

War, needlework & flowers: Letters to Granny during World War One

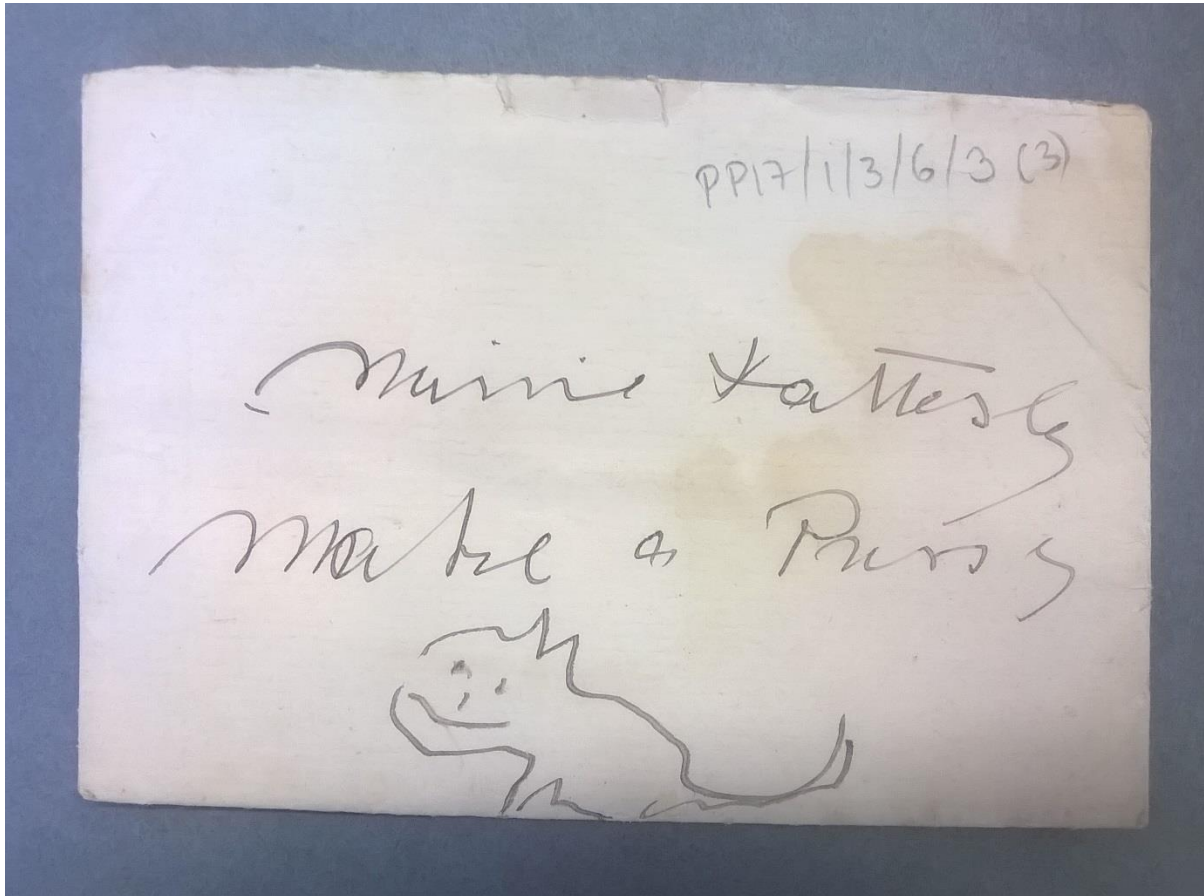


Image 1: Envelope accompanying letter by Honor Edmonds, c. 1918, '[?Minnie Attesly] make a Pussy' (PP17/1/3/6/3)

Five sisters, Jens, Mildred, Molly, Harriett and Honor Edmonds wrote letters to their grandmother, Harriett Perry, during World War One. They were in Bedford, England, while their grandmother lived in King's County [Offaly]. It is lovely to have an insight into the children's daily lives and to see certain things mentioned in one child's letter correlating with its mention in another child's letter. Christmas and birthdays and the presents they received are important events and three of the girls also mention the visit of a German and other war-related things. Needlework is also something mentioned more than once. What follows is a short journey through the letters covering these topics.

Birthdays and Christmas

Jens Edmonds thanks her grandmother on 9 June 1914 for her birthday present which was a watch chain. She also lists the other presents she got, such as a watch and five shillings from 'Aunt Flowers', as well as 'the dearest little brooch' from Aunt Flowers's mother Mrs Duncan. Aunt Mildred gave her 'such a nice hymn book' and a racket, Mildred gave her a pin cushion and Dickie gave her a little box. She also says she got 'heaps of letters' and Debora came over to play games.

Another undated letter around Christmas in an unspecified year has a sketch of a watch Jens bought partly from her grandmother's monetary gift [Image 2]. In another letter Jens is conspiratorial, asking

her grandmother not to tell anybody of her plan to give her father a Christmas present of an India rubber which she will make into a big parcel so as to pretend she is giving him a large present.

On 28 December 1915 Mildred writes she got a prayer book and a book called Little King Richard from her granny's Christmas money. She has a little sketch of a plant in the corner [Image 3]. An undated letter from Honor thanks her granny for the money and she says what presents she got from other people, such as an album from her father, a rubber and a pen from Mildred and a 'lovely icing cake from Jens'. This letter is accompanied by an envelope with the drawing of a cat and a caption in another person's handwriting [Image 1].

On 5 October 1914 Molly writes what everybody gave her for her birthday. Aunt Flo gave her a birthday cake, Mother gave her a teddy and Dad[d]y gave her a trowel and a fork, Mildred gave her a knife and Jens a pram. The following year, on 18 June 1915, Molly says she got money from her granny Harriett, from Aunt Mildred and from Uncle Ernest which makes her fell rich as it totals a pound. She also got two books, a purse, a pencil, a big piece of rubber, a bead loom and a 'box of chocklets'.

On 28 December 1915, Molly says she got 'such a lot of present[s]' at Christmas. Jens gave her a 'dear little handkerchief' which she made herself and Mildred gave her a pen. She also says that Jens takes Mildred, Molly and Honor out for a long walk every day.

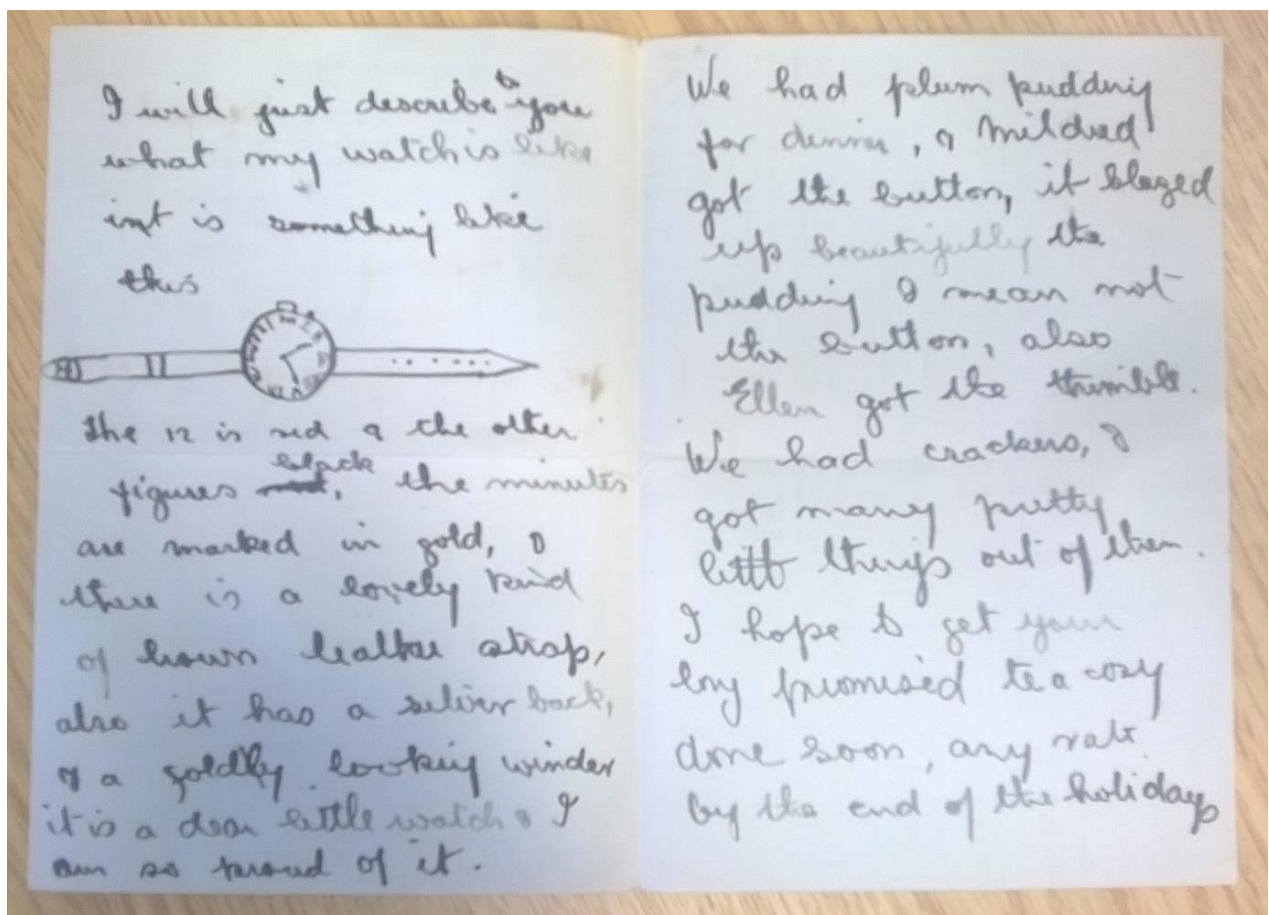


Image 2: Letter by Jens Edmonds, with sketch of watch newly bought around Christmas, Undated (PP17/1/3/2/9)

World War One

In December 1914, Jens Edmonds writes a letter enclosing a newspaper clipping, 'Sale of work and tea by the children of W.A. Edmonds', which details money raised for the Belgian Relief Fund to the amount of £7 14s 8d. In the same letter Jens says they have actually made over £8 since then. She also tells her grandmother that her mother would rather a calendar for 6d, rather than the one for 1s 6d which she, Harriett Perry, usually sends. This shows the need to cut back spending everywhere during the war period.

On 28 February 1916 Jens thanks her grandmother for 'the lovely fat egg'. She also tells of how she and her sisters made a snow sled with a piece of wood and wire. She has drawn a sketch of the activity [Image 3]. Her father also sends thanks for the fat hen's egg he got. During the war, having an egg would have been considered a luxury for many people due to shortages and rationing. On 5 November 1917, Molly says Miss Drought gave her and Mildred 'a large bag of filter nut' which Miss Drought's had sent her, again showing the importance of giving and receiving during the war period. Gas masks used by soldiers had charcoal in a compartment within them. This charcoal was extracted from peach pits, walnuts and other organic matter, so it appears that this is probably what the 'filter nut' relates to.

In World War One and World War Two, there was a practice of digging a war garden which was also sometimes called a victory garden. This was an effort to grow extra crops by civilians when food was scarce. On 18 June 1915 Molly writes of those in her household, 'one of the soldiers in our house is a sargent [sic] who helps to dig their gardens. Two years later, on 17 March 1917 Molly says her father is 'very busy digging the garden and he is going to make it into a war garden', so it is not clear whether the earlier gardens were in the same spot as the one her father was later transforming in to a war garden.

Another interesting subject is that of a German prisoner whom they all refer to as being their mother's. In an undated letter, Jens says that 'yesterday, mother's German prisoner arrived' and that he was a very nice man. Judging from the dates of the letters of her sisters in which they also mention this prisoner's visit, he must have come in early January 1919 and she must have written the letter around the same time. On 5 January 1919 Mildred writes that they went to the pantomime and mother's German prisoner visited. On 6 January 1919 Molly says that 'Mummy's adopted prisoner [sic] came from Cambridge to see us' and that he was a very nice man. They went to 'Cinderella' and he came as well. Molly says it was pretty, but it was 'very long and rather dragged'.

PP17/1/3/2/7 (2)

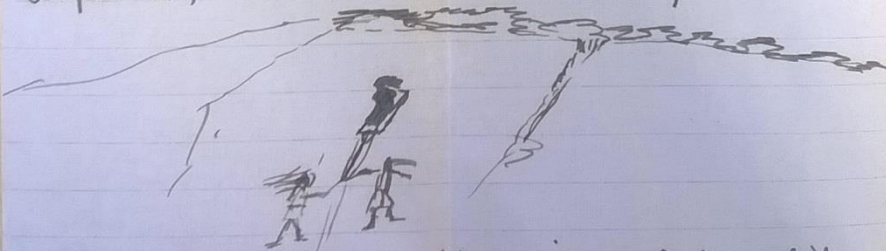
14 Chaucer Rd
Bedford.

Dear Grammy

Thank you so much for the lovely fat egg
I had mine for supper, & it was lovely.

Honor is up, & we can see her through the window
I threw some snowballs up at her window
which she liked very much I think.

We had such fun yesterday, it has been snowing
here you know, so we got a broad piece
of wood, & put a piece of wire through 2
holes at the end, & then tied a piece of
rope onto the wire, & drew it along; we took
this & sledge out to a hill in Clapham, &
we had such fun pulling each other down, ~~she~~
you should of seen our cheeks, Molly looked
so pink, I never saw her look so pink.



This is something like what we did

yesterday.

Daddy sends you his best thanks for the fat hen's

Image 3: Snow sledding in Jens' letter, 28 February 1916 (PP17/1/3/2/7)

Needlework

Unsurprisingly for the early twentieth century, the girls had numerous projects which involved needlework. In December 1914, Jens writes a letter in which she says she is planning to work on the 'cosy cover' she has promised her grandmother and she tells her what she used the money to buy which her grandmother gave her, probably for Christmas. In another, undated, letter by Jens she says

she hopes to finish the 'long promised tea cosy' soon. This is quite possibly the same item, which took some time to be made and had been promised for a while. On 5 November 1917 Mildred says at last she is sending the tea cosy. She says they received a letter from Jens on Thursday saying she is homesick. From this letter, it would seem that Harriett Perry received two tea cosies from two granddaughters in three years.

On 5 November 1917, on the same day that Mildred sent her grandmother a tea cosy, Molly writes that she is sending her granny a hot water cosey [sic], which presumably means it was for a hot water bottle.

On 19 December 1915 Mildred sent a letter in which she says she is sending a pair of mittens, one of which was knitted by her and one by Jens. She herself has made Jens a bag of lavender from the silk her grandmother gave her. In a letter from about 1915, Jens herself writes that she has finished a blouse she is making in dressmaking class, except for the buttons and button holes.

Illness

From the letters the girls write, it is also possible to trace when their grandmother was unwell. A letter written about 1915 mentions that Jens is 'very distressed to hear you have been a naughty old lady, and have been in bed with a cold'. There is an addition at the top of the page saying 'I hope you are quite well now - & not playing poor Aunt Mildred any tricks'. She is writing from Haywards Heath, rather than her usual Bedford, and says how happy she is to be going home when she can 'see my dear old mummy'.

On 5 January 1919 Mildred is sorry to hear her granny has a bad back. She thinks her father may have got to Cape Town by now. A day later, on 6 January 1919, Molly mentions her granny is unwell and asks her not to write until she is well again. A letter from Jens in January 1919 mentions that her grandmother is unwell with rheumatism. In putting the three letters together, it is possible to piece together that their grandmother was unwell because of rheumatism in her back.

Flowers

In December 1915 Molly says the 'little pansy' her granny gave her is growing. She also thanks her for the chrysanthemums whose smell reminds her of her (Granny Harriett's) garden. Honor has a new nurse, Miss Macaulay. On 28 December 1915, Mildred writes that 'the snowdrop[s] you gave us are growing beautifully' [Image 4].

Harriett sent two letters and Honor sent four. It can be seen from the writing and the scarcity and brevity of the letters that these girls were much younger than their sisters at the time. Each has one letter which was written by somebody else, possibly one of the older sisters, on her behalf. In Harriett's of 11 February 1918, it says that she put a snowdrop in Mother's garden and Mother thought it was one of their own. This seems to suggest that Harriett, the grandmother, may have sent the snowdrop. Honor, writing on 25 March 1918, says that she now has one violet bud in her garden. Together with Harriett's letter of the previous month concerning the snowdrop, this gives the impression that the two younger girls, at least, were being taught something about cultivating plants by their grandmother, Harriett Perry.

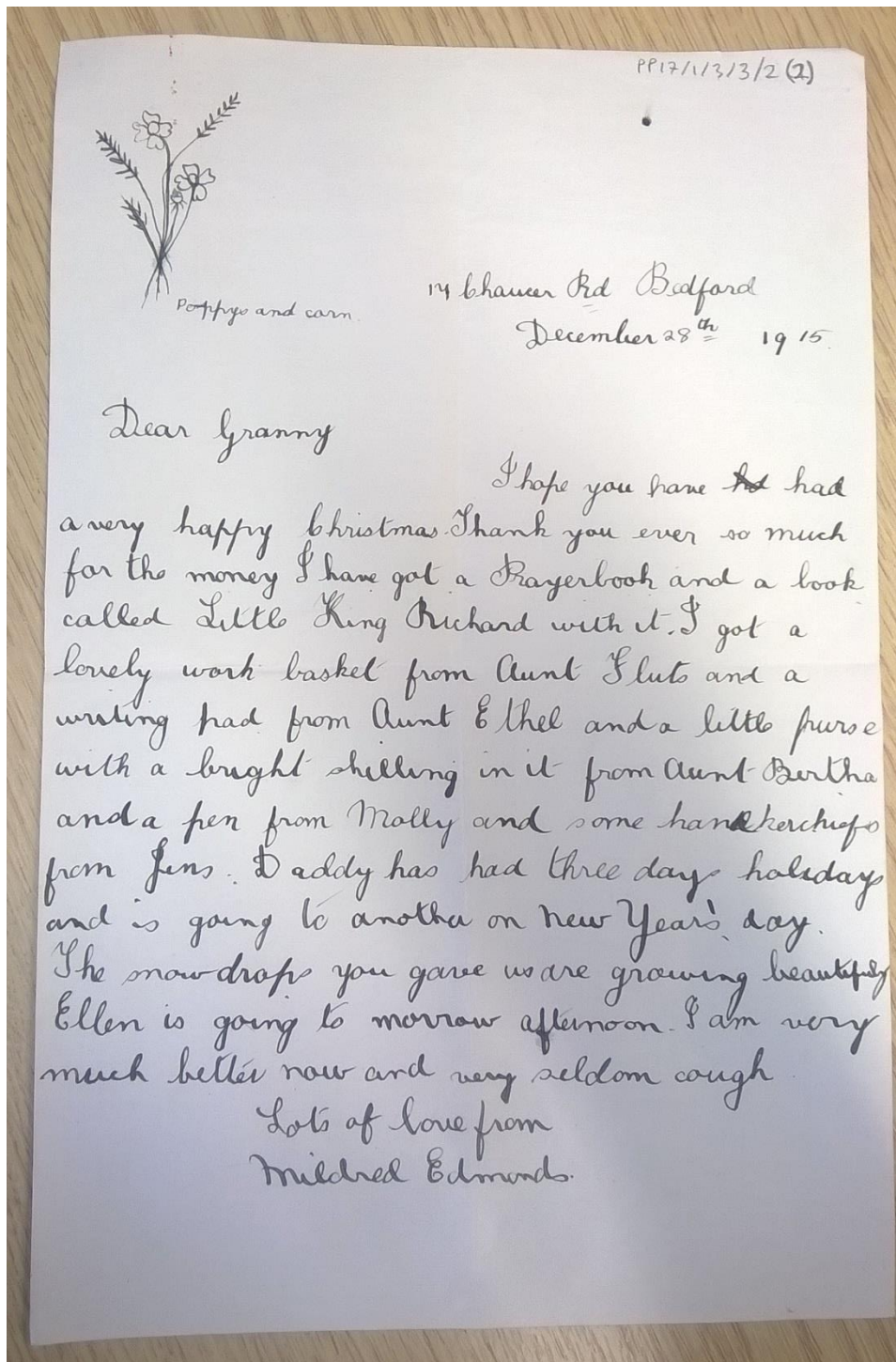


Image 4: Letter from Mildred Edmonds, 28 December 1915 (PP17/1/3/3/2)

Personal

I will conclude with a small section that will hopefully reflect a few other personal insights into the lives of the children. Molly frequently writes about school. In about 1915 Molly sent a letter in which she left a blank space for a word which she never put in. She writes, 'I am sending you a _____ of my class' [Image 5]. The gap was probably meant to be filled with the word 'photograph' but she may

have wanted to check the spelling but not got around to it. This makes the letter more immediate because it feels like she still needs to put it in. In a letter from Molly, also around 1915, she tells her grandmother that 'Jens has gone to stay with Amy Grant'. Again in about 1915, Molly tells her grandmother that she is getting on well with tennis, has been made monitress of her form and that she will soon be able to play a piece on the violin. She also asks, on behalf of her mother, for 'six little penny dolls' for Honor's dolls' house as they cannot get them and hope Harriett Perry may be able to get them in Birr. On 20 January 1917 Molly says she was fourth out of twenty-one children in the class.

In one of her letters, Molly says she now has a good amount of money in her savings bank and wonders whether her granny likes getting letters from her, because she likes getting them from her granny. She signs that letter with her full name, 'Mary Frances Molly Edmond'. On 18 June 1915, Molly says they miss Uncle Ernest and his motor car, which shows that he had a modern form of transport. On 20 February 1918, Harriett Perry received a letter to say that Jens and Mildred had recently gone to a supper party. This shows that the girls had started to grow up since they first started writing in 1914.

It is always interesting to read a child's letter if it indicates how they may have spoken a particular word. For example, Honor in one letter in April 1918, writes 'thank you very much for the hof a crun' [half a crown]. Under the heading of 'Birthdays and Christmas' above, it is interesting to see Molly's phonetic spelling of chocolates as 'chocklets', a not unreasonable way of spelling that word, judging by how it is normally pronounced!

PP17/1/3/4/3

17 Chaucer R^d
Bedford

My dear Granny

I hope you are quite well. Thank you very much indeed for the sweet lavender you sent me, did you make it your self. I am getting on ~~very~~ very well at school.

Did Uncle Ernst get home safely. I am sending you a _____ of my class, Mildred isnt there

Image 5: Letter from Molly Edmonds, 'I am sending you a _____ of my class', c. 1915 (PP17/1/3/4/3)

These letters are part of the Belmont Mills Archive (PP17) in Special Collections & Archives, John Paul II Library, Maynooth University.

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