

Diplomacy, passion and power: British Library acquires the Granville Archive, detailing two centuries of political and private lives at the highest level

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The British Library has acquired the Granville Archive, a vast collection of political papers and correspondence relating to three generations of the Leveson-Gower family, who played pivotal roles in British national life from the mid-18th to the late-19th century. The acquisition was made possible with a grant of £865,200 from NHMF and funding from other generous supporters.

Contained in more than 400 boxes, the Granville Archive comprises the extensive papers of three aristocratic politicians – father, son and grandson – who exercised huge power as politicians and diplomats during the period of British imperial and commercial expansion in the 18th and 19th centuries. Of equal significance are the extensive original correspondence and papers of women within the family, including Susanna Leveson-Gower, Harriet Bessborough and Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire, which provide an unrivalled insight into the personal and political lives of several generations of aristocratic women in an age when only men could hold public office.

Highlights of the archive include:

- Papers of **Granville Leveson-Gower, second Earl Gower and first Marquess of Staffordshire (1721-1803)**, a crucial figure in Lord North's Cabinet at the outset of the American Revolution; Earl Gower's stance in relation to the colonists helped bring the dispute to a head, and in the subsequent War of Independence he despaired of what he saw as Lord North's indecisive leadership.
- Extensive correspondence to and from his third wife, **Susanna Leveson-Gower (1742/3-1805)**, including the series of letters she received from her daughter-in-law Elizabeth, Countess of Sutherland, giving a vivid eyewitness account both of the outbreak of the French Revolution and the subsequent Terror.

- Their son, **Granville Leveson-Gower, first Earl Granville (1773-1846)** was one of the most prominent British diplomats during and after the Napoleonic Wars. The archive includes despatches and papers from his postings in Prussia, Russia, Belgium and France – including his failed endeavours to head off an alliance between Napoleon and the Tsar at Tilsit in 1807.
- An extraordinary cache of personal correspondence never before available to researchers, including intimate and candid letters between Lord Granville and his lover, **Harriet, Countess of Bessborough (1761-1821)**, relating both to their secret love affair, and to the two illegitimate children she bore him in secret.
- Lady Bessborough's correspondence is among more than a thousand letters which, for years, were kept in private in two tin trunks, separate from the rest of the archive; it includes letters from Lady Bessborough's elder sister, the celebrated hostess, **Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire**, and their extensive circle of friends involved in Whig party politics.
- As well as her intimate and heart-rending letters to Lord Granville detailing the concealed births of their son and daughter, Lady Bessborough also offers what is believed to be the **earliest contemporary comment on any work by Jane Austen**. In a letter postmarked November 1811, she remarks of *Sense and Sensibility*: "God bless you dearest G. have you read Sense & Sensibility? it is a clever novel they were full of it at Althorp – tho' it ends stupidly I was much amus'd by it..." (The first review appeared the following February).
- **Granville George Leveson-Gower, second Earl Granville (1815-1891)** served as Foreign Secretary three times between 1851 and 1885 and, in this and other positions, played a central role in the first three administrations of Prime Minister William Ewart Gladstone, as well as being one of Gladstone's closest associates.
- This largest section of the archive provides a panoramic insider perspective on the conduct of the Government at the height of the British Empire and illuminates many dramatic historical moments, such as the **furious telegram the Queen sent to her ministers** – including Granville – upon the fall of Khartoum in 1885 and the death of General Gordon.

"The Granville Archive is one of the most important single collections of papers and correspondence relating to British national life in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries," said William Frame, Head of Modern Archives and Manuscripts at the British Library.

“We are delighted to have acquired the archive and we are tremendously grateful to the National Heritage Memorial Fund for their generous support, without which we would not have been able to make this purchase. The Granville Archive has deep and very rich connections with a number of other collections held by the British Library – especially the Canning Archive and the Gladstone Papers – and we are very pleased that researchers will be able to explore these connections under a single roof.”

Sir Peter Luff, Chair of NHMF, said: “Spanning two centuries of political and private life, The Granville Archive is a remarkable resource. Its coverage of global history from the American and French Revolutions through to the late-Victorian era is outstanding. The previously unexplored correspondence between Lord Granville and Lady Bessborough provides an intimate window into aristocratic society and family life. The National Heritage Memorial Fund felt it was imperative to save and unite this collection. Consisting of over four hundred boxes, the scale of this archive offers a rich and colourful understanding of the time period for both researchers and members of the public. To put it simply, it could not be overlooked.”

Heritage Minister Michael Ellis said: “This outstanding collection offers a unique insight into the personal and political lives of the aristocracy during an eventful period of British history. It is right that government investment has helped to ensure this archive remains accessible and in the public collection. That way, researchers can learn more about our past through the eyes of those who lived through it.”

The acquisition of the Granville Archive includes funding to ensure that it is fully catalogued, and it will become available to researchers in the British Library’s Reading Rooms at St Pancras within the next year.

From 1927 onwards the bulk of the Archive relating to politics and diplomacy was deposited on long-term loan with The National Archives (formerly the Public Record Office), while the tin trunks of private correspondence between Lord Granville and Lady Bessborough, and others of their generation, remained private and has not been available for research before.

“By acquiring this remarkable collection in its totality, we will be making the full extent of the Granville Archive available for the first time,” said William Frame. “By reuniting the collection and allowing researchers to explore the public and private lives of the Leveson-Gowers, it’s as though we will be seeing them as fully formed people for the first time.”

This acquisition has also been generously supported by: British Library Collections Trust, Friends of the National Libraries, Shaw Fund, the Eccles Centre for American Studies, the Bernard H. Breslauer Endowment and a private donor.

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