

### WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE

This year marks the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Representation of the People Act that granted some women the right to vote in Parliamentary elections for the first time. To commemorate the anniversary our reception display until the end of September 2018 exhibits some of the records relating to women's suffrage held at Bedfordshire Archives.

By the time the first female suffrage campaign groups started to appear in the 1870s a small number of female ratepayers had already been granted the right to vote in local elections and could be elected to positions on School Boards and Boards of Guardians. One of the items in our display is an election handbill distributed by supporters of Louisa Edwards in April 1887 [BorBG10/7/4]. Louisa was standing for election to the Board of Guardians in the St. Pauls parish of Bedford and the handbill explains very succinctly why she and her supporters felt that women ought to be allowed to stand in such positions.

The exhibition also includes a selection of records from the archive of the Bedford Society for Women's Suffrage, the only archive of such a society known to have survived in this county [X114]. The Society was founded in 1909 and was dedicated to campaigning for equal voting rights on strictly peaceful, constitutional grounds. Its members included a number of respectable and well known women from across the town, including Amy Walmsley of the Bedford Training College (later Bedfordshire's first female County Councillor), Dr. Ethel Stacey and Violet Chomley of Bedford High School. Although the society's methods were peaceful it didn't always attract widespread support from the people of Bedford. In fact, several of their meetings were disrupted by angry youths throwing stones and the police were often called in to keep order.



**Left:** ref: BTC6/2/1/3 Amy Walmsley

#### **The Bedford Society for Women's Suffrage.**

##### **RULES.**

- 1.—The Society shall be called "The Bedford Society for Women's Suffrage."
- 2.—The object of the Society shall be to obtain the Parliamentary Franchise for Women on the same terms as it is or may be granted to men.
- 3.—The Society shall be affiliated to the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies, and federated to the Oxon., Berks. and Bucks. Federation.
- 4.—The methods of the Society shall be constitutional.
- 5.—Membership of the Society is open to all men and women who approve of its object, adhere to its methods, and pay a Subscription of not less than 1s. per annum.
- 6.—The Financial Year shall end on July 31st of each year.
- 7.—The Society shall be governed by an Executive Committee consisting of President, Chairman, Hon. Treasurer, Hon. Secretary and eight other Members. Three Members of the Committee shall retire annually in rotation and be eligible for re-election.
- 8.—The Annual General Meeting shall be called as soon as possible after July 31st:—
  - (a) To receive the Report and Financial Statement.
  - (b) To elect by ballot the President and Hon. Treasurer and also Members of the Executive Committee to vacancies caused by retiring Members.
  - (c) To transact any other business of which eight days' notice has been given.
- 9.—The Committee shall have power to fill vacancies which may occur during the year, and to elect other Officers.
- 10.—The Committee shall meet at least eight times a year.
- 11.—The Chairman shall only have a casting vote.
- 12.—Three shall form a quorum.
- 13.—At the request of ten Members the Secretary shall be required to call a Special Meeting within eight days.

**Above:** ref: X114/1 - rules of the society

Although we only hold the archive of one suffrage society, we know that others did exist in this county. Local newspapers contain references to societies covering the north of Bedfordshire (active c.1889-1892), Biggleswade (c.1912), Dunstable and Houghton Regis (c.1910-1914), Leighton Buzzard (c.1911), Luton and Dunstable (c.1911) and Woburn Sands, Woburn and Aspley Guise (c.1908-1909). We also know that members of the Women's Social and Political Union, whose members were known as 'suffragettes' were also active here, albeit on a smaller scale. In 1913 suffragettes were blamed for three arson attacks in Bedford and for a hoax bomb discovered in Aspley Guise. In that same year three young protestors - named as Miss Wren, Miss Wing and Miss Ellery in the press - attempted to disrupt a meeting in Luton Council Chamber by climbing on desks and shouting 'Votes for Women!' Our exhibition is illustrated with some of the newspaper reports describing these events.

Alongside the records of the Bedford Society for Women's Suffrage we've displayed two electoral registers showing how the electorate of one Leighton Buzzard street changed between 1912 and 1922; election handbills distributed exclusively to female voters in 1918 and a flyer for a newly established Women Citizen's Association.

Also on display is an extract from notes compiled by Herbert Charles Janes of Luton in preparation for a speech or article denouncing women's suffrage and equal pay [JN64/9]. Janes argued that the suffrage movement was worked into a 'frenzy' by 'irritable women' intent on causing disruption and increasing drunkenness, vice and avarice. His notes are undated but we wonder whether they were written around the time of the second Representation of the People Act, passed in 1928, when women finally achieved full electoral equality with men.

The 'Bedfordshire Women and the Vote' exhibition will remain in the reception area until October 2018.

Esther Bellamy, Archivist

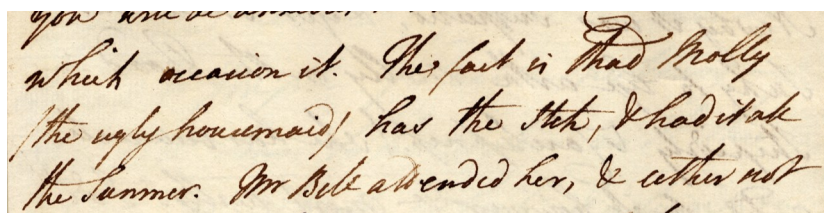
## IS THE ART OF LETTER WRITING DEAD?

I've become particularly interested in letters in recent years. I always delight in receiving handwritten cards or letters especially thank you notes from children in the family which often include illustrations. Last year, whilst clearing her house after her death, I found a bag full of letters that my grandmother had been sent during WWII. Most of them were from my grandfather whilst he was away fighting and were quite romantic. I can't bring myself to read them all. It's too soon and they're too private. A few were from my great-grandmother to her daughter, whilst my Nan had been staying with some of my Grandad's relations in the West Midlands. I'd never seen my great-grandmother's handwriting before and I didn't know her patterns of speech and turns of phrase, so to read them was a treasure. As the family archivist I've also been gifted some letters written by another great-grandmother and her relations, who whilst writing from the 1960s onwards, were all born in the late 1800s, and their views on the modern world make interesting reading.

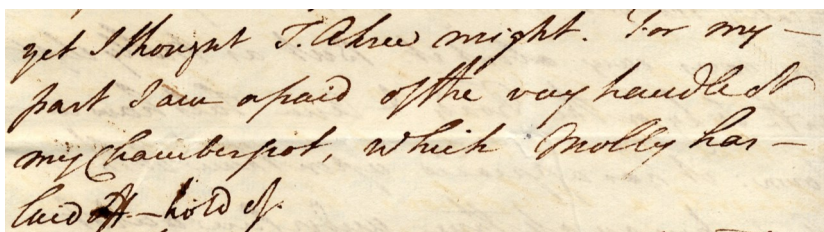
Many of the collections held by Bedfordshire Archives contain letters—letters of business as well as letters from families, friends and lovers. The largest and most widely known collection of letters we hold are those in the Lucas Estate Archive. The family owned Wrest Park in Silsoe, one of the finest country houses in the county. The complex family tree of Lucas ancestors includes many titled men and women, landowners and politicians, all of whom were, in keeping with the society of the day, regular letter writers.

Thomas Robinson, 2<sup>nd</sup> Baron Grantham, the son-in-law of Jemima, Marchioness De Grey, was an ambassador to Spain in the time of George III, Secretary of the Board of Trade and Secretary of State and wrote many letters to his relations, colleagues and associates. His letters in the Lucas collection to his brother Frederick (aka Fritz) number over 300. One in particular caught my eye when we were asked for a copy of it [ref: L30/15/54/240, dated 6<sup>th</sup> January 1785]. It seemed considerably more 'gossipy' than you would expect for an upper-class gentleman and politician. Thomas, writing from Whitehall, is bringing Fritz up to date with the latest news and has inserted a separate letter in addition to his regular news, in which he states "it is high time to have done with this disagreeable sheet, which I advise you burn!" Luckily for us, Fritz either forgot or didn't agree with him. It seems that "Molly (the ugly housemaid) has the itch and had it all the summer" and Thomas is gravely concerned for all the members of the household and has demanded they see a doctor, although his main concern seems to be for himself; "for my part, I am afraid of the very handle of my chamberpot which Molly has had hold of".

A friend has been regaling Thomas with a tale which he reports to Fritz; "you can conceive of nothing more shocking than the story of B." who given the laws and



you will be surprised  
which occasion it. The fact is that Molly  
(the ugly housemaid) has the itch, & had it all  
the summer. Mr. B. attended her, & either not



yet I thought I. B. might. For my  
part I am afraid of the very handle of  
my chamberpot, which Molly has  
laid off hold of.



morals of the time had scandalised his acquaintances by being discovered in a homosexual relationship and “a scene of seduction, reasoning – menaces, as I imagine had never been before practiced”. Thomas finishes his with an interesting report of “the story of Lady S. is traced to the opera, but for all that, a sharp little foreigner whom we know said two months ago that there was a blonde in laced ruffles at H. H. who was suspected”.

*Love. — The story of L. is traced to the opera — but for all that, a sharp little foreigner whom we know, said two months ago, that there was a blonde in laced ruffles at H. H. who was suspected.*

Whilst Thomas clearly never intended anyone other than Fritz to read about the household’s possible contagion, or his views on a young man who has had to leave the country due to his illicit relationship, his regular letter also contains some comments which could be classed as impolite; “Mary Milbank is grown, looks very well and is big enough to appear almost nubile” whilst Harry Pelham is “very thin, has a cough and is subject to great weakness especially in his knees, in so much that he was obliged to be led from a Minuet to his seat at a Ball in Lewes.”

The Lucas collection is particularly noted for the vast quantity of letters written by women who are usually underrepresented in primary historical sources. Thomas Robinson’s wife, Mary Jemima Yorke, her older sister Amabel Yorke and their mother Jemima, Marchioness Grey of Wrest Park, wrote constantly to each other and this triumvirate of letter writers form the central part of the Lucas collection. The women of Wrest wrote about many different topics including politics, culture, and travel. Indeed we have just catalogued some letters from Elizabeth Yorke, Lady Hardwick, at Dublin Castle to Lady Lucas that give a first hand account of the Irish Rebellion of 1803. As women of high society, their lives were quite different to the women of the working class, most of whom would not have been literate.

In addition to the upper class writing about their domestic and political life, we have many letters in our archives from ordinary folk. Charles Cartwright of Millbrook had ten years of criminal convictions including theft, poaching, rioting and assault, which culminated in an assault deemed to be highway robbery, and was sentenced to death at the Assizes in 1837 aged 32. This was commuted to transportation to New South Wales in Australia. He was able to read and write according to our gaol database entries and he wrote home to his wife and their four children as and when he could [ref: X256/2-3]. He worked hard and had a good life in Australia and asked his wife if she would join him. He must have received a reply to his first letter as he tells her he is sorry to hear his sister Susan is dead, is very keen for his wife to enquire about emigrating and feels that the children will probably have forgotten him by now. It seems he never got his wish as his wife died in Millbrook in 1877.

We have letters from Wilfred Hammond, who enlisted in the army in 1916, lying about his age (the minimum required was 19 years but Wilfred was only 17) in his desperation to ‘do his bit’ [ref: Z1360]. They are very jovial and he urges his mother “now hold up and don’t worry”. His spirits are so high, he is able to joke about an injury that put him in a casualty station during the Battle of the Somme in October 1916, “While over the top, on Saturday last, by the byre, my left ear (remember how Fred used to kid me about them, won’t he tee-hee, the devil) must have been idly flapping and wagging about in the breeze, for a German Sniper did his duty and pipped me through the funnel affair and just grazed my head.” The last letter in the collection is dated 3rd June 1917. Wilfred was killed on 7th June 1917 aged 19. A letter to his mother is shown here on the right [Z1360/1/35]

Letters give us an insight into the thoughts, feelings and experiences of individuals in a way that other contemporary sources don’t, especially in times when society told you to keep your emotions to yourself. Now we can upload our thoughts and feelings for all to see. I for one am rather glad that I’ve committed very few of my thoughts and feelings to paper, as you never know who may be reading your private thoughts but it would be nice if letter writing wasn’t consigned to history.

Bel. J. France  
November 25<sup>th</sup> /16  
My Dear Mother  
Just a short note to keep you up-to-date & to let you know that I am well. I have a fairly bad cold just now & get a handful of pills occasionally.  
I am in an old house just now & have a fine dog out & sleep like a log.  
Received your paper to day also enclosed letter. Simon was only known to me by name. Don't get showing my photo in, please.  
Thanks for food & parcel.  
The cake etc were good & were enjoyed by myself & pals.  
No more now,  
Your loving son,  
Wilf.

Laura Johnson, Customer Liaison Officer

## OUT & ABOUT WITH THE ARCHIVES



Bedfordshire Archives Service was part of the Heritage Bedford tent at the recent Bedford River Festival alongside The Higgins Museum, the Bunyan Museum, the Quarry Theatre, the Panacea Museum, the Bedford Tour Guides and the Place Theatre. Showcasing our *Women of Bedfordshire* game, we spoke to a variety of people over the two day event, which this year was extended to St Mary's Garden's, west of the town bridge, to celebrate the 40th anniversary of the River Festival.

### **BEDFORDSHIRE ARCHIVES POPS UP IN LUTON**

**Thursday 6th September, Luton Central Library**

As part of September's national Heritage Open Day events Bedfordshire Archives, working with Luton Cultural Services Trust, will be running a pop up archive in Luton Central Library. Using a range of activities, exhibitions, games, demonstrations, and short presentations on some of our Luton based collections we will bring the experience of working with and inspiration for using archives to those in the South of the county who may not know about us. You can check the Heritage Open Day website for more details of events in your area.

## **NEWS**

We have said goodbye to Esther Bellamy, one of our archivists, who is heading back to Cambridgeshire Archives to work as a cataloguing archivist and to our Learning Officer, Clare Davison, whose projects with local schools have opened up the archives to a new generation. Thank you both for your work; you'll be very much missed! We also said goodbye to Rachel Bates, archivist, who has decided to be a full time mum – our loss is baby Joshua's gain.



**L-R: Esther, Clare and Rachel**

Bedfordshire Archives is sad to hear of the death of our friend and supporter, Mr Richard Wildman, the well-known author and historian of Bedford and former honorary archivist of Bedford Modern School.

We welcome ideas and material for future issues. Published by Bedfordshire Archives Service, Riverside Building, Borough Hall, Bedford MK42 9AP. Tel: (01234) 228833 E-mail: [archive@bedford.gov.uk](mailto:archive@bedford.gov.uk) Online at: [www.bedford.gov.uk/archive](http://www.bedford.gov.uk/archive)

 [twitter.com/Bedsarchives](https://twitter.com/Bedsarchives)  [facebook.com/BedfordshireArchives](https://facebook.com/BedfordshireArchives)



Jointly funded by Bedford Borough Council, Central Bedfordshire Council & Luton Borough Council