

# The Lady Flora Hastings - misrepresented and misjudged

by  
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An 1829 Penny Post entire letter from Lady Flora and her sisters throws light on their family relationship, and precedes Flora's unhappy demise. Dane Garrod, social and postal historian, explains how and why, and the Malta family link.

When The British Queen wrote in her diary that her mother's Lady-in-Waiting, Lady Flora Rawdon-Hastings, was pregnant, she added to a Court scandal that shook early Victorian London and beyond, and brought the unmarried Flora much hardship at a time she was unwell and in great pain.

For now, we will go back ten years from those unhappy events of the spring and summer of 1839, to 1829, when with her sisters, she wrote to their mother, also called Flora. Her mother, Countess of Loudoun in her own right, also became Marchioness of Hastings upon marriage to Francis, a naval officer who was to die in 1826 on board *H.M.S. Revenge* moored in Baia Bay off Naples, perhaps to give

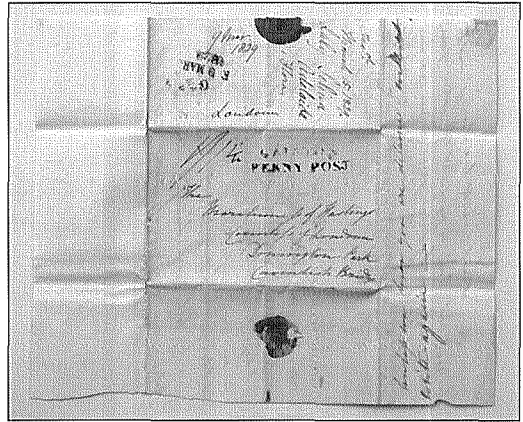


Fig.1 The front of the 1829 entire letter

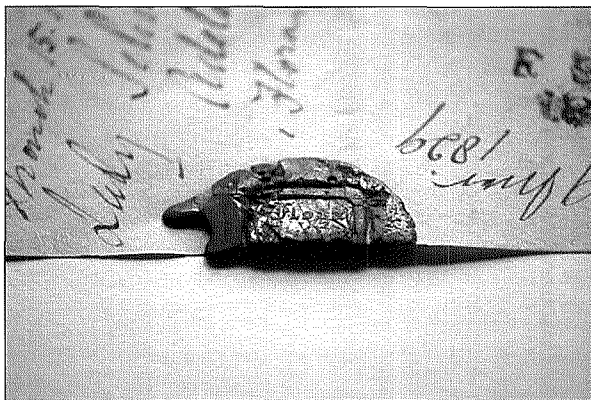


Fig.2 The red wax seal of Flora

credence to the phrase 'See Naples and Die'. Francis did both, but not without leaving a strange request concerning his partial disposal in Malta, to which we will return at the end of this article. Although it is of interest, it has no bearing on the postal history element to be detailed, or the slander and shame experienced by his eldest daughter with her reputation sullied.

The unmarried Lady Flora (portrait shown at Fig.5) was allegedly having an affair with John Conroy, Comptroller of the Household of The Duchess of Kent, mother of The Queen. Sometime in early 1839, Flora began to experience pain and swelling in her lower abdomen, and consulted the Queen's

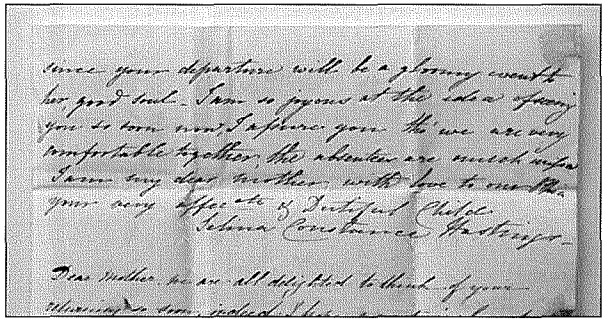


Fig.3 The postscript from sister Lady Selina

physician, Sir James Clark, Bart., who could not diagnose her condition without an examination, to which she refused to accede. He assumed, incorrectly, that the abdominal growth was pregnancy, but his discretion was not matched by others who spread false rumours that she was "with child". The Queen wrote in her journal of agreement with this rumour, which was proved false when Flora finally consented to an examination which revealed an advanced cancerous liver tumour. Whilst waiting by her sister's death bed, Phia refused to sleep in a bed belonging to The Queen. Flora died quietly in her sleep due to her illness, just months later, on 5th July 1839 at age 33 years, and is buried at Loudoun. There was no apology from The Queen either in the months preceding Flora's death, or afterwards.

An entire letter dated 9th March 1829 has recently come to light. In truth it is not entire at all, as half of the folded single sheet has been removed in the past, although it may well rest safely in a collection elsewhere due to its content, and more importantly perhaps, the signature of the writer. The remaining half, the front of which is illustrated at Fig.1, shows a straight two-line Galston Penny Post handstamp, the letter having been written from Loudoun Castle, Galston, in East Ayrshire. The recipient is addressed as The Marchioness of Hastings, Countess of

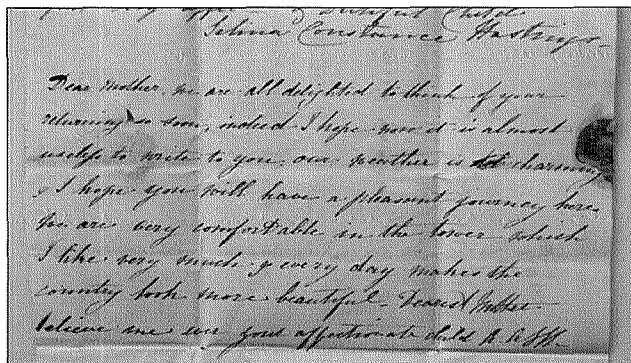


Fig.4 The postscript from sister Lady Adelaide

Loudoun, and as well as a red wax seal, has what appears to be a manuscript addition by the postal authorities of 1/1½. The handwriting on the address panel is identifiable as that of the Lady Flora, but what makes this postal item particularly interesting, apart from the diverse postal markings, is the fact



Fig.5 Portrait of The Lady Flora Rawdon-Hastings

that it is written by three of the four daughters of the Countess. From the words in the postscripts from Selina and Adelaide, younger sisters of Flora, they are all looking forward to seeing the return of their mother, who has their other sister Phia (Sophia) with her. Shown at Figs.3 & 4, it is worth quoting their dutiful words:

(in the hand of Lady Flora Rawdon-Hastings)

*Unless we hear you are detained, I will not write again –*

(in the hand of Lady Selina Rawdon-Hastings)

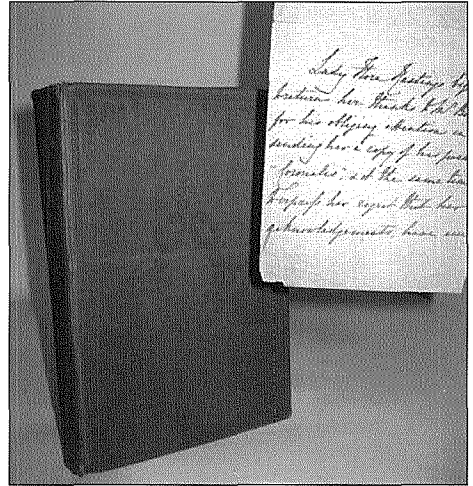
*...since your departure will be a gloomy event to her, good soul. I am so joyous at the idea of seeing you so soon now, I assure tho' we are very comfortable together, the absentees are much missed. I am my dear mother, with love to our Phia, your very affecate. & Dutiful Child Selina Constance Hastings.*

(in the hand of Lady Adelaide Rawdon-Hastings)

*Dear Mother, we are all delighted to think of your returning so soon, indeed I hope now it is almost useless to write to you. our weather is charming & I hope you will have a pleasant journey here. We are very comfortable in the tower which I like very much & every day makes the*

country look more beautiful. Dearest Mother believe me ever your affectionate child A.A.L.H.

The Countess wrote the date of receipt on the letter as *March 15. 1829*, confirming that transmission of this entire from writers in East Ayrshire to receipt by the addressee took six days. This was only a few years before rail travel, so the letter would have travelled southbound by various coaches and horses. This entire letter is particularly poignant because, apart from the postscripts added by the younger sisters to their eldest sister's letter to their mother, the red wax seal (*Fig.2*), although split over two parts of the sheet of paper as the illustration shows, still clearly bears the inscription within of *Flora* - the woman who in later years was so unfairly disgraced.



*Fig.6 Lady Flora's book of poems, and another letter*

After Flora's death in July 1839, her family were incensed over her mistreatment and defamation, and her brother, Marquess of Hastings, together with John Conroy, stirred up a press campaign against both The Queen and Doctor Clark. This attacked them for insulting and disgracing Flora with false rumours, and for a time, The Queen enjoyed a period of subdued popularity with expression of disapproval from the public concerning Her involvement. From a philatelic viewpoint, it is understood that in retaliation, her family attached postage stamps of The Queen upside down on correspondence.

Flora was also a poet, and her *Poems by The Lady Flora Hastings* were published posthumously by her sister Sophia. Shown at *Fig. 6* is a copy of the 1841 first edition in its green binding, together with a letter written by Flora which shows in the writing of the word *Hastings* the distinctive and ornate capital 'H' which is an identical match to the 'H' in the address panel on the letter to her mother.

As for Flora's father, Francis, he cannot feature within this entire letter of 1829 along with his wife and four daughters as he had died three years earlier. Following his directions, and before he was buried in Malta, his right hand was removed and later buried with his wife when she died 13 years later in January 1840 at Kelburne Castle. It now rests clasped with hers in the family vault at Loudoun Kirk. It is quite conceivable that other letters to and from the Hastings family in the 19th century are in stamp dealers' boxes, unrecognised for what they are and the stories they can tell, as this was, as recently as April 2011.