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VOL 31 NO 7

£2.95

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PRESS ASSOCIATION IMAGES

Words of Wisdom

Queen Mary attends to her correspondence at Buckingham Palace in 1918

FAR LEFT: The Queen, her granddaughter, at work at her desk in Windsor Castle in April 1977

POPPERFOTO/GETTY IMAGES

Royal communications have helped to play a part in history for hundreds of years, but is the art of letter-writing dying out, asks IAN LLOYD

LAST NOVEMBER, DURING his official visit to Canada, the Prince of Wales spoke about Prince Harry's deployment to Afghanistan. 'I don't think I managed to talk to him,' recalled the prince.

'I wrote letters and tried to get him to write me letters. I was saying if you write a letter, in 30 or 40 years it becomes fascinating history.'

This historic value is nowhere more apparent than in the correspondence of that most assiduous of letter-writers, Queen Victoria. Giles St Aubyn, one of her many biographers, says: 'Her massive integrity, her common sense, her quick, observant eye, her passionate enthusiasms, her royal memory, her naïve simplicity, are all disclosed in her vivid, staccato style.'

Her output was prodigious. On average the queen wrote 2,500 words a day in letters and her journal, approximately 60 million words during her reign. For more than 40 years she wrote at least twice a week to her eldest daughter Vicky, later the Empress Frederick of Germany, a correspondence that was eventually published in six volumes. Countless other letters were sent to Vicky's eight siblings as well as the ever-growing brood of royal grandchildren.

Politicians were inundated. In 1882, during an uprising in Egypt, the monarch sent the Secretary-of-State for War some 17 letters in less than 24 hours. In the Broadlands' archives are over 1,200 letters written by her to Lord Palmerston, just one of 20 ministers with whom she corresponded on a regular basis.

Royal letters – even innocent ones – can prove a lucrative bargaining tool for the unscrupulous. In 1870, during the messy divorce proceedings initiated by Sir Charles Mordaunt, trifling letters written by Edward Albert, Prince of Wales, to Lady Mordaunt were used as evidence of her intimate involvement with the prince. He was served a subpoena to appear as a witness in court, where he was obliged to deny adultery. ➤

POPPERFOTO/GETTY IMAGES

FROM RIGHT: The Queen Mother in her private sitting room at Clarence House in July 1960

The Duke of Edinburgh in his office at Clarence House in August 1951. His wife ascended the throne six months later

A note released by the Public Record Office under the 30-year rule in which Prince Philip apologised to Prime Minister Edward Heath after making allegedly anti-Common Market comments at the height of the negotiations to take Britain into Europe

The Mordaunt case may have been a factor in Edward's decision to have most of his personal papers burned after his death in 1910. His biographer, Philip Magnus, noted that historians 'lost a substantial record of the 19th century, including much material which a biographer of King Edward VII would have wished to consult'.

Similarly in 1925, following the death of Queen Alexandra, her letters were also destroyed with the exception of those to her son George V, her brother Waldemar and her sister Marie, mother of Tsar Nicholas II of Russia. Magnus regarded this second incineration 'another deplorable loss'.

Blackmail for royal correspondence has reared its ugly head several times. Edward's son the Duke of Clarence was forced to pay £200 to a young lady of the night in return for some letters he had written to her. A generation later, Clarence's nephew, Prince George, Duke of Kent, was similarly blackmailed. This time there was the added twist that the extortionist was a young man, a Parisian architect, to whom George had sent some ill-advised *billets-doux*. The prince's elder brother, the future Edward VIII, paid up on behalf of the royal family.

'There has been a scandal about Prince George's letters to a young man in Paris,' diplomat Sir Robert Bruce Lockhart recorded in his diary. 'A large sum of money has been paid for their recovery.'

Other recipients of royal love letters have tried to profit by selling them. In the 1960s Princess Margaret wrote a series of frank notes to society pianist Robin Douglas-Home, with whom she enjoyed a brief relationship. In one of them Margaret rhapsodised: 'I think all the time of you... trust me as I trust you, love me as I love you, know always that I want you.' Douglas-Home tried to sell the letters to a New York publisher but died before the deal was concluded.

History would repeat itself 30 years later when James Hewitt, a former lover of Diana, Princess of Wales, tried to sell 64 intimate letters from the princess. Although he once claimed he had been offered £4 million for the hand-written notes, to date they are still in his possession. At the time Sarah, Duchess of York condemned Hewitt's action: 'Betrayal, I think, is the most horrible, horrible disloyal thing you can do to anyone,' she said.

The duchess was herself the recipient of an infamous letter of rebuke after sending flowers to Princess Margaret. Three years earlier photographs of Fergie having her toes sucked by American John Bryan had been splashed across the tabloids, and it clearly still rankled.

'Not once have you hung your head in embarrassment,' fumed Margaret, 'even for a minute, after those disgraceful photographs. Clearly, you have never considered the damage

PICTURES: PRESS ASSOCIATION IMAGES

BUCKINGHAM PALACE

22nd June, 1971.

Dear Prime Minister,

I am appalled to think that some very casual remarks at a small conference in Edinburgh should have caused such a fuss. I apologize profusely for causing you any further trouble on this vexed question.

At the time my mind was running on a completely different tack and I never dreamed that my comments could be construed as being either pro or anti Common Market.

I am afraid the mere words 'Common Market' have the same effect on the press as the bells had on Pavlov's dogs.

Yours sincerely,

Philip

you are causing us all. How dare you discredit us like this, and how dare you send me those flowers.'

When the letter was leaked Princess Margaret's stance was condemned as breathtakingly audacious given her own chequered past. She most certainly would not have approved of the Duchess of York's recent activities…

Members of the royal family have often resorted to letter-writing to communicate feelings they were otherwise unable to express. The greatest exponents of this practice were King George V and Queen Mary. Shortly before their marriage in 1893, Princess May wrote to her future husband: 'I am very sorry that I am still so shy with you. It is so stupid to be so stiff together & really there is nothing I would not tell you, except that I love you more than anybody in the world, & this I cannot tell you myself so I write it to relieve my feelings.'

Prince George replied the same day, telling his fiancée that his love for her 'is growing stronger & stronger every time I see you: although I may appear shy and cold'.

Their daughter-in-law, the future Queen Mother, occasionally resorted to the written word to express emotions she found difficult to voice. To Princess Margaret at the time of the latter's ill-fated romance with Peter Townsend, Queen Elizabeth wrote: 'I think about it and you all the time, and because I have to talk over the horrid things does not mean that I don't suffer with you, or that one's love is any less. I have wanted to write this for a long time, as it is something which might sound embarrassing if said.' ➤

GETTY IMAGES

CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT: The Prince of Wales as an undergraduate in his room at Trinity College, Cambridge, April 1969

A letter from Prince Harry, aged seven, on show at the Metropolitan Police Mounted Training Establishment in East Molesey, Surrey

The prince at Eton some 12 years later. Has he acquired his father's letter-writing skills?

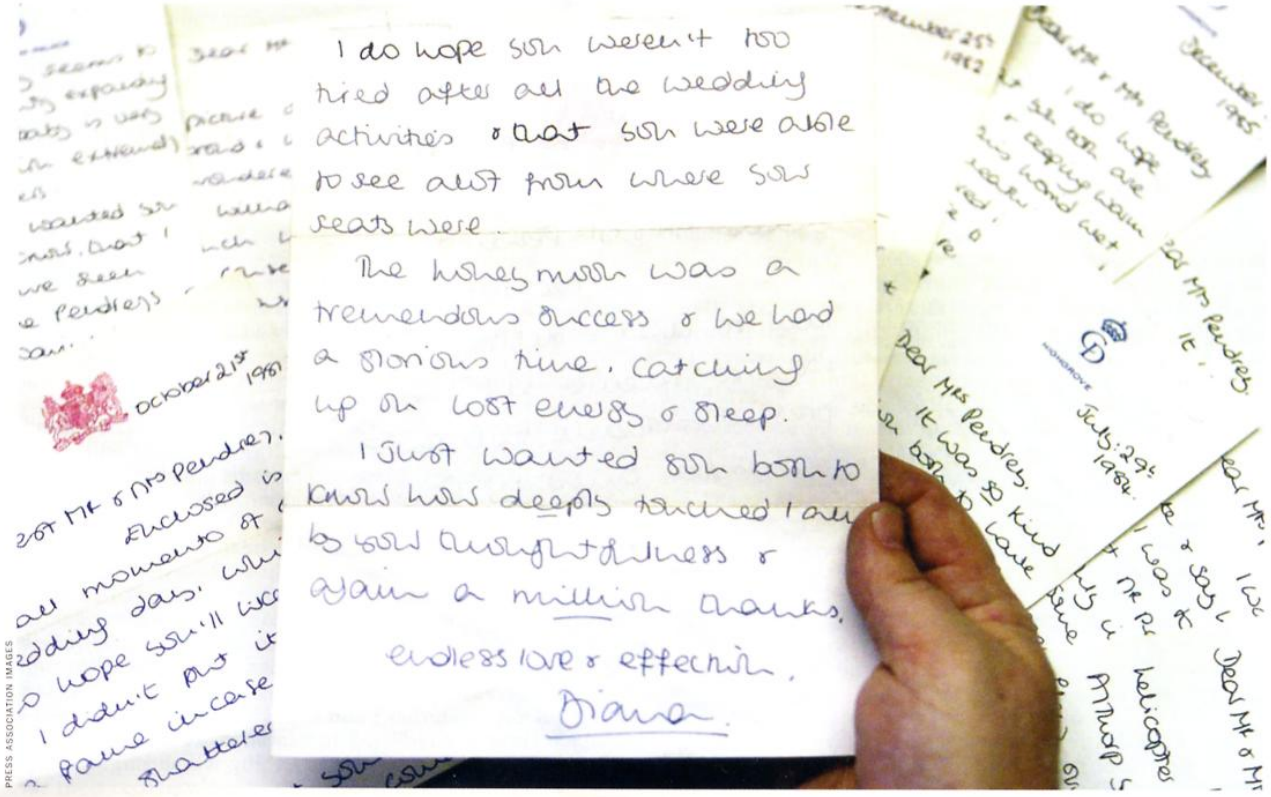
A collection of handwritten letters from the late Diana, Princess of Wales are auctioned in Norfolk in 2002

What, if anything, the Queen Mother wrote about the more recent crises that have rocked the royal family we will never know, thanks to another royal 'sorting' of papers, this time by Princess Margaret.

William Shawcross, Queen Elizabeth's official biographer, revealed: 'on the princess's orders, large black bags of papers were taken away for destruction', including correspondence from the Princess of Wales, which, declared Margaret, were 'so private'. Shawcross, like Philip Magnus before him, deems such actions 'regrettable from a historical viewpoint'.

The extant letters written by both Queen Elizabeth and the Duke and Duchess of Windsor are proof of the historic significance of royal correspondence. In a 1940 letter written by Her Majesty to the then Colonial Secretary, Lord Lloyd, she describes the Duchess of Windsor as a bad example for England and 'the lowest of the low' – crucial evidence of her inflexible attitude to the couple, even four years after the abdication.

For their part, letters written by David and Wallis to each other a decade later reveal their own spiteful and selfish



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natures, as well as their ambitions. In 1952 the duke was in London for the funeral of his brother, King George VI, with the duchess reminding him 'this is a golden opportunity and it may only knock once', adding, 'now that the door has been opened a crack try and get your foot in'.

Any attempt to rehabilitate the Windsors into royal life was sharply rebuffed by Queen Mary, the widowed Queen Elizabeth and the new Queen Elizabeth II. The duke wrote to his wife saying the royal trio were 'ice-veined bitches'. A year later, in Britain for his mother's funeral, he rages: 'what a smug, stinking lot my relations are'.

Relatively few missives written by Queen Elizabeth II have been made public, though occasional auctions of childhood letters to friends and relations give us a glimpse of a dutiful child solicitously asking about the health of the recipient or thanking them for a gift or a card.

The scant evidence we have suggests that the Queen has not inherited her grandfather's ability to commit his emotions to paper. According to her biographer Robert Lacey, she has always found it difficult to articulate her personal grief, and he cites the example of the murder of Earl Mountbatten in 1979. 'When it came to a letter of condolence to either Patricia or her sister Pamela [Mountbatten's daughters], Elizabeth II sent nothing' although, Lacey concedes, 'it was, however, clear from her actions that she felt for her cousins and shared in their distress'.

Contrast this with her response to a brief note sent to the sovereign by Patricia following the death of a favourite corgi. 'By return she received a four-page letter full of gratitude and feeling, spilling out what the loss meant to her.'

Presumably it will be several decades before we have a sizeable amount of published correspondence to help evaluate the Queen's personal and political roles. We do know, however, that among the most significant ones she has penned were to the Prince and Princess of Wales in December 1995 in the aftermath of Diana's damaging BBC *Panorama* interview.

According to Lacey: 'Elizabeth II formally notified her Prime Minister [John Major] that she would be writing to her son and daughter-in-law requesting that they agree to "an early divorce... in the best interests of the country".' Lacey goes on to describe the letters as 'measured but firm'.

In contrast to the Queen, Prince Philip dashed off 'a long and lyrical letter' to Patricia Brabourne in the wake of her father's murder. She was herself critically injured in the atrocity and unable to attend the family funerals, including that of her son Nicky. Philip therefore sent her 'a moving and compassionate example of his vivid writing style, a graphic description of the occasion, exactly what a grieving mother would want to hear.'

Royal biographer Gyles Brandreth considers the Duke of Edinburgh 'an assiduous correspondent. He types his letters himself. He writes with head and heart, and always to a purpose. It is his most effective means of personal communication.'

All of this became apparent to the outside world during the inquest into the death of Diana, Princess of Wales. The inquest proved once again the historical value of royal correspondence since copies, provided by the duke himself, disproved scurrilous allegations that he had called his daughter-in-law a trollop and a harlot.

Instead they showed him as sympathetic to Diana's plight, which she acknowledges in one of her replies. 'Dearest Pa, I was particularly touched by your most recent letter which proved to me, if I didn't already know it, that you really do care.'

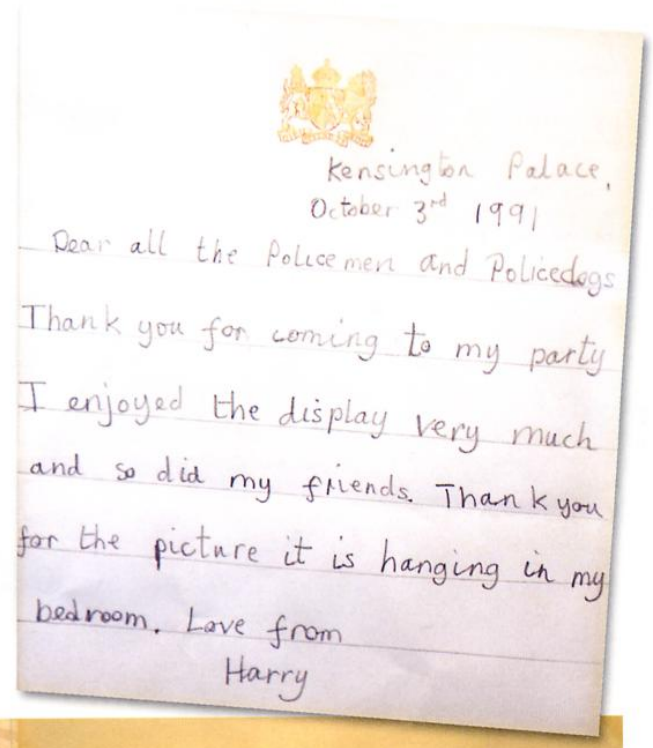
Although few of the Queen and Prince Philip's letters have been made public, a varied selection of letters written by the Prince of Wales were featured in his authorised biography by Jonathan Dimbleby. It became apparent that he has inherited Queen Victoria's skill at writing passionate, highly personal and incisive letters, as well as her fondness for underlining key words.

A typical example is one he wrote in November 1986 detailing the beginning of the crisis in his marriage.

'Frequently I feel nowadays that I'm in a kind of cage, pacing up and down in it and longing to be free. How awful incompatibility is, how dreadfully destructive it can be for the players in this extraordinary drama. It has all the ingredients of a Greek tragedy.'

We know that the Princess of Wales taught her sons the discipline of writing thank-you letters immediately after receiving gifts or attending parties at their friends' homes. It is to be hoped that they also follow their father's advice and write more substantial letters whenever they can.

As he has told them, they will become 'fascinating history' for future generations.


Kensington Palace,
October 3rd 1991

Dear all the Policemen and Policedogs

Thank you for coming to my party

I enjoyed the display very much

and so did my friends. Thank you

for the picture it is hanging in my

bedroom. Love from

Harry

PICTURES: PRESS ASSOCIATION IMAGES