

Secrets of a Linen Press

A wealth of historical delights discovered during a chance conversation

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During dinner at a friend's house, the conversation turned to archaeology. After the usual first question, 'What is the most valuable thing you have ever found?' I was asked if I was interested in *anything* that was old. A scrapbook was then produced. It had been found wedged in the back of a Victorian Linen Press and had narrowly escaped going onto a bonfire. The book appeared to belong to a Miss Charlotte Sullivan and while the content is more historical than archaeological, research has uncovered an intriguing story.

The scrapbook comprises some 394 items, in random order, including letters with envelopes, pamphlets, tickets, invitations, drawings and newspaper cuttings. The envelopes are addressed to Miss Sullivan at Broom House, Fulham. Census checks revealed how unusual the spelling with a single 'l' was and the Dictionary of National Biography listed a Laurence Sullivan who was the Chairman of the East India Company in the 18th century. Unsure of the next move, I contacted the Fulham and Hammersmith Archives and my call was met with delight and disbelief. A local historian, Sue Pierson, was at that very moment about to publish her biography of Charlotte Sullivan. This led to an immediate invitation to visit Fulham and exchange research details with Sue and the Archivists there. Sue photocopied and used many of the items from the scrapbook for her book. She said it had given a lighter, more personal insight into Charlotte's life. For my part, I now had details of Charlotte's life, her family, photographs of her and even details of her will.

Charlotte was born in 1824, the great-granddaughter of the Laurence Sullivan who was listed in the DNB. Her father, another Laurence, was for forty years, the Deputy Secretary at the War Office and a Privy Councillor. Her mother was the sister of the Prime Minister, Lord Palmerston. Other relatives included her uncle, Admiral Sir William Bowles and a niece who was the Countess of Carnwarth. Her home, Broom House, was set on 14 acre site fronting the Thames at Fulham and adjoining Hurlingham House. Along with other parts of Fulham, the family owned property in Ireland, Yorkshire and, spectacularly, 66,000 acres of Prince Edward Island in Canada. Although a considerable heiress, Charlotte remained single all her life. She was a generous benefactress of the parish, donating land for a Park, founding a Working Men's club, supporting the school built by her father and many other charitable works. After her death in 1911 Broom House and the grounds were sold to the Hurlingham Club and the house demolished. The contents of individual rooms had been willed to her servants.

The scrapbook gives an insight into the Victorian world of arts and sciences available to a wealthy and educated woman. I believe it started as an autograph album, as in pride of place is the signature of Queen Victoria. This is followed by that of Edmund Burke, probably acquired from her great grandfather's papers, along with an entry pass to the trial of Warren Hastings.

Now for something archaeological. The first letter is from Charles Dickens to Dr. Austen Layard, who excavated at Nimrud and Kuyunjik, discovering the cuneiform library of Ashurbanipal. This letter has now been authenticated and reproduced in the publication of the Dickensian Fellowship. There is also the programme of a lecture on the Bronze Age by John Lubbock, the man who initiated the preservation of ancient monuments. Particularly associated with Avebury he eventually took that name for his title. He was married to the daughter of his colleague, General Pitt Rivers.

There is correspondence with the explorer Sir Richard Burton, the geologist Sir Roderick Murchison and Sir James South the astronomer, who invited her to visit his observatory in Campden Hill, presumably sited above the smog area. There are letters from Sir Henry Ellis, the librarian of the British Museum, Dr William Buckland, the Dean of Westminster, the botanists Sir W J Hooker of Kew Gardens fame and Professor John Henslow. The list goes on.

In conclusion, this short article can only give a glimpse into the range and variety of the contents of this scrapbook. How the book came to be in Kingston Deverill remains a mystery, but if I am asked again what is the most valuable thing I have found, the answer will be 'a scrapbook'.