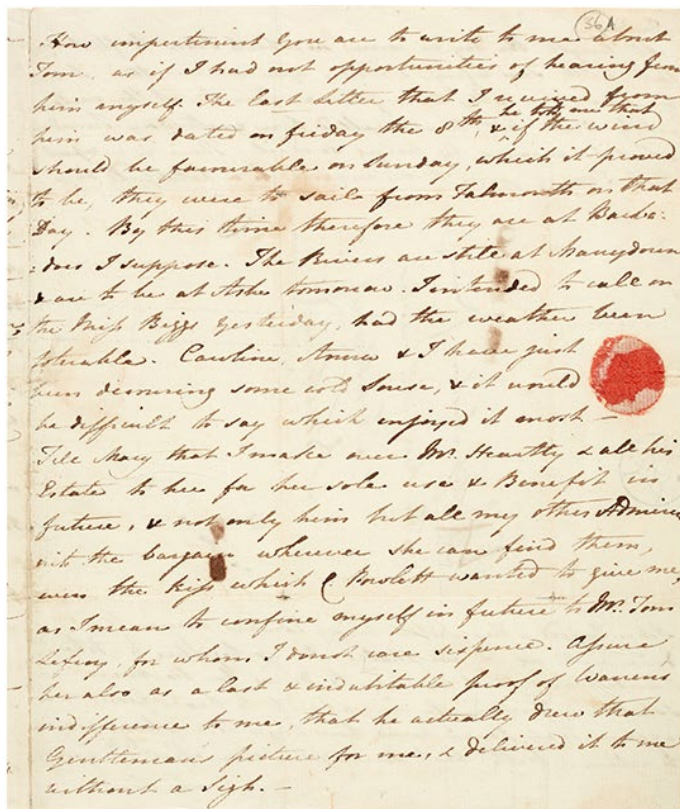


# The Bodleian Libraries and Jane Austen's House acquire prized Jane Austen letters – November 17, 2021



Jane Austen Autograph letter signed, to Cassandra, January 1796, on her romance with Tom Lefroy.  
Photo: Courtesy Jane Austen's House.

**OXFORD.-** A collection of manuscripts written by Jane Austen, which were this week saved in an unprecedented literary acquisition, has been donated to the Bodleian Libraries and Jane Austen's House in Hampshire by Friends of the National Libraries, the literary charity dedicated to preserving the nation's written and printed heritage.

The campaign to save the Honresfield Library, a private collection of manuscripts and printed books associated with some of the greatest writers in English literature was led by Friends of the National Libraries, in partnership with a consortium of research libraries and authors' houses, including the Bodleian Libraries and Jane Austen's House, amongst others. The campaign involved an intensive public appeal to generate donations to save the works from being dispersed through auction sale. It reached a satisfying conclusion this week, having raised more than £15m in donations to secure the collections, including £4m from the National Heritage Memorial Fund. The generosity of the principal donor, Sir Leonard Blavatnik, amounted to half of the collections purchase price (£7.5m). The acquisition will ensure public access to these treasured manuscripts and protect them from further sale for many decades to come. As a result of this monumental donation, it will now be known as the Blavatnik Honresfield Library.

The Jane Austen collection includes two hugely significant personal letters. The autograph manuscripts of fewer than 160 letters by Jane Austen are known to survive, and these two letters will join 14 others already owned by Jane Austen's House —Austen's home for the last eight years of her life and the place where she lived and wrote her novels. The letters confirm the museum as one of the world's most significant repositories of Austen material and the only place where her domestic art can be viewed in its original context.

The two letters in the Blavatnik Honresfield Library offer fascinating glimpses into Austen's personal and creative life. Both were written to Jane Austen's beloved sister Cassandra, and they show her at two very different stages of life. In the first, from January 1796, Jane is about to 'flirt her last' with Tom Lefroy, the young Irish lawyer on holiday in Hampshire for Christmas who has caught her fancy. This is also the earliest known surviving letter

to hold Austen's signature.

The second letter dates from 1813 and sees an older Austen, now the published author of two well-received novels, enjoying a stay in London, and updating Cassandra with the latest gossip. In this long letter we see her pride in the reception of two of her best-loved novels, *Pride and Prejudice* and *Sense and Sensibility*. The collection donated to the Bodleian Libraries and Jane Austen's House also includes rare first editions of *Pride and Prejudice*, *Emma*, *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion* in their original condition.

Richard Ovenden OBE, Bodley's Librarian at the Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford said: 'I am delighted to have been able to play a role in such an important literary acquisition - one that will secure literary treasures by some of the greatest writers from these islands for future generations. We offer huge thanks to Friends of the National Libraries for the donation. Jane Austen is a literary marvel, beloved by her devoted readers all over the world and we are honoured to have prized items of such a unique, personal nature, to add to our wonderful Austen holdings at the Bodleian Libraries. We look forward to building on existing links with Jane Austen's House and to share them with scholars and the wider public, for many years to come.'

Lizzie Dunford, Director of Jane Austen's House, said: 'It has been a privilege for Jane Austen's House to be a part of this truly ground-breaking campaign, spearheaded by inspirational individuals, to save these extraordinary literary treasures for the nation. Jane Austen's House is looking forward to working with the Bodleian Libraries to preserve and share with the public these two extraordinary letters.'

Professor Kathryn Sutherland, Senior Research Fellow, St Anne's College, Oxford, and Trustee at Jane Austen's House, said: 'I am proud to have been part of the campaign, under the visionary leadership of the Friends of the National Libraries, to save this extraordinary collection of priceless manuscripts and printed books for public enjoyment. It is impossible to overestimate the importance of what the FNL have achieved and the significance of this moment for our shared literary heritage. Held between Jane Austen's House and the Bodleian Libraries, the Austen letters from the Blavatnik Honresfield Library will enrich two of the world's major collections of Austen manuscripts and artefacts ensuring their accessibility to scholars and enthusiasts for generations to come.'

HRH The Prince of Wales, Patron of FNL, said: "It is tremendous news for our country that Friends of the National Libraries, I am proud to be Patron, has raised £15 million in just five months to save one of the most significant collections, including manuscripts by Charlotte Brontë, Walter Scott and Robert Burns. I can only congratulate the Chairman, Geordie Greig, and his team for saving the Blavatnik Honresfield Library for the nation, with its treasures now to be owned by some of our greatest national libraries across the U.K. Our literary heritage is our cultural D.N.A. and this preserves it for students, teachers, academics and ordinary readers in perpetuity."

Ros Kerslake, Chief Executive of the National Heritage Memorial Fund, said: 'We at the National Heritage Memorial Fund are delighted to have supported the campaign to save Honresfield Library with £4million, the largest amount we have ever granted towards an acquisition of literary manuscripts since our formation in 1980. 'This is truly a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to acquire such an outstanding and nationally significant collection. The NHMF is a fund of last resort, and the astonishing array of manuscripts will join over 1,000 heritage treasures saved for the nation. With Honresfield Library now secured for public ownership, organisations across the UK will benefit from these literary gems joining their collections.'

'I am proud that this incredible archive will be the last major acquisition we will support under my leadership, before I step down at the end of the year.'