

contained.<sup>28</sup> In the increasingly consumer aware world of the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries there was an acute awareness of the value of goods. Through personal experience and the information provided in letter writing manuals, trade directories and newspaper adverts, there was an awareness of the different elements required to create a letter and also the associated fiscal costs. The therefore provided an ideal location for conspicuous consumption. The writing of letters was an activity which engaged with a range of luxury goods, many of which were part of the increasingly global trade networks that Britain enjoyed.<sup>29</sup> The ink and seal were made of products imported from as far afield as Sudan, Syria and India, thus making the act of writing a letter part of the emerging engagement with global commerce.<sup>30</sup> Much of the paper was made within Britain, from linen or cotton rags, although these sometime had to be shipped in from overseas.<sup>31</sup> The number of rags to make a paper was considerable, and the better quality the paper the greater the number of linen rags that were required for its manufacture.<sup>32</sup> Although it was to create a luxury good, the collecting of rags was a job for the very poor and papermaking was one of the many jobs listed as being potential injurious to workers' health due to the dust created in the manufacturing process.<sup>33</sup> Like so many of the markers of elite status of the period such as sugar, tea, spices, jewels, stationery was dependent on a global trade and the labour of people who were unable to enjoy the benefits of the items they produced.

The origins of the items did not seem to concern the elite women who used them, as they were more focused on how the items would be understood by those who saw them. The most public symbol and most overtly elite feature of the letter was the seal. However, while for aristocratic men the seal was a central identifier of their status, this was not always the case for their wives and daughters. While some women did have their own marker, such as the one used by Dorothy Osborne in her letters to Sir William Temple in the mid seventeenth century, most women used the seals of their male relatives.<sup>34</sup> Lacking a seal of her own, Georgiana Carlisle seemed happy to use the seal a range of friends too; when staying at Bishopthorpe at York, her letters to her husband were marked with the seal of the Archbishop of York.<sup>35</sup> Usually, though, she used the family seals of her husband and brother. This can be seen as reflecting her position within these networks; her natal and marital connections were what made her a member of the aristocracy and so the dynastic seals were markers of her own status.

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<sup>28</sup> James Daybell and Andrew Gordon, 'Introduction. The early modern letter opener', in James Daybell and Andrew Gordon (eds.) *Cultures of Correspondence in Early Modern Britain* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), p. 16.

<sup>29</sup> Dierks, 'Letter writing, stationery supplies, and consumer modernity', p. 482.

<sup>30</sup> The sealing wax was not wax but shellac which was imported from the East. M. Finlay, *Western Writing Implements in the Age of the Quill Pen* (Carlisle: Plains Books, 1990), p. 59; Dierks, 'Letter writing, stationery supplies, and consumer modernity', pp. 477, 480-1.

<sup>31</sup> In the 1830s the *Saturday Magazine* reported that the majority of rags were imported from Italy, Germany, Hungary and Sicily. Finlay, *Western Writing Implements*, p. 30.

<sup>32</sup> For good quality cream paper, best quality rags were needed; buff paper would be made from 'worst second quality' rags and have little linen in it. John Krill, *English Artists Paper* (London: Treforil, 1987), p. 13.

<sup>33</sup> Carolyn Steedman, *Dust* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), p. 20.

<sup>34</sup> How, *Epistolary Spaces*, pp. 42-3.

<sup>35</sup> Castle Howard Archives, Carlisle MSS, J18/2/42, letter to George Lord Morpeth, from Georgiana, Lady Morpeth.

This aristocratic rank was also reflected in the paper that Georgiana Carlisle used. Using fine quality paper for letters had a long tradition, as it was recognised as an important marker of the status of the sender. In the seventeenth century there are a number of examples of people making active decisions about the type of paper that they chose in order to write letters for certain recipients. The letters Robert Cecil sent to Francis Darcy in 1601 used refined Italian paper due to its association with the members of the Italian Court which meant that it was usually only used for special occasions.<sup>36</sup> Leonine Hannan notes that letters sent by Mary Evelyn in the 1660s and 1670s to her son were sent on large fine paper, the handwriting was carefully written and the letter was laid out formally. In contrast, her letters to her daughter were on smaller pieces of paper and less formal in their appearance.<sup>37</sup> The use of scraps could be seen as insulting; paper was understood to be an expensive commodity and so the recipient would have been able to make judgements about the sender just on the basis of their use of paper.<sup>38</sup> John Keats wrote a humorous brief 'dissertation on letter writing' in 1818 which noted the types of paper that could be used. In this he categorised paper by people, associating Quarto paper with 'Projectors, Patentees, Presidents, Potatoe [sic] growers' and Bath paper with 'Boarding schools and suburbans in general'.<sup>39</sup> Unusual use of paper was worthy of mention in letters; Georgiana, Lady Dover, noted that an acquaintance and her daughter wrote 'to each other on paper double the size of foolscap and closely crafted'.<sup>40</sup> If the paper she used was the 'dress' she appeared in, an aristocratic woman had to acknowledge that her choice of attire might attract notice and comment.

The vast majority of the surviving letters written by Georgiana Carlisle used heavy cream gilt-edged paper, which measured 185 mm by 230 mm and on which she usually wrote intact.<sup>41</sup> This was quite a large sheet of paper; while the same type of paper was used by her father in law, the fifth earl of Carlisle, he often tore the paper in half, unless he was writing an especially long missive.<sup>42</sup> Both the size and quality of the paper was an immediate marker of her status. Advertisements by stationers clearly marked gilt-edged paper as a separate luxury good, different from the ordinary writing paper; one advert from 1828 for a range of different paper types demonstrates that gilt edge added two shillings to the wholesale price of a ream of paper.<sup>43</sup> While it has not been possible to identify how much was paid for the paper used at Castle Howard,

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<sup>36</sup> Daybell, *The Material Letter*, pp. 2, 101.

<sup>37</sup> Leonine Hannan 'Women's letters: eighteenth-century letter-writing and the life of the mind' in Hannah Greig et al (eds) *Gender and material culture in Britain since 1600* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), pp. 32-48.

<sup>38</sup> Cedric C. Brown, 'Losing and regaining the material meanings of epistolary and gift texts', James Daybell and Peter Hinds (eds), *Material Readings of Early Modern Culture Texts and Social Practices, 1580-1730* (London: Palgrave, 2010), p. 26.

<sup>39</sup> John Keats, *The Letters of John Keats*, Edited by Maurice Buxton Forman. Third Edition (London: Oxford University Press, 1947), p. 215.

<sup>40</sup> Staffordshire Record Office, Sutherland Papers, D6579/80/1 Letter from Georgiana, Lady Dover, L'Hampton to Harriet, second Duchess of Sutherland, October 18<sup>th</sup> 1833.

<sup>41</sup> Castle Howard Archives, Carlisle MSS, J18 Letters from Georgiana, sixth Countess of Carlisle.

<sup>42</sup> Letters from the fifth Earl of Carlisle to Lady Sutherland, later the first Duchess of Sutherland

<sup>43</sup> Advert for J Bowen, a London based papermaker and wholesale stationer, *The Morning Post*, Monday, February 25, 1828, p. 1.

Lady Frances Irwin, who lived at Temples Newsam near Leeds, paid her bookseller a shilling per quire of gilt-edged paper in the 1770s.<sup>44</sup> Not all, or even most, elite women showed such dedication to the gilt edging as Georgiana. While many women used it at least occasionally, she was quite unusual in utilising it for the vast majority of her letters. Most of the letters sent by Georgiana's daughters to one another were on plain paper, except during periods of mourning when they often used black-edged paper.<sup>45</sup> Usually, gilt-edged paper was used specifically for important letters: James VI wrote to Elizabeth I on 'gilt paper', for example.<sup>46</sup> This may have been not only a mark of status but also an acknowledgement of her gender, as there is some evidence to suggest that there was an association of gilt-edged paper with women; for example, in the early-seventeenth century Edward Viscount Conway asked a correspondent to send him some gilt-edged paper so that he could use it when writing to women.<sup>47</sup> This association with femininity can also be seen in the early nineteenth century when John Keats noted that gilt-edged paper was especially used by 'dandies in general, male, female and literary'.<sup>48</sup> This indicates that this was the paper of choice for fashionable elites; by selecting to use it, even for every day letters to her husband, Georgiana was engaging with a particular form of conspicuous consumption which was at odds with her unaffected writing style.

So why did she select it? It may have been that she valued the practical benefits of the paper. In the later eighteenth century it was acknowledged that artificially whitened paper reduced the lifespan of the document and led to the destruction of the ink.<sup>49</sup> By choosing thick cream paper she was increasing the possibility that her letters might survive and so form part of the dynastic archive at Castle Howard. More immediately, though, thick paper was less liable to damage in either transit or in the act of opening a letter. In the 1770s and 80s fellow Yorkshirewoman Lady Elizabeth Ponsonby often used much thinner paper for her letters, although this paper was still gilt edged.<sup>50</sup> The paper was so thin that when it is held up to the light it is possible to see the writing on the other side; this is not possible with any of Georgiana's letters. Lady Ponsonby was clearly aware of the dangers of the thinner paper to the contents of her letters. In a number of cases she changed how she wrote on the part of the paper where the address was written on the reverse. Instead of using the full width of the paper, as she did at the top and the bottom of the page, in this central third she just wrote in the middle.<sup>51</sup> She was aware that when the letter was opened at the

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<sup>44</sup> West Yorkshire Archiver Service, Leeds, Temple Newsam Papers, TN/EA/12/18 Bills for Books, stationery, etc.

<sup>45</sup> This sample is taken from various letters to Letters to Harriet, second Duchess of Sutherland; Staffordshire Record Office, Sutherland Papers, D593/P/20, D593/P/22, D6579/75, D6579/76. One example of a letter written on black-edged paper is Staffordshire Record Office, Sutherland Papers, D6579/76/7, Letter to Harriet, Countess Gower, from Georgiana, Lady Dover, Roehampton 6 October n.y.

<sup>46</sup> Daybell, *The Material Letter*, p. 101.

<sup>47</sup> Daybell, *The Material Letter*, p. 101.

<sup>48</sup> Keats, *The Letters of John Keats*, p. 215.

<sup>49</sup> Krill, *English Artists Paper*, p. 92.

<sup>50</sup> Borthwick Institute for Archives, University of York. Hickleton Papers, A.1.2.1 Letters from Lady Elizabeth Ponsonby to Lady Louisa Ponsonby, 1778-1795

<sup>51</sup> For example, Borthwick Institute for Archives, University of York. Hickleton Papers, A1.2.1.1 Letter from Lady Elizabeth Ponsonby to Lady Louisa Ponsonby, 9 July 1778.

seal, the paper might tear and to ward against her recipient losing important bits of information in the letters that she sent she did not write on the reverse of the sections where the seal would go.<sup>52</sup> She was right to do so: many of the letters are indeed torn at these points and those letters where she did not leave a space are now difficult to read in the area on the back of the page where the seal was placed.<sup>53</sup> As Deena Goodman has noted, while there was a French taste for fashionable goods to be lightweight, such as porcelain, furniture and gauze, it was not a trend widely followed in England, and the user of these lightweight goods needed to be able to negotiate the problems associated with delicate items.<sup>54</sup> Instead, this indenting clearly signalled Lady Ponsonby's prudence, in stark contrast to the way that her use of expensive paper signalled Georgiana's wealth.

This difference between prudence and extravagance can also be seen in the ways that the women laid out their writing on the paper. Although there was a general expectation of a formally laid out letter, and this was a model used by servants writing to aristocrats, many elite women followed practices which suggest that they were not so concerned with the etiquette of epistolary spaces.<sup>55</sup> In letters to her daughter in law, Lady Elizabeth Ponsonby diligently filled as much of the paper as she could in her tiny spiderish handwriting in the overwhelming majority of the letters which still survive. It appears that she felt obliged to write full letters, especially if they were going to be sent overseas. In a letter dated January 1780, for example, although she admitted 'I have no ideas left. I have nothing to talk of' half way down the first page, she still covered every corner of the paper, even returning to the front page of the letter to write, upside down, a postscript in the space to the left of the date. Elizabeth Ponsonby's concerns about her letters being worthwhile may have been shaped by the fact that her recipient had to pay for postage. She wrote in March 1780:

Just as I was making up a letter of two sheets scribbled as close as this shall be, I received one from you my dearest Louisa which tells me that you have got all my letters you though were lost, so that my two sheets are so old fashioned that I have burnt them, in truth it was not worth you paying for so much repetition.<sup>56</sup>

As, at this point, postage was paid for by the person who received the letter, not the sender, the writer had to make the letter worth reading.<sup>57</sup> Lady Elizabeth Ponsonby appears to have mastered the art of writing a letter which filled every centimetre of space, concluded just in time for the post, but said very little.

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<sup>52</sup> It is of note that during the eighteenth century a special tool to open letters at the seal was developed, the seal chisel. Finlay, *Western Writing Implements*, p. 62

<sup>53</sup> For example, Borthwick Institute for Archives, University of York. Hickleton Papers, A1.2.1.5 Letter from Lady Elizabeth Ponsonby to Lady Louisa Ponsonby.

<sup>54</sup> Goodman, *Becoming a Woman in the Age of Letters*, p. 194.

<sup>55</sup> For example, West Yorkshire Archive Service, Leeds, Temple Newsam Papers, TN/C/19/87, Letter from Sam Keeling Temple Newsam to Isabella Viscountess Irwin, 15 July 1763; Whyman, *The Pen and the People*, pp. 21-23.

<sup>56</sup> Borthwick Institute for Archives, University of York. Hickleton Papers, A1.2.1.8 Letter from Lady Elizabeth Ponsonby to Lady Louisa Ponsonby, 9 July 1778.

<sup>57</sup> For a discussion of the costs of sending letters in the eighteenth century see Whyman, *The Pen and the People*, pp. 46-73.



In comparison, Georgiana Carlisle was much more formal in her use of epistolary spaces. In the four-page booklet that she created in order to write her letters. She usually only used the fourth page for the address, despite the fact that it was usual custom amongst writers in this period to continue writing in this space.<sup>58</sup> In her letters to those that she had a longstanding correspondence with, she often did not even fill the three pages. Many of these letters are just a single page long, although the paper was still folded to create a four page document in the usual fashion. Her daily letters to her sister and her husband were usually only two pages long if they were in the same country as her, although if she was writing to or from France her missives were always at least three folios long, and often contained an additional folded sheet to give a seven page document.<sup>59</sup> In the shorter documents, she was able to write with just a few words of reassurance of her wellbeing, or rather, confirmation that her bad nerves were no worse. In one letter, written in the 1820s, she wrote to her husband: 'I continue very poorly and it is of no use to send you a false acct. ... I know not what I look forward to but I suppose I had better remain on here at present ... God bless you, Dearest, kindest, best.'<sup>60</sup> Sometimes she just wrote to her family for pleasure; an undated letter written to her husband when they had been married about four years was just a short piece which began: 'My dearest Lord M. I was to writ[e] a few line again today tho' I have very little to tell you but it is a pleasure to me'.<sup>61</sup> To send letters daily, to use such a small amount of a large piece of expensive paper, and to send such a small amount of 'news' was the luxury of the wealthy, who could afford both the stationery and the time to indulge in extravagant epistolary exchanges.

One of the reasons she was able to do this was that, unlike those senders who had to make the letter worth paying for, Georgiana Carlisle's addressees usually did not have to pay to receive her letters. Postage was quite costly in the later eighteenth century, with charges of 3d for a single sheet that had travelled just 15 miles, 4d for 30 miles and 8d for 150 miles and a shilling if over 300 miles.<sup>62</sup> Avoiding costs was therefore important, and there were two main ways that aristocrats did this. Firstly, they could use their servants. Letters sent across London were usually carried by footmen and delivered immediately. This sending of news through a personal bearer meant 'personalising' the letter. How the letter was sent was important as it reflected not only the status of the sender but also how they viewed the recipient.<sup>63</sup> The other main way to gain free postage was through the use of the parliamentary franks, a perk of being a politician in either the Commons or Lords.<sup>64</sup> The access to free postage was sought by many letter writers, and as franked

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<sup>58</sup> Keats noted that 'a sheet of paper contains room only for three pages, and a half'. Keats, *The Letters of John Keats*, p. 215.

<sup>59</sup> An example of a shorter letter is Castle Howard Archives, Carlisle MSS, J18/2/3, Lady Georgiana Morpeth to Lord Morpeth, n.d.. A long letter example is J18/2/34, Georgiana, Countess of Carlisle to 6<sup>th</sup> Earl of Carlisle, France, n.d.

<sup>60</sup> Castle Howard Archives, Carlisle MSS, J18/2/23, Georgiana, Countess of Carlisle to 6<sup>th</sup> Earl of Carlisle. St Leonard's.

<sup>61</sup> Castle Howard Archives, Carlisle MSS, J18/2/37, Lady Georgiana Morpeth to Lord Morpeth. Saturday, n.d.

<sup>62</sup> Whyman, *The Pen and the People*, p. 63; Nancy Martin, *The Post Office. From Carrier Pigeon to Confravision* (London: J.M. Dent and Sons Ltd, 1969), p. 14. A folded piece of paper counted as a single sheet.

<sup>63</sup> O'Neill, *The Opened Letter*, p. 41.

<sup>64</sup> For a discussion of franking see George Brummel, *A short account of the franking system in the Post Offices 1652-1840* (Bournemouth: Bournemouth Guardian Ltd, 1936)

covers were distributed wholesale by peers and MPs the abuse of the franking systems did cause concern.<sup>65</sup> As Whyman notes, people wrote more if they did not have to pay postage, and this can be seen with Georgiana Carlisle.<sup>66</sup> She did not need to worry that her letters were 'worth it', nor did she need to fit as much information in to any specific letter, she could easily write again on another day. The only cost to her was the ink and paper, which she did not seem to perceive this as an expense that needed to be avoided.<sup>67</sup> Her letters not only contained her thoughts, ideas, and performance of elite roles, but also expressed her wealth and aristocratic status.

The way that Georgiana used her letters as both literary and material objects reflects the ways in which letters were, in the words of Lindsey O'Neill, 'frequent tokens of esteem'.<sup>68</sup> Their physicality meant that the letter became more than a temporary conversation but could become a 'thing' which was worth keeping.<sup>69</sup> The continued existence of eighteenth and nineteenth century letters which can still be examined today is another marker of the sender's and/or recipient's status. The majority of people would have been unable to keep their correspondence for extended periods of time due to an absence of a suitable space, and once those who had valued individual letters had died, the imperative to keep them was often reduced. However, as Susan Whyman demonstrates with the gentry Verney family, the collating and protecting of letters and other manuscripts provided an elite family with a way to demonstrate and maintain their dynasty. This need to create an archive, to record one's life and to manage one's own history is part of what Derrida described in 'Archive Fever'. There is a pull, he suggested, to form an archive, a real desire to record, to catalogue, and to manage one's self, and, in turn, the 'family, lineage, or institution'.<sup>70</sup> For aristocrats a large archive was a matter of prestige, as it was proof that the family had a history. Families recognised the importance of their archives as a way of constructing their 'individual, dynastic, and social identities'.<sup>71</sup> Letters would have been kept along with the documents which underpinned their wealth and status, such as conveyancing documents, rent rolls, and marriage settlements. Studies, libraries and muniment rooms in Country Houses provided a distinct space for the pedigree to be preserved, acting as a more intimate, more literary and less public version of the picture gallery with its portraits of worthy ancestors. Together, the art, artefacts and archives provided the show and substance of the family's claim to their station.

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<sup>65</sup> Kenneth Elis, *The Post Office in the Eighteenth Century. A study in Administrative History* (London: Oxford University Press, 1958), p. 40.

<sup>66</sup> Whyman, *The Pen and the People*, p. 65

<sup>67</sup> The cost of writing a letter before postage (e.g. paper, ink, wax, thread) was estimated by a Sussex shopkeeper Thomas Turner to be a penny in 1756, and he was probably not using the most expensive paper. Whyman, *The Pen and the People*, p. 82

<sup>68</sup> O'Neill, *The Opened Letter*, p. 123.

<sup>69</sup> For a discussion of the difference between objects and things see Bill Brown 'Thing Theory', *Critical Inquiry* 28.1 (2001), pp. 1-22.

<sup>70</sup> Jacques Derrida (translated by Eric Prenowitz), 'Archive fever: a Freudian impression', *Diacritics*, 25.2, (1995), p. 12.

<sup>71</sup> Whyman, 'Paper visits', p. 15.

However, although these archives legitimised status, they were also artificially created assemblages. They have been managed: curating is part of what shapes the collections as we see them today. Letters are not in the state in which they were received. They have not only been opened, but sorted, tidied, and frequently placed in letter books. Decisions have been made about what to keep and what to discard, and often women's letters were not subject to the same level of care afforded to those documents which related to fiscal interests of the family.<sup>72</sup> Many of Georgiana Carlisle's do survive, and a number of letters that were sent from Castle Howard to her sister have been returned to her marital home in order to create a more complete archive. Her letters were deemed worth preserving by later generations, suggesting that she had a continuing reputational status within the family. It is another marker of her elite identity, as letters that are placed in a dynastic archives gain a particular significance; she and her writings became important again. Not all collections of women's letters were so complete: the papers of her mother, the fifth Duchess of Devonshire, have been considerably tampered with by later generations. There was a major power struggle over the fifth Duchess' letters following her death, which led to the collection being broken up and some papers destroyed; some of those that remained at Chatsworth were edited with thick black lines in the Victorian period.<sup>73</sup> By editing and destroying the letters of the dead, the living family could ensure that the image of the deceased matched the family's ideals, and that the reputation of the dynasty was not threatened.

In the internet age when sending emails is all too easy, the associated expenses of sending a letter are often forgotten. In the nineteenth century the ability to send a daily letter to close friends and family was a key marker of one's status. It was not only an elite duty to remain connected with the epistolary exchanges and maintain the family interest, but it also highlighted that one was leisured, a key marker of being elite, and so was part of the activity of 'aristocraticness'.<sup>74</sup> The written content of the letters reflected the importance of exchanging and reinforcing elite ideals, but so too did the associated material culture as Daybell argues 'material matters are ... central to a full understanding of a writer's words as they appear in a handwritten and printed form'.<sup>75</sup> The bringing together of goods from around the world, manufactured by the very poor in difficult and injurious conditions to create objects which were used to reinforce the elite status of the aristocracy was a common feature of the consumer worlds of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Letter writing was an important element of the new form of consumerism, and the recipients of these letters would have been aware of the meanings in the object that they received. The paper used, how the writing was laid out on it, the seal and the method of delivery were all important elements in meaning that a letter could be part of the performance of aristocratic identities. That these letters have

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<sup>72</sup> James Daybell, 'Gender archival practices and the future lives of letters', in James Daybell and Andrew Gordon (eds.) *Cultures of Correspondence in Early Modern Britain* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), p. 234

<sup>73</sup> A. Foreman, *Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire* (London, 1998), p. xv.

<sup>74</sup> Whyman, 'Paper visits', p. 21.

<sup>75</sup> Daybell, *The Material Letter*, p. 15.

survived into the twenty-first century further reinforces the privileged status of those who wrote and kept them. The words of the letters only tell part of the story: the text worked with the material culture that carried them. While the written content of Georgiana Carlisle was often simple and 'unaffected', the letters themselves were items of display and show. Documents were complex, multi-layered objects that need careful analysis as sophisticated artefacts. By taking an archaeological approach to the letters, we can gain a fuller understanding of what they meant to both the sender and recipient. Those who wrote these letters were sending images of themselves in the post, so they had to ensure that they were properly dressed. Letters acted as an important element of the construction of the self, but those constructions were enabled not only by the words but also by the material culture too.