



'Significant Signatures': Autograph letters from the Waddesdon Archive including Elizabeth I, Mozart and more

26 March – 2 November 2025

In 2024, a routine cataloguing project in the Waddesdon Archive rediscovered something quite extraordinary. An ordinary archive box was revealed to contain a collection of 229 letters and papers penned or signed by some of the greatest and most influential figures of the last 500 years.

In Spring 2025, the Family Room at Waddesdon Manor will unveil *Significant Signatures: Autograph letters from the Waddesdon Archive*, a display of 29 specially selected letters, most of which have never been seen by the public before.

From monarchs like Elizabeth I to a manuscript by Mozart, as well as an example of Lord Nelson writing with his surviving left hand, the exhibition will be a unique window into the private and public lives of some of history's most recognisable names spanning over 500 years.

This unexplored collection was compiled by Baron Edmond de Rothschild (1845-1934), an indefatigable collector from the age of 7, who developed a passion for manuscripts and works on paper. How the Baron acquired some of the letters is shrouded in mystery, perhaps from a specialist dealer, although others were part of his family's contemporaneous correspondence with notable people like Victor Hugo (1802-1885).

A substantial part of the collection focuses on French political and revolutionary figures, as well as those involved in Western arts, music, science and philosophy. Some were written in the knowledge they would be made public, while others were clearly intended to be private, offering a fascinating insight into the greatest minds of their time, and their lives that continue to intrigue us.

Letters from some of the most powerful royal and political players will be on display, whether written in their own hand or personally signed off for approval.

The Protestant Reformation created a period of great political turmoil on the European continent and the exhibition will display letters from an English monarch at the centre of the schism. Navigating the upheaval, Elizabeth I (1533-1603) survived assassination attempts and repelled the Spanish forces from the mainland in the four decades she ruled. Her letters on display are written in French, one of six languages she had mastered, and which she would often use when conversing with fellow monarchs. Also included is a letter from the Queen's statesman ally and potential suitor Robert Dudley (1532-1588), who found himself mired in scandal when his wife died from a fall down the stairs.

George Villiers (1592-1628) rose from minor nobility as the favourite of King James I (1566-1625) and eventually became the Duke of Buckingham. Known as a patron of the arts, on display will be letters from him and an artist he established a close relationship with - the Flemish painter Peter Paul Rubens (1577-1644). They probably met during Villiers's negotiations for the marriage of Charles I and Henrietta Maria of France, and Rubens would subsequently paint the Duke's portrait on several occasions. He also featured him in allegorical work that was meant to solidify the Duke's important political standing, although Rubens would privately admit his patron was arrogant and heading for disaster, an accurate prediction a few years later when the Duke was assassinated.

Other monarchs featured include King James II (1633-1701), the last Catholic King who was deposed in the Glorious Revolution, Francis II (1768-1835) the last Holy Roman Emperor, Louis XVIII (1755-1824) who ruled as a constitutional monarch following the revolutionary and Napoleonic eras, and Adelaide of Saxe-Meiningen (1792-1849), Queen Consort to William IV who became Queen Dowager for twelve years after her husband's death.

At a time when absolute monarchy was being replaced by democratic rule, the letters of revolutionaries also give an insight into the people who changed the course of history. The mind and pen of one of the Founding Fathers of America, Benjamin Franklin (1706-1790) was pivotal in the drafting and signing of the Declaration of Independence and can be seen here in a less grandiose, but equally intriguing, appearance. Another pivotal figure in the American War of Independence was the Marquis de Lafayette (1757-1834), who joined the continental army and commanded the troops in the decisive Siege of Yorktown. His letter was written in between returning to France to take part in both 1789 and 1830 revolutions.

On opposite sides of the Napoleonic Wars were Horatio Nelson (1758-1805) and Joachim Murat (1767-1815). Having lost his dominant right arm to a Spanish musket ball in 1797, Nelson reportedly began signing orders with his left a mere half hour later, and a letter written with his surviving hand will be on display. Although not as dangerous as his naval battles, Nelson also most likely had to contend with another foe – quills – which were usually taken from the left side of a bird's wing so that the feather curved away from the presumed right-handed writer. On the other side of the war, Napoleon's brother-in-

law Murat was key in bringing the Emperor to power and served as a Marshall of the Empire and as Admiral against the Coalition forces. Shortly after becoming King of Naples, he abandoned the Emperor and was eventually sentenced to death by firing squad after a failed war against the Austrians.

The letters on display also relate to some of the greatest European cultural figures of their time.

There are writings from an incredible array of musical geniuses from the 18th and 19th centuries. Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791) and Antonio Salieri (1750-1825) were contemporaries in Vienna, and both were employed by Franz-Joseph, the Holy Roman Emperor. In recent years their relationship has been the subject of much mythmaking in the theatre and cinema, but visitors can come to their own conclusions by seeing their own words up close, and indeed a precious fragment of an unknown Mozart manuscript composition. Also included are letters to the Rothschilds from violinist maestro Niccolò Paganini (1782-1840) and composer Gioachino Rossini (1792-1868), who was in contact with the family following his voluntary withdrawal from the operatic scene.

Literary figures from France whose famous pens were also put to good use include the towering figure of the enlightenment, Voltaire (1694- 1778), as well as one of his patrons, mistress of the King Louis XV, Madame de Pompadour (1721-1764). A century later the romantic writer Victor Hugo (1802-1885) would correspond with Baron Edmond, while politics and literary ambitions mixed for the French Foreign Minister François-René de Chateaubriand (1768-1848), whose letter was written long after he had returned from exile in London to France.

British and Irish icons are also included, from the Romantic poet Lord Byron (1788-1824) whose towering influence is reflected in the archetypal anti-hero, to the Anglo-Irish novelist Maria Edgeworth (1768-1849) whose children's stories championed ideas of social reform.

As well as featuring all these letters from some of the grandest and most influential figures of the time, the exhibition will also investigate the very nature of letter collecting, the popular pursuit that has endured for centuries. It celebrates the vanishing art of correspondence, how letters that may have been seen as prosaic at the time of writing can become objects of beauty in their own right, not to mention the challenges of misattribution. It will also demonstrate Waddesdon's Archive role in caring for its collections, and how archival material provides the foundation for an understanding of history and the history of collecting.

Dame Hannah Rothschild said: *"This year, Waddesdon Manor will display a lesser-known slice of Rothschild history: a collection of autographs that spans centuries. Pulled from an undiscovered archive box, these letters are more than just signatures—they're a window into our family's insatiable curiosity and its devotion to art, history and culture. Names leap off the pages, whispering tales of the past and stories that have been waiting to be told. For the first time, these rediscovered autographs will step out of the shadows and into the public eye at Waddesdon - a revelation of treasures hidden in plain sight."*

Pippa Shirley, Director of Collections at Waddesdon Manor said: *"In our age of email, texts and digital communication, the art of letter writing is fast disappearing, so there is something wonderful about this reminder of the physical elegance and permanence of words written on paper. They give us a tangible link to history we can see and feel, as well as to the people who, just like us, needed to communicate with*

others – even though they may never have expected their writings to last and be treasured as they have been.”

NOTES TO EDITORS

[HIGH RESOLUTION IMAGES CAN BE DOWNLOADED BY CLICKING ON THIS LINK](#)

- *Queen Elizabeth I*, Nicholas Hilliard, 1576–1578. Image - Waddesdon (Rothschild Family) © Hamilton Kerr Institute
- Queen Elizabeth I to King Henri IV of France, undated [c.1589-1598]. Accession No. 5831.2, © The Waddesdon Archive at Windmill Hill

Waddesdon Manor was built at the end of the 19th century by Baron Ferdinand de Rothschild in the style of a French early 16th-century château. Baron Ferdinand was an inspired collector, and the house was designed to showcase his exceptional collection of English and Dutch paintings, French 18th-century furniture, Sèvres porcelain, and other decorative arts. When Ferdinand died in 1898, he left Waddesdon to his sister, Alice, who also was a great collector. Upon her death the house passed to her great-nephew, James de Rothschild, who inherited a substantial part of his father Baron Edmond’s great collection. In 1957, to ensure its future in perpetuity, Waddesdon was bequeathed to the National Trust. The Rothschild family continues to run Waddesdon through a family charitable trust, the Rothschild Foundation. Until February 2024, it was under the chairmanship of Jacob, 4th Lord Rothschild. His eldest daughter, Hannah Rothschild, is now the Chair. More at <https://waddesdon.org.uk/about-us/press/notes-for-editors/>

For more information on Waddesdon Manor and its exhibitions, visit www.waddesdon.org.uk, like @WaddesdonManor on Facebook, follow @WaddesdonManor on Twitter and @waddesdonmanor_nt on Instagram.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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