

Snapshots of the past



Letters were once the primary means of long-distance communication. They were sent with gifts, sealed agreements, and helped connect people far away from each other. Many of the estimated 160,000 letters in the Prize Papers collection are still unopened. Pictured here is a box containing bundles of letters from mailbags seized from the Spanish ship *La Perla*, which fell into the hands of English privateers off the Azores in 1779 (TNA, HCA 30/311).

The Prize Papers at the National Archives in London offer unique insights into the history of the early modern period from the perspective of individuals whose letters and personal notes would not normally have survived the centuries. The collection comprises hundreds of thousands of documents and artefacts from the period between 1652 and about 1815, which were stored in boxes at the Archives and all but forgotten for many years. In a long-term project led by historians at the University of Oldenburg, this treasure trove of records from the past is being opened up and made available to researchers and the general public

The little notebook must have meant a lot to Johann Pohl. Its tattered, weather-beaten pages attest to frequent use and exposure to the elements. It is likely that its owner, a sailor from the Hanseatic city of Bremen by the name of Johann Pohl, carried it around with him at all times. It was in Pohl's possession for four years, until it was literally snatched from him aboard the *Concordia*, a Bremen merchant ship captured by English privateers on 6 April 1758 off the chalk cliffs of Beachy Head in the English Channel – a notorious spot for such manoeuvres.

Although the *Concordia* was sailing under the neutral flag of Bremen on its way from the Caribbean to Amsterdam, it was coming from French waters. And since at that time France was at war with England, this suspicious circumstance was deemed reason enough to confiscate not only its cargo of coffee,

sugar and cotton, but also the mailbags it was carrying, as well as the ship's papers and the personal belongings of the captain, the nine seamen and one boy on board that made up its crew. These documents – known as the "prize papers" – were then submitted as evidence before the High Court of Admiralty in London so that it could uncover any links to an enemy party, in this case France, and decide whether or not the capture of the ship had been legal. For centuries the capture of "enemy" ships and their cargo was considered a legitimate tactic of warfare during times of war, including an own jurisdiction.

Although Johann Pohl's notebook was not used as evidence in the ensuing court process, it was kept with all the other documents and items taken from the *Concordia* in the archives of the High Court of Admiralty, and stored for several decades in the Tower of London together with the papers and artefacts seized from more than 35,000 other ships the

English captured between 1652 and 1815. During that period alone, the European powers fought out 14 naval wars in their own waters and on the world's oceans. In 1858 the entire collection comprising several million historical records and objects of many different types and origins was moved to The National Archives (TNA) in Kew, London. Sitting in the archives, the papers and items were all but forgotten for many years.

In the Prize Papers Project, which officially began in 2018, based at the University of Oldenburg and the UK National Archives London and funded within the Academies Programme of the Union of the German Academies of Sciences and Humanities, experts are cataloguing and digitizing the entire Prize Papers collection. The aim of the project is to make the records available to the scientific community and the general public in an open access database, while at the same time conserving the collection in London in

its original condition as far as possible. The project is jointly funded by the German government and the federal state of Lower Saxony and is set to run until 2037. Along the 90 different document types that make up the collection continue to offer new surprises and insights, inspiring historical research in Oldenburg and across the globe. For Oldenburg historian Dr. Lucas Haasis, the notebook belonging to Johann Pohl – or "Jean Pol" as the ship's crew called him – is among the most moving documents he has encountered so far.

"At first glance it looks like a scruffy notebook used for writing exercises," says Haasis, who coordinates the international research cooperations connected with the project. "But on closer inspection, you see that it is much more. For one thing, it shows very clearly that more people were literate or learning to write in the 18th century than has long been assumed – and not just men from bourgeois or aristocratic



In the 17th and 18th centuries, glass beads made in Europe were a popular means of payment and exchange in Africa, and millions of them exchanged hands within the slave trade. In 1803, J.A. de Marrée, a Dutch official, sent the bead necklaces pictured above from Elmina in present-day Ghana to Amsterdam, a centre of glass bead production at the time, as a sample for ordering further supplies (TNA, HCA 32/996).



Small keepsakes were often sent together ones. Silhouette portraits conveyed an impression of how the faces of relatives or friends were changing over time. In 1780, these silhouettes were sent with a letter from C.L. Scheitz from Cochin, India (TNA, HCA 30/722).



Bundles of correspondence like this one dating back to 1757, in which a letter contained several other letters, are among the fascinating discoveries in the collection. Letters were often packed together like this for practical reasons, such as to save money on postage, or when several sailors from the same hometown sent messages to their families. Sometimes they were bundled for tactical reasons, with the outermost letter giving instructions for passing on or withholding the documents inside (TNA, HCA 32/249/11).

circles. We find a lot of letters from women and from people from different social classes in the Prize Papers; children wrote letters, and sailors, too. We wouldn't have expected anything on this sort of scale." Since writing skills were not required for seafarers from lower ranks at that time, historians had long assumed that most were barely able to sign their own name. However, the crew of the *Concordia* presents a far more nuanced picture.

The notebook also bears witness to exactly how this man, who was at sea for years, taught himself to write or had others teach him: first he practiced writing individual letters, then monotonous sequences of letters, and finally certain passages of the Lord's Prayer, repeating them over and over again in his notebook. "The practice of learning to write, normally taking place in grammar schools, had made its way on deck – or rather below the deck – of the *Concordia*," Haasis observes. The traces of wax on the pages of the notebook suggest that Pohl practiced his writing with great assiduousness, working even by candlelight. Why he went to all this trouble is revealed on the last page of the inconspicuous booklet, which contains a little poem he penned for the christening of his baby daughter:

"As a small gift at your christening remember my dearest daughter that through me at this time you will be carried to Jesus Christ."

This is just one of the many unheard voices that have become audible through the sorting and analysis of this unique archive collection, thus deepening our knowledge of those times. Oldenburg historian Professor Dr. Dagmar Freist, who is the project director, also sees the Prize Papers as an opportunity for a shift in perspective: "The major upheavals of European expansion, such as colonialism and poverty-driven migration, are depicted here from the everyday perspective of social groups from which we normally have no testimonies at all. So, our knowledge is not necessarily called into question, but the past appears far more complex and contingent."

Freist, who has been researching and teaching the early modern period at Oldenburg since 2004, describes the Prize Papers as a "treasure trove". Spanning 400 years from around 1450 to 1850, this period was marked by dramatic upheavals, including the invention of printing, European expansion and colonialism, the Reformation and the formation of nation states. She is

fascinated by the way the Prize Papers, as an "accidental" archive, provide ever new historical constellations and insights into experiences of migration, disease or slavery in the 17th, 18th and early 19th centuries, depending on the context, time, location, and persons involved. Their diversity, she explains, offers points of departure for historical research in all kinds of areas, including medicine, climate, communication, law, religious plurality, cartography, shipbuilding, and the history of the 19 languages identified in the documents to date.

Whether it's a plea for help from a woman to her husband who has emigrated to America leaving her and their children behind; the letter book of a Jewish merchant driven from the Iberian Peninsula to North Africa, entertaining a huge trade network which his correspondence uncovers, at the same time giving intimate insights into Jewish life 400 years ago; or the reports of Moravian missionaries who had been sent from the German-Danish border region to Suriname – the Prize Papers "demonstrate clearly that this era cannot be understood solely from the national historical perspective that still prevails in research on the European expansion and colonialism", says Freist.

with letters to family members and loved ones. Silhouette portraits conveyed an impression to those far away of how the over time. In 1780, these silhouettes were sent with a letter from C.L. Scheitz from Cochin, India (TNA, HCA 30/722).

Many of the approximately 160,000 undelivered letters preserved in the Prize Papers collection remain folded or even sealed, some of them shedding centuries-old seeds or the letter sand sprinkled onto the ink to make it dry. As the only means of communicating across large distances, letters played a vital role in helping people to stay in touch. They were often accompanied by a small gift – something familiar sent from home, or something exotic sent home from abroad. In the case of important business documents, several copies were often sent on different ships, Freist adds, in the knowledge that if the vessel was captured, they might not reach their intended recipient. In a letter dated February 27, 1795, Catharina Borck, a 33-year-old Moravian Church missionary born in Flensburg and stationed in Paramaribo, Suriname, wrote to another member of her church:

"Now I hope that (...) all my letters will reach you safely (...), only recently a ship that was on its way here was captured by privateers. They unloaded its cargo and let it sail on without it. They brought one sack of letters, but left the other behind."

Despite the vast distances and the sometimes uncertain, often months-long delivery times, the authors often adopted a chatty tone in their missives. Borck, who ran a small bakery with her husband in the Moravian Church mission in Paramaribo, also treated her correspondence as a "conversation". In a letter dated March 1, 1795, she wrote:

"It is with great pleasure that I once again take up the quill to converse a little with my dear parents in these few lines."

Nonetheless, the carefree tone of her letters contrasts starkly with their content at times – at least from today's perspective. A letter that raised many questions for historian Freist was also penned by the young Catharina and addressed to Peter, a member of the Moravian Church in Christiansfeld, Denmark. Catharina describes her introduction to plantation society in Suriname, which at the time was a Dutch colony where the use of slaves was commonplace – tens of thousands of enslaved people had been brought there from the west coast of Africa. Three of them worked in Borck's bakery. In her letter to Peter, Catharina describes a visit to a plantation and how

its manager had his enslaved workers led into the courtyard to crush coffee beans for the entertainment of his guests:

"It almost looked like soldiers in a drill, except that they were all black. There were probably almost a hundred of them."

For Freist, the missionary's description of the scene is "disconcerting from today's perspective because she seems to have no understanding of the blatant oppression and slave labour being presented to onlookers like a stage production". Instead, she compares the rhythmic movements of coffee-bean crushing with a military drill. Yet as Christians, the Moravian Church missionaries had an ambivalent stance on slavery, Freist explains. "This example shows how challenging it is to contextualize this kind of account and compare it with others in order to understand how slavery was perceived and practiced by Europeans from many different backgrounds and levels of education." There is still a lot of catching up to do when it comes to research on slavery, Freist notes, adding that the most important thing now is to integrate the perspectives



Pandemic prevention almost three centuries ago: a document in which officials of the city of Marseille certify to Captain Jacques Chermazin and his crew that the city's port was "free from any suspicion of plague or other contagious diseases" upon their departure in February 1747, and request that other authorities therefore give the ship free passage on its way to the then French colony of Saint-Domingue in modern-day Haiti (TNA, HCA 32/94).

of those who were enslaved, and for research to be conducted in collaboration with scholars from the places of origin.

The aforementioned letter is also an example of the unadorned and uncensored insights that the Prize Papers offer. "The content of mail bags became accidental archives," TNA archivists Dr. Amanda Bevan and Dr. Randolph Cock, who work in the project for TNA sorting, write in an article. "A unique survival of mail in transit, in bulk, unmediated by being scattered in delivery, or familial censorship, or the ravages of time." The unique state of preservation of many records, having survived in their original material condition from the past, is another distinctive feature of the Prize Papers. Furthermore, Catharina Borck's letters are a good example of how the Prize Papers can render global microhistories visible, of how such sources can offer intimate perspectives on global circumstances.

"It's so fascinating to be able to zoom in and out," says Haasis, who spent several years on his own microhistorical study, a PhD project on the correspondence of a merchant dating back to the 1740s. "My starting point were the contents of a wooden travel chest, which are stored in their entirety in three of the more than 4,000 archive boxes in the collection. I read and transcribed everything, and then used this as the basis of my analysis,"

Haasis explains. His focus was on the letter-writing and business practices of Hamburg merchant Nicolaus Gottlieb Luetkens. Through the letters, Haasis was able to follow how Luetkens, who was travelling in France at the time, founded his own merchant house and prepared his marriage – "all through the medium of letters", as the historian emphasizes.

Luetkens' correspondence was one of those chance discoveries. Haasis, like his colleagues Christina Beckers and Dr. Jessica Cronshagen, has been a member of the Oldenburg Prize Papers team since the preparatory phase of the project before its official launch in 2018. He was on his second visit to the National Archives when he came across several boxes full of documents seized from the Hamburg merchant ship *Die Hoffnung*. Haasis describes them as "a time capsule, whose contents were unknown". He took lots of photos so he could read the documents in peace at home. "It was only then that I realized this was a complete archive of letters, and that it all belonged to the same guy!" Galvanized by his discovery, Haasis rushed back to London and "took photos of everything".

"Everything" comprised a complete business archive in which Nicolaus Luetkens had kept all incoming letters and a letterbook with copies of all outgoing letters produced over the course of his two-year business trip along the

Atlantic coast. More than 2,400 letters in total had been stored by Luetkens in the wooden travel chest, as well as invoices, outstanding bills of exchange, newspapers, and items of clothing. As Haasis later learned from the court documents, this wooden chest was hidden under a stack of barrels of sugar in the hold of the *Hoffnung* when the ship fell into the hands of privateers on August 23, 1745, on its way from Brest to Hamburg. Now the historian knows: "Luetkens had sent this letter archive, his main asset, to Hamburg with the intention of opening his merchant house there after two years of preparation – and then he lost it all. That's the equivalent of losing a computer together with all the passwords and company secrets today!"

But Luetkens' loss is a huge gain for scholars researching the history of letter-writing and business practices. The documents enabled Haasis to not only reconstruct the merchant's journey all the way from Bayonne in the south of France to Brest in the north. Moreover, the historian could observe his practices and tactics throughout the entire process of establishing his merchant firm. And what practices they were! "What we see here are intrigues; how he exploited legal grey zones and used insider trading tactics. Few other mercantile records known to date offer such insights!", Haasis points out. The documents also include personal letters, such as letters to Luetkens' future wife Ilse Engelhardt. It's "an absolute privilege", Haasis says, to be able to conduct research on such unique documents. Especially since many of them remained untouched for so long. For the conservators, archivists and photographers in London as well as the team in Oldenburg, preserving the documents in their original historical state is a key priority.

Anyone who will read Luetkens' digitized letters in the Prize Papers database, soon to be online, will also find long-winded, at times pompous-sounding declarations of love, which Haasis' analysis revealed to be

set phrases taken from the letter-writing manuals popular at the time. At the end of 1744, Luetkens sent jewelry and other such "trifles" to his "most beloved" to console her for his having to extend his journey. The collection also includes letters securing the financing of business deals or assuring a ship's crew that he would pay a ransom if they were captured in the Mediterranean Sea by privateers of the Ottoman Empire. "The letters spoke, indeed acted on behalf of their author," says Haasis. On May 5, 1744, Luetkens penned the following lines to his brother Anton:

"Since (...) the turmoil of war has given some people reservations about loading cargo onto our ships (...), I had the idea that you should become a citizen (...). Then I would sell you a share in the ships so that you could swear in good conscience (...) that they belong to you."

Being in France, which was at war with England, Luetkens had decided to use his brother as a straw man so that his ships could sail under the neutral flag of Hamburg and thus avoid being captured as "prizes". However, at least in the case of the

Hoffnung, this strategy failed. But despite such setbacks, he succeeded in founding his own merchant house in Hamburg, married his fiancé in 1745, and even went on to become a senator of the Hanseatic City. His *Beletage* (luxury entrance hall of his villa), with its French gilt furniture, can still be admired today in the Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe Hamburg. It remains unknown to this day, however, whether sailor Johann Pohl from Bremen – after losing his notebook – ever found a way to send his daughter the christening poem he had spent so long learning to write. (ds)

BACKGROUND

The project "Prize Papers. Cataloguing – Digitization – Presentation" is led by the Oldenburg historian Professor Dagmar Freist and funded within The Academies Programme of the Union of the German Academies of Sciences and Humanities, Germany's most comprehensive humanities and cultural sciences research programme, since 2018. The programme currently funds 37 long-term projects. For a prospective funding period of 20 years, the Prize Papers project has been awarded 9.7 million euros, half of which is provided by the German government and the other half by the federal state of

Lower Saxony. The project is assigned to the Academy of Sciences and Humanities in Göttingen.

The members of the international Prize Papers team are based in Oldenburg, London and Göttingen. The Oldenburg team led by Professor Freist includes six researchers in various academic posts and ten student assistants. Two archivists and one record specialist are sorting and cataloguing the collection at the National Archives (TNA) in London. In addition, two TNA conservators are ensuring that all items in the archive are preserved in the best possible condition.

As an academic partner, the German Historical Institute London (DHIL) helps with the organization of international conferences and employs the project's two photographers. As an open-access database, the Prize Papers portal will continue to make the digitized documents and artefacts of this vast and unique collection available to researchers as well as interested members of the public. The underlying data structure was developed by the Prize Papers team in collaboration with two IT experts from the headquarters of the Common Library Association (VZG) in Göttingen.



Director of the project Dagmar Freist (fourth from right) and research coordinator Lucas Haasis (third from left) with the Prize Papers team in Oldenburg.