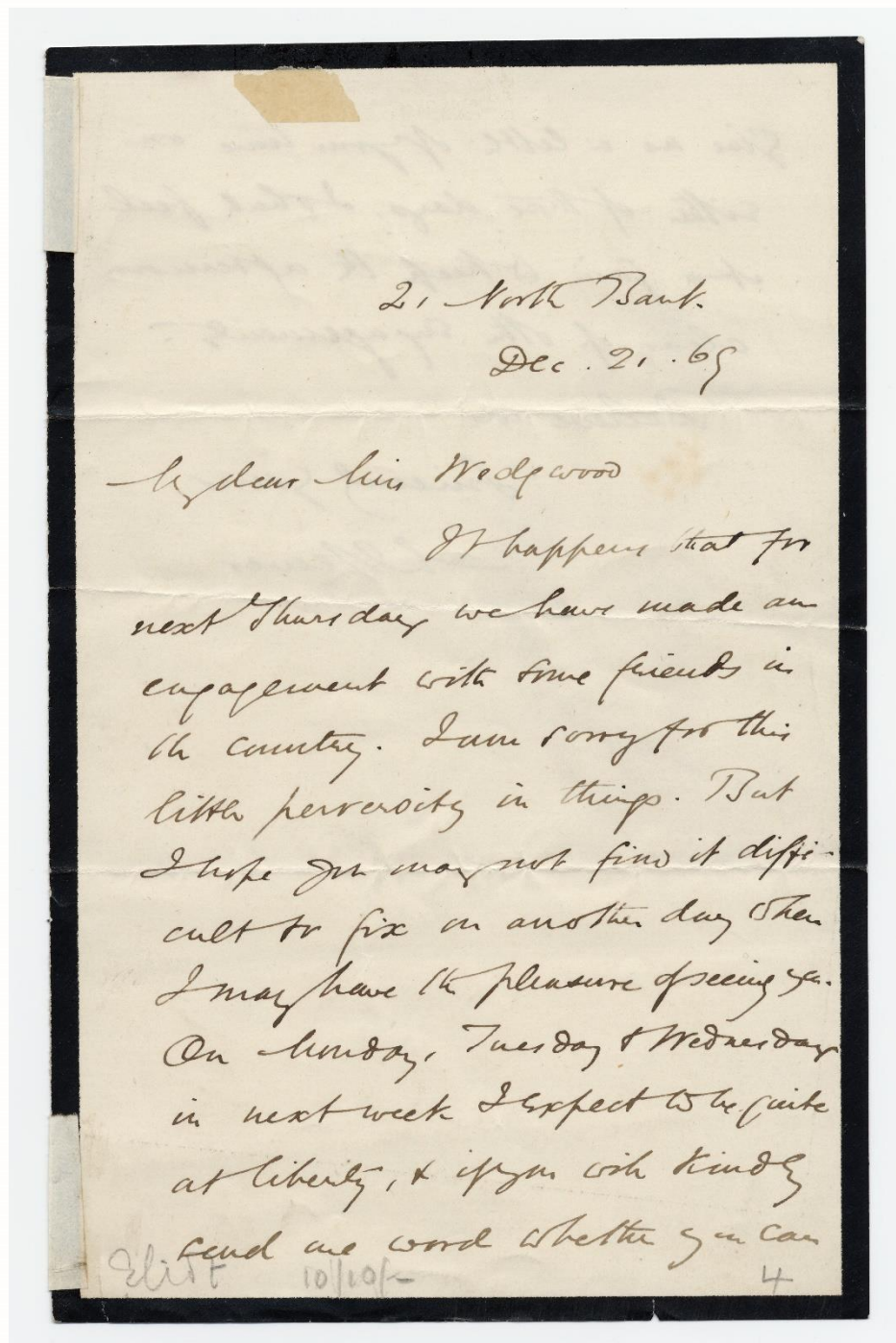


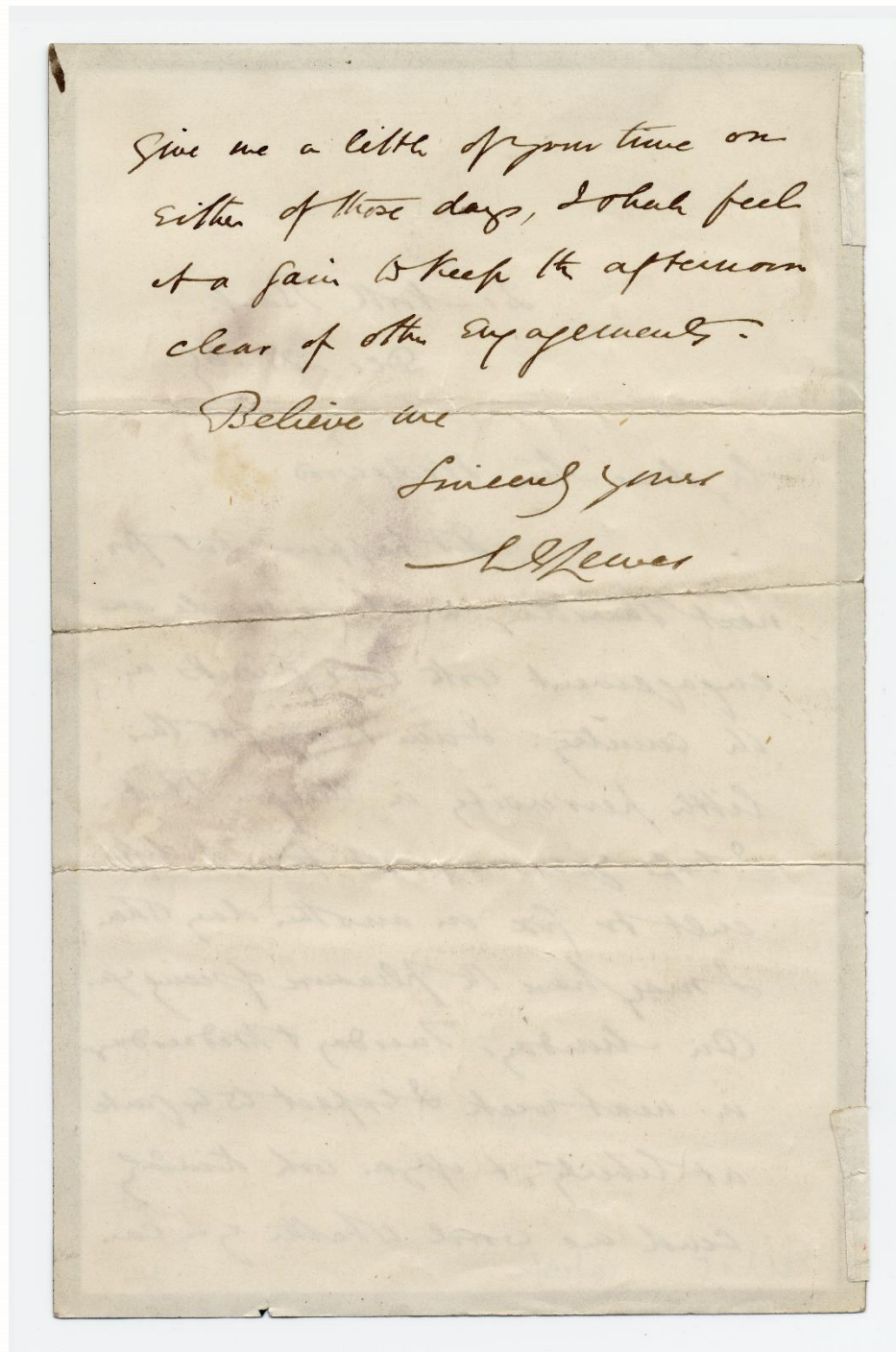
Letter from M.E. Lewes to Miss Wedgewood, CR3989/4/1/1

For December's Document of the Month, we have decided to break with the festive theme of previous years. December is also the anniversary of the publication of both the first and last instalment of Middlemarch by Warwickshire's own George Eliot (or Mary Anne Evans). Therefore, we have chosen to focus on her for this month's Document of the Month. Eliot went by many names in her lifetime so for the purposes of this article we shall refer to her by her pen name.

We have chosen this letter sent by Eliot to Miss Wedgewood. The letter is dated 21st December 1869, before Eliot had written Middlemarch. Eliot signs the letter as M.E. Lewes. At this point in time Eliot was living with her partner, the philosopher and critic George Henry Lewes. They never formally married, but Eliot referred to herself as Marian Lewes during this time which was considered controversial.



Page 1 of the letter, Image courtesy of Warwickshire County Record Office and
Warwickshire Libraries, CR3989/4/1/1



Page 2 of the letter, Image courtesy of Warwickshire County Record Office and Warwickshire Libraries, CR3989/4/1/1

In the letter, Eliot is explaining that she cannot make a meeting with Miss Wedgewood the following Thursday, as “we have made an engagement with some friends in the country”¹. She then expresses her apologies for this and asks her to suggest another date to meet. Unfortunately, we do not have Miss Wedgewood’s response to Eliot in our collections.

The letter is also edged in black. This is because at the time of writing the letter Eliot is in mourning for her stepson Thornton Lewes, who had died of cancer on the 19th October that year.

George Eliot

George Eliot was born Mary Anne Evans in 1819 on the outskirts of Nuneaton, at the Arbury Estate. Her father, Robert, was the estates manager for the Newdigate family (who owned the Arbury estate).

The family moved to Griff House on the outskirts of Nuneaton when Eliot was four months old, and she stayed there until the age of 21. She attended school until 1835, when she had to undertake caring responsibilities with her sister Chrissy for her parents. Her father recovered, but her mother died. Her father recognised Eliot’s intelligence, and actively encouraged her by ensuring she had tutors and access to theology books. Mrs Charles Newdigate also allowed Eliot access to the library at Arbury Hall².

At the age of 21, Eliot and her father moved to Coventry. This was to have a profound influence on Eliot, who lost her Christian faith and joined a circle of free-thinking intellectuals³. This placed great strain on family relations. After the death of her father in 1849, and a brief stay in Geneva, Eliot decided to settle in London and begin a career in journalism. It was here at parties held by the publisher John Chapman that she first met George Henry Lewes. She later went on to live with Lewes, and even referred to herself as Marian Lewes, but they were never married. Lewes was still married and unable to sue for divorce, even though he and his wife were separated. This led to Eliot’s brother Isaac instructing the family to break ties with Eliot. This instruction lasted until Lewes’ death⁴.

¹ Letter from George Eliot to Miss Wedgewood, Warwickshire County Record Office, CR3989/4/1/1.

² Information gathered from *George Eliot – Her Early Life*, Vivien Wood, Our Warwickshire, <https://www.ourwarwickshire.org.uk/content/article/george-eliot-her-early-life> (accessed 05/11/2020).

³ Information gathered from *George Eliot*, British Library, <https://www.bl.uk/people/george-eliot> (accessed 05/11/2020)

⁴ Information gathered from *London*, The George Eliot Fellowship website, <https://www.georgeeliot.org/george-eliot/lifestory/49-london> (accessed 05/11/2020).

She was first introduced to the notion of writing fiction by Lewes in 1855. The result of this was the first story in *Scenes of Clerical Life: The Sad Fortunes of the Rev. Amos Barton*. Lewes sent the story to his publisher John Blackwood without an author's name. Blackwood recognised that he was dealing with a potentially good writer, and began corresponding via Lewes with the (as yet unknown) author. The first use of the pen name George Eliot came in a letter to Blackwood on 4th February 1857.

Blackwood published this story in his magazine in January 1856. After two more of these stories, Eliot's first full length novel, *Adam Bede*, was published in 1859, which was an instant success, even outselling *A Tale of Two Cities* by Charles Dickens in its first year. She went on to write many other novels, including her most well-known *Middlemarch*⁵.

Lewes died in November 1878, and a year and a half after this, Eliot married John Cross. However, on 22nd December 1880 George Eliot died. She is buried in Highgate Cemetery, next to Lewes⁶.

Middlemarch

Eliot's novel *Middlemarch: A Study of Provincial Life* was first published in eight parts between 1871 and 1872. It is set in a fictional Midlands town between the years 1829-1832. The novel touches on events such as the 1832 Reform Act and the accession of King William IV⁷.

The origins of the novel reside in two unfinished pieces. One focused on the character of Lydgate and the other on the character Dorothea.⁸

At the time of publication, *Middlemarch* received mixed reviews. However, it is now widely considered to be her masterpiece. It examines the lives of people in all aspects of society in the fictional town of *Middlemarch*⁹. A summary of the plot can be found on the Encyclopaedia Britannica website.

⁵ Information gathered from *George Eliot Writes*, The George Eliot Fellowship website, <https://www.georgeeliot.org/george-eliot/lifestory/50-george-eliot-writes> (accessed 05/11/2020)

⁶ Information gathered from *George Eliot: The Final Years*, The George Eliot Fellowship Website, <https://www.georgeeliot.org/george-eliot/lifestory/51-final-years> (accessed 05/11/2020).

⁷ Information gathered from *Middlemarch*, Wikipedia, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Middlemarch> (accessed 05/11/2020)

⁸ Information gathered from *Middlemarch*, The British Library, <https://www.bl.uk/works/middlemarch> (accessed 06/11/2020).

⁹ Information gathered from Vybarr Cregan-Reid, *Middlemarch*, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Middlemarch> (accessed 05/11/2020)

Much more about George Eliot and her novels can be found on the George Eliot Fellowship website <https://www.georgeeliot.org/>.

This letter is part of a collection of letters which came to us from Warwickshire Libraries. The collection, and more information about it can be found online here: <https://www.warwickshire.gov.uk/heritage-culture-1/george-eliot-letters-collection/2?documentId=556&categoryId=20097>.