



Press release

13 February 2012

Archivists discover rare love letters in Kew Gardens

Touching love letters thought to be over 150 years old have been discovered at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew.

The letters which discuss the subjects of 'wives' and 'marriage' were found within the Directors' correspondence collection and personal papers written by botanical collectors and explorers in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Highlighted as part of The National Archives [Archive Awareness Campaign](#), the letters reveal the romantic challenges of our intrepid explorer ancestors.

In 1877, [Sir Joseph Dalton Hooker](#), Kew's second public Director and friend of Charles Darwin, left his beloved wife Hyacinth to tour North America. Throughout his expedition, he wrote several letters to Hyacinth describing the perils and pleasures of his trip, all the while continuing to relay his devotion to her *'I do long to see you again and stroke your face. I am as anxious to be back as you can be and begin to count the days. I am most anxious to hear of you.'* In another, *'this is my last letter to you from America, I am pleased to go, for I am wearying to be home and with you'* (Hooker/Gray letters JDH/2/22).

Mary Livingstone, the wife of missionary and explorer [David Livingstone](#) (1813-1873), accompanied him on several of his adventures. However, in December 1861, during the Zambesi Expedition in South Africa he tells Sir William Hooker, the angst and despair of being separated from her when she returned to England after contracting fever *'My wife is I believe now on her way out here after a 3 years unexpected separation'* (DC 60, f.179). Unfortunately she died of fever the following year.

Another botanist, William Keit from The Natal Botanic Gardens in South Africa, wrote to [Sir Joseph Hooker](#) telling him he had *'treated myself to a wife'* (DC 190 f.791). The messages in the correspondence reveal that both love and the necessity of an assistant compelled him to 'matrimony'.

The Frank Kingdon-Ward collection also holds personal artefacts including letters, photographs and diaries of one of the great plant hunters of the twentieth century. They enclose a wealth of information and observations about his trips as well as many references to his first and second wives. His second wife Jean accompanied him on many of his expeditions and he alludes to his fondness for her in several of his letters: *'my 63rd birthday. Darling Jean had a lovely birthday surprise for me...'* (FKW/1/21). Jean also gave her husband a moving letter after they returned from one of their expeditions in 1948: *'Thank you so very much sweetheart for a lovely three weeks plant hunting ..I love you with all my heart for ever and ever, oh so much darling if I could only tell you how much'* (FKW/1/38).

Kiri Ross-Jones, Archivist & Records Manager, Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, said:

The human face of the collection is very fascinating and it's wonderful that the letters have been preserved. They give us a real insight into the great botanists, enabling us to see the personal lives of the men behind the science. It is a privilege to work with such amazing collections and there are many further gems to be found in our kilometre of archives.

Angela Owusu, Archive Awareness Campaign, commented:

"This is an ideal Valentine's Day find for all those who work to collect, preserve and learn from the past. What is most captivating is that a lot of the words are so heartfelt that reading the letters feel like you are intruding into the personal lives of the authors. Today's romantics can see that simple gestures are very much the key for expressing romance on a grand scale."

– Ends –

For free postcards, further details, spokespeople or images on the Archive Awareness Campaign, please contact **Angela Owusu** on **0208 392 5237** or email Angela.Owusu@nationalarchives.gov.uk.

Notes to Editors

For more information about Kew's archive collection please contact the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew press office on 020 8332 5607 or email pr@kew.org

Archive Awareness Campaign (AAC)

AAC www.archiveawareness.com is an ongoing celebration of archive treasures across the UK and Ireland. It provides a means for local archives to promote their services through open days, exhibitions, tours, workshops, competitions, performances and many more to

help the public discover a piece of their own history. AAC is spearheaded by the Archives & Records Association (ARA) www.archives.org.uk and funded by The National Archives nationalarchives.gov.uk.

The Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew

The Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew is a world famous scientific organisation, internationally respected for its outstanding living collection of plants and world-class Herbarium as well as its scientific expertise in plant diversity, conservation and sustainable development in the UK and around the world. Kew Gardens is a major international visitor attraction. Its landscaped 132 hectares and Kew's country estate, [Wakehurst Place](#), attract nearly two million visitors every year. Kew was made a UNESCO World Heritage Site in July 2003 and celebrated its 250th anniversary in 2009. Wakehurst Place is home to Kew's [Millennium Seed Bank](#), the largest wild plant seed bank in the world. Kew and its partners have collected and conserved seed from 10% of the world's wild flowering plant species (c.30, 000 species) and aim to conserve 25% by 2020.

Kew's Archives

Kew's Archives are open to the public and can be viewed in the recently opened reading room. To book an appointment, view the collections, or for any enquiries about the collection, please contact archives@kew.org or call 020 8332 5476. Follow the Kew archives team's blog <http://www.kew.org/news/kew-blogs/library-art-archives/free-events-in-the-archives.htm>