

PUTTING PEN TO PAPER

Materials of Letter Writing in the Early 1800s

Explore the practical aspects of writing in the early years of the nineteenth century through the experience of Ellen Hutchins (1785-1815) of Ballylickey on Bantry Bay, West Cork. Ellen is famous as Ireland's first female botanist and she made a significant contribution to scientific knowledge through her detailed study of the seaweeds and other non-flowering plants - lichens, mosses and liverworts to be found around Bantry Bay and on the mountains nearby.

Letter writing was the means of sharing knowledge about the plants, and also developing friendships between botanists. Ellen Hutchins and the leading seaweed specialist, Dawson Turner, in Yarmouth, England, corresponded for seven years, and built an incredibly strong friendship based solely on their letters to each other.

When Ellen wrote her letters, to botanists and to her brothers, she was using writing materials that had been in use for many centuries. She was part of a tradition of writing letters, to communicate knowledge and to share stories, that had existed down the ages, and it would continue to exist up to and past the invention of email.

Ellen's letters that have survived - 130 of them have been found so far - are an important source of information, and they reveal many details about her life, her botany studies and her world.

Examining the writing materials themselves, it is interesting to see the same things being used for an incredible length of time, and how some elements are very different from now, whereas with others there has been very little change.

The letters also show evidence of how the postal system worked in the early 1800s, and that has some similarities and at least one big difference with today's system.

1. Folded letter addressed to Dawson Turner, TCC

2. Ellen's letter to her brother Manny (Emanuel) about her botany and use of her name, HFC

3. Silhouette of Carrie O'Flynn, historical re-enactor, letter writing as in the early 1800s, silhouette by Jenny Dempsey Design, EHF

FIND OUT MORE ABOUT ELLEN HUTCHINS
AND HER LETTERS ON THE WEBSITE

WWW.ELLENHUTCHINS.COM

Pen and Ink

QUILL PENS

Quill pens have a long history from 6th to 19th century, and were used to write the Book of Kells (c 800), Magna Carta (1215) and to sign the American Declaration of Independence (1776).

Quill pens were made from a wing feather of a goose (or a turkey). The quills were cured, or hardened, usually by being soaked in water then plunged into hot sand. The pen was then prepared or ‘dressed’, carefully cutting it into the nib shape using a penknife or a specially shaped cutter.

In Ellen’s time quills could be bought cured and cut from a stationers. She probably had a penknife but just for trimming the quills.

The quill pen did not hold very much ink, and Ellen would have had to dip it back into the inkwell or inkstand after every three or four words.

1. *Painting of young woman writing;*
Alix-de-montmorency, Duchesse-de-Talleyrand,
by Henri-Francois-Riesener, French-1767-1828

2. *From Book of Kells c800*

3. *Quill nib*

4. *Inkstand from the early 1800s*

5. *Oak apple galls*



OAK GALL *or* IRON GALL INK

This type of ink was the common writing medium across Europe, in general use from the 5th century to the 19th, and for some specific uses continuing into the 20th century.

It has a botanical element, being made from tannic acid obtained from oak apple galls. These are swelling growths, like a wart, and are caused by wasp larvae.

The other ingredient was iron sulphate. The resulting mix bonded to the fibres of the paper and was permanent. It is described as being “*like writing with dirty water*” and it starts off looking very faint and takes time to darken.

Paper

These days, paper is machine-made from wood pulp, but the paper Ellen used was handmade from rags. This method started in China, and spread through the Islamic world, reaching Europe in the 12th century when it replaced parchment or vellum as the standard writing material.

Handmade paper from rags continued until the early to mid 19th century when industrial production methods and the use of wood pulp were developed.

WATERMARKS

If you hold an old sheet of paper up to the light you may see words, a date and a design or image in the paper itself. This is called a watermark. Some of Ellen's letters have watermarks in the paper, with the names or initials of the paper makers, including John Wise, R Williams and J Whatman.

A watermark can sometimes be very helpful to date a document that does not have a date written on it.

Paper was made by the fibrous pulp from rags being spread onto wire frames, then drained and shaken. The marks of the wires show, and the paper is thinner on the lines of the wires. Paper makers incorporated names, dates and designs into the wires of the frames, and these make the watermarks. This type of paper is called laid and can be slightly rough and uneven.

Some years before Ellen's time, in the 1750s, an innovation was pioneered by John Whatman of Turkey Mill, near Maidstone in Kent, England, to make a smoother paper suitable for detailed work. This was called wove paper because it is similar in appearance to woven linen. Whatman also developed a new system for whitening papers which had previously had a yellowish tone. Whatman paper became very popular worldwide, especially with watercolour painters. The watermarks on Ellen's letters show that sometimes she was using this high quality paper.



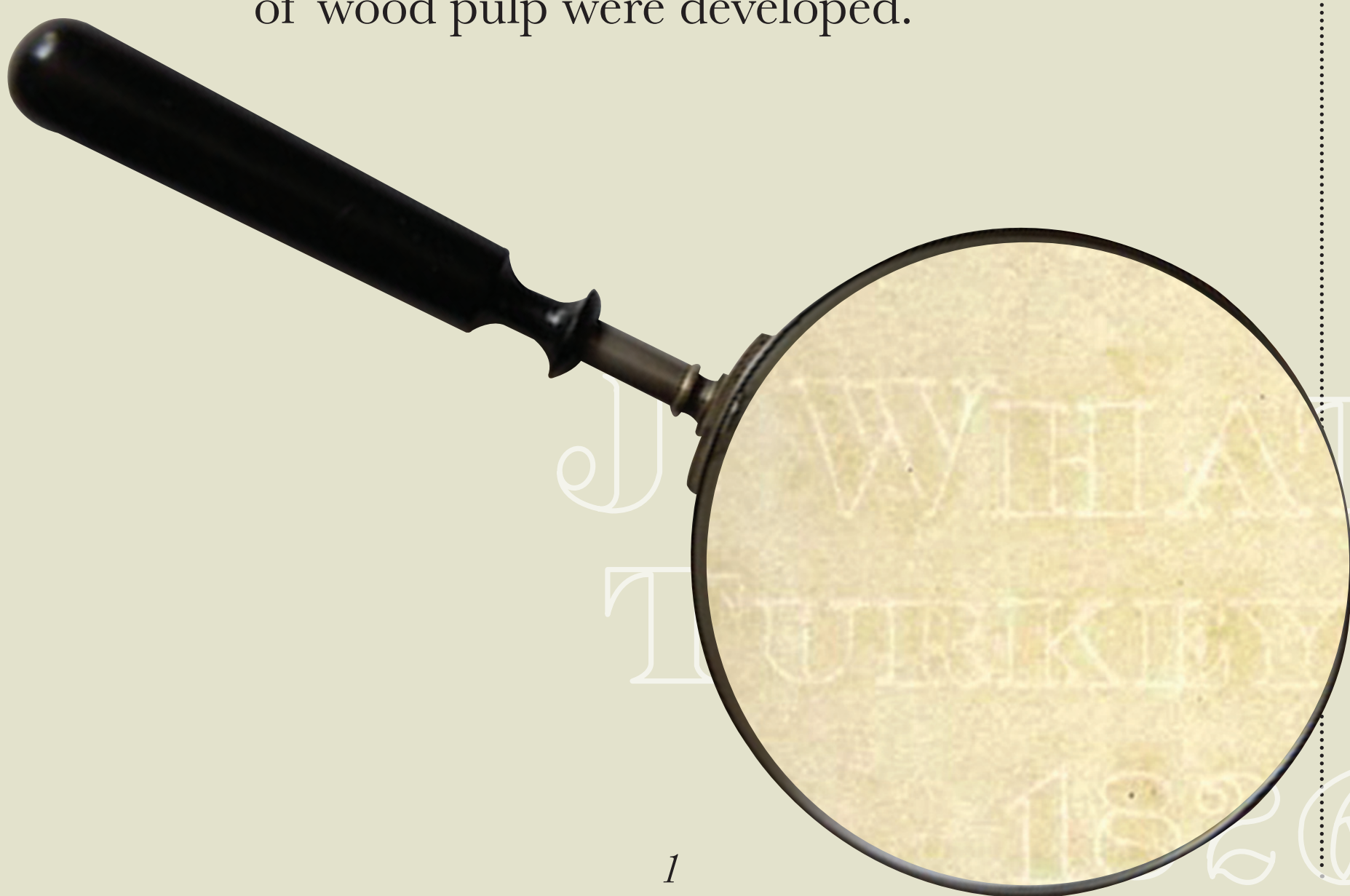
STATIONERS IN CORK CITY

We know that Ellen bought books from Anthony Edwards, booksellers and stationers on Castle Street in Cork City. She may well have bought her paper, ink and sealing wax from him too.

The image above shows the stock he had of stationery items in 1792. In the list it says “*Edwards has a curious sort of Wove Letter Paper which is getting very much into use.*” This would almost definitively have been the famous Whatman paper.

1. Watermark from J Whatman 1826

2. Catalogue pages from the back of Edwards' Cork Remembrancer of 1792: image courtesy of the National Library of Ireland (Dix Cork 1792)



Letter Writing

SEALED WITH ...

There were no envelopes, and the letter was folded and tucked into itself and sealed by dropping melted sealing wax onto it and pressing this down with an embossed seal.

Ellen used a seal with a lion above intertwined initials T H. This was probably her father's, Thomas Hutchins, who had died when she was two years old. Sealing wax was normally red, or black for use when in mourning.

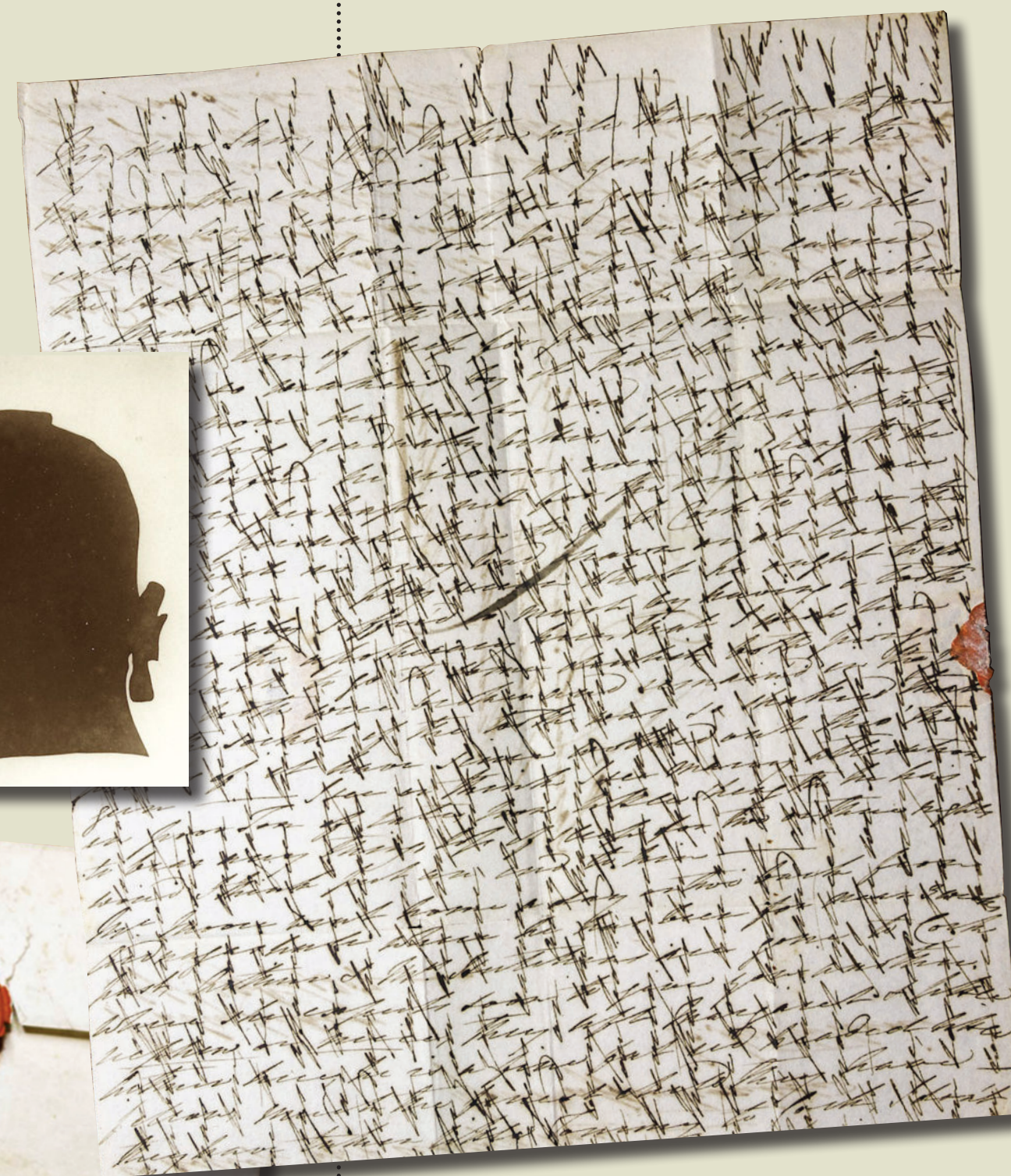
1



2



3



CROSS HATCHING

On some of her letters, Ellen economises on the use of paper by turning the page sideways and writing a second page of text over the first one. This is called cross hatching. It makes the letter very difficult to read, but if you put the edge of a sheet of white paper under a line of text, the words are much easier to make out.

In the one illustrated here Ellen was probably running out of paper, as the whole letter is only a half sheet, but she seems to have used cross hatching to keep the cost of postage down, as a two sheet letter cost twice the price of a one sheet letter.

bcdefghijklr

ITALIC

bcdefghijklr

CURSIVE

4

HANDWRITING

Ellen was sent to school near Dublin and there she would have been taught handwriting, probably following a copy/model book. The style of script Ellen used is called cursive and is a flowing hand where the pen stays on the paper to write whole words. The quills were cut to a fine pointed end which produced a thin line of ink. This style of writing had developed in the 17th century and replaced italic writing which used a square ended pen, capable of producing thick or thin lines depending on whether the pen was moved down or sideways on the paper.

1. Thomas Hutchins silhouette by his eldest daughter, Katherine Hutchins, HFC

2. Wax seal on folded letter, HFC

3. Cross hatched page of writing - Ellen to her brother Sam, HFC

4. Examples of italic and cursive writing styles

Catching The Post

THE POSTAL SYSTEM AND HANDSTAMPS



The marks and the writing on the outside of the letters tell the story of the postal system in the early 1800s.

Ellen's letters would have been taken to the post office in Bantry. There the letter was stamped with BANTRY 164, indicating the mileage (in a straight line on a map) from Dublin, on which the postal price was calculated.

The other stamp that appears on many of Ellen's letters is known as the mermaid and was used only in Ireland and between 1808 and 1814.

The mermaid is similar to the figure carved on Irish harps and used on old Irish coins. It shows the date of posting.

There were no paper stamps as we know them to stick onto the letter to indicate the postage paid. (These first appeared in 1840, with the Penny Black.)

In Ellen's time the price of posting was written on by the Post Office and, strange as this seems now, this was paid by the person receiving the letter not Ellen sending it.

The second letter illustrated here has price marking written on it (7d for Bantry to Dublin, and 1s 8d from Dublin to London). It has a mermaid and also has a second plain English date stamp, added in London when it arrived there.

Visit www.ellenhutchins.com for more information about Ellen Hutchins.

See details of the Heritage Trail and Audio Guide which allows you to follow in her footsteps round Bantry Bay and Beara, and the Ellen Hutchins Festival in Heritage Week in August.



www.ellenhutchins.com
for information about Ellen,
her life and her letters.
Also see details of the Ellen
Hutchins Festival



Ellen's World
for further sources of
information and links relating
to Putting Pen to Paper.



1. Ellen's letters folded for posting with handstamps and price markings, HFC

2. Mermaid handstamp from one of Ellen's letters, HFC

Abbreviations on credits:
HFC - Hutchins Family Collection
TCC - Turner Correspondence, Trinity College Library, Cambridge
EHF - Ellen Hutchins Festival



Produced by the Ellen Hutchins Festival
and funded by a Research Award from the
Cork Historical and Archaeological Society

Written by Madeline Hutchins, with thanks for help
from Carrie O'Flynn, Timothy O'Neill and David O'Shea.
Designed by Jenny Dempsey

Ellen Hutchins

IRELAND'S FIRST FEMALE BOTANIST

EXHIBITIONS

PART OF THE ELLEN HUTCHINS FESTIVAL
(17 - 25 AUGUST 2019)



LIVING HISTORY LETTER WRITING 1809

Part talk and part practical, this session covers more on letter writing and you will learn how to write with a quill pen and fold and seal your letter, with Carrie O'Flynn, historical re-enactor.

Hear about Ellen Hutchins' correspondence and handle some of her letters, with Madeline Hutchins, researcher.

In the period setting of SeaView House Hotel, Ballylickey.

FRIDAY 23RD AUGUST:
2PM TO 4PM

Free, but places must be booked.
See www.ellenhutchins.com
(Teas and scones can be ordered for 4pm.)

PUTTING PEN TO PAPER

Letter writing materials and the postal system in the early 1800s

here in the foyer

ENDS SATURDAY
14TH SEPTEMBER



DRAWINGS & LETTERS

Sit and look through Ellen Hutchins' drawings, specimens & extracts from her letters

on the table in the
reference section inside

ENDS SATURDAY
24TH AUGUST



See programme for full list of events

www.ellenhutchins.com

Ellen Hutchins

IRELAND'S FIRST FEMALE BOTANIST

FESTIVAL

WALKS • TALKS • WORKSHOPS
LIVING HISTORY • BOAT TRIPS

NATIONAL
HERITAGE
WEEK

Funding: Fisheries Local Action Group - South,
National Parks & Wildlife Service,
Cork County Council and Bantry Credit Union

