



Living Letters

Correspondence then and now

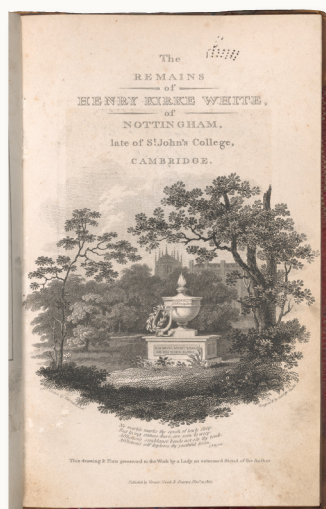
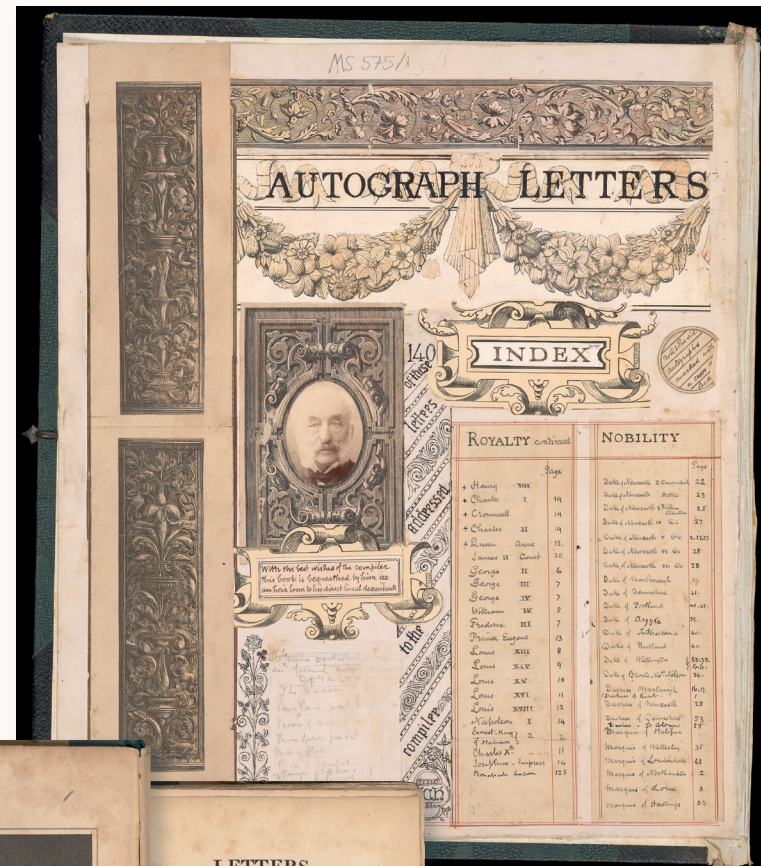
Scrapbook of autograph letters kept by Thomas Chambers Hine (1813-1899), architect. Manuscript Collections, MS 575/1 →

Letters kept and letters lost

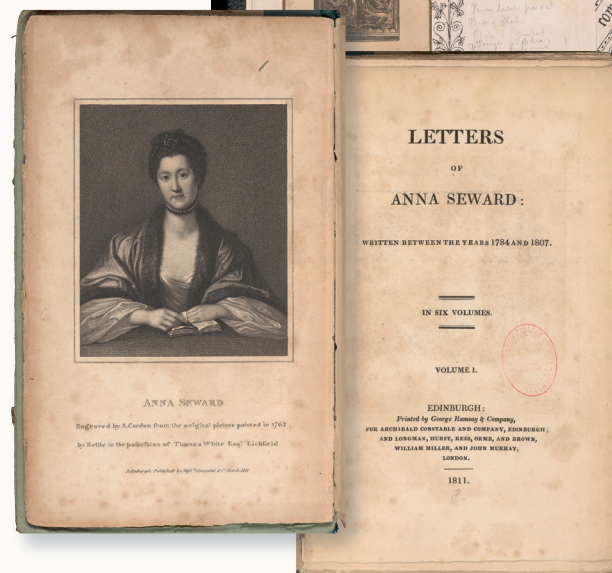
Letters have their own particular and markedly different afterlives. It depends on whom they are sent to and sometimes whom they are passed down to. Some people are willing and able to collect their own letters, or those of others. In contrast, other people cannot or do not wish to preserve them and the letters are destroyed.

A letter's life and cultural value do not necessarily end when (or if) it is sent, or when its author or recipient dies. The Nottingham architect T.C. Hine curated a vast scrapbook of 'Autograph Letters from Kings Nobles Statemen Churchmen Scientists Authors Artists Architects and Other Notabilities AD 1640 1880'. Letters were sometimes given to others to publish for posterity, as seen in editions of the letters of Anna Seward, a significant figure in the Midlands enlightenment, and the Nottingham-born poet Henry Kirke White.

Editing, particularly pre-twentieth-century, often involved removing from the text anything that might be embarrassing to the letter writer's surviving family, including the names of individuals still living, or information about potentially controversial opinions. Such censorship could take extreme forms and even be prompted by the letter's author. Carlos Blacker, a friend of both Oscar Wilde and the 7th Duke of Newcastle, asked the latter to destroy one of his letters. Whilst this letter survived, it is an important reminder of the vulnerability of correspondence to deliberate or unthinking acts of destruction. It reminds us that for every letter that has come down to us there are unknown numbers (potentially millions and millions of letters) that have not. We might glimpse ghostly traces of some of these. For example, a passing reference in a surviving letter to one that has not survived. In the main though, these letters and the lives and events they record are lost to us.



↑ The remains of Henry Kirke White, of Nottingham; late of St John's College, Cambridge, with an account of his life by Robert Southey (London, 1807). East Midlands Special Collection Not 1.W8 WHI



← Frontispiece and title page to volume 1 of *Letters of Anna Seward: written between the years 1784 and 1807* (Edinburgh, 1811). Special Collection PR3671. S7.Z5

The poet Anna Seward lived most of her life in Lichfield and was an indefatigable and extremely well-networked correspondent. She once compared leaving a letter unanswered to 'an unexpiated sin'.

→ Part of a letter from Carlos Blacker to his 'Best of friends' [Henry Pelham-Clinton, 7th Duke of Newcastle under Lyne], 27 August 1891. Newcastle Collection, Ne C 14265

