

An engraving of Napoleon Bonaparte from Hester's collection



Hester Pengelly

The discovery of a lost autograph collection

In 1986, work experience placement Joanne Porter, who was working on Torquay Museum's archives, made a chance discovery in a cupboard.

She alerted the curator's attention to 12 albums packed with letters. What she had discovered was Hester Forbes-Julian's autograph and letter collection which has been left to the museum in her will in 1934.

The society had almost certainly been overwhelmed with the task of documenting around 4,000 letters and put it safely away.

Unfortunately, they forgot it was there. Hester Pengelly was the youngest daughter of one of the museum founders, William Pengelly.

Her education at private schools in Torquay and at Cheltenham Ladies' College was followed by home studying with her father.

VERONIKA VALIGURSKÁ
Torquay Museum

She was a member of the Geologists' Association, the Anthropological Institute, the Dante Society and other institutions. By the turn of the 20th century, Hester inherited a significant autograph collection of the rich and famous. Originally bound in 12 albums and numbering 1,500 items, the collection of signatures and letters also featured documents and portrait engravings.

Through Hester's father's scientific connections, her own links with Torquay Natural History Society and her marriage to prominent metallurgist Henry Forbes Julian, a considerable number of items were subsequently added.

Hester would also take

advantage of Torquay being a popular holiday resort for the famous and frequently invited important members of society to accompany her for afternoon tea.

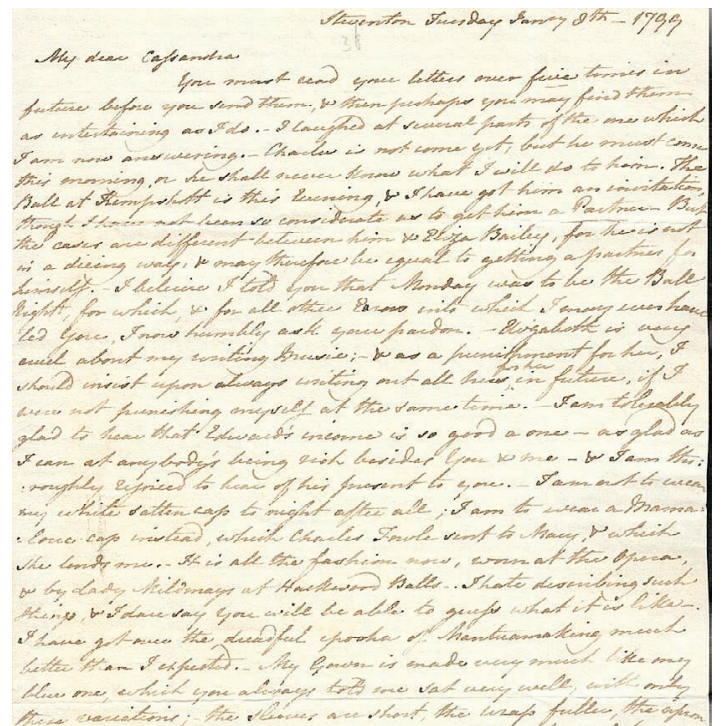
Their replies, favourable or otherwise, became part of the collection.

Hester was to lose her husband Henry on the Titanic in 1912. Letters of condolence some from European royalty were discovered in the collection.

This discovery started what became a 13-year volunteer project to document, transcribe and scan the collection.

It includes letters from Jane Austen, John Keats, Charlotte Brontë, Abraham Lincoln, Nelson, Napoleon, Wellington, Gustavus Adolphus, Stanley, Livingstone, Scott and Shackleton, to name but a few.

Many of the letters have now been published, often in biographies.



A piece from Hester's Collection