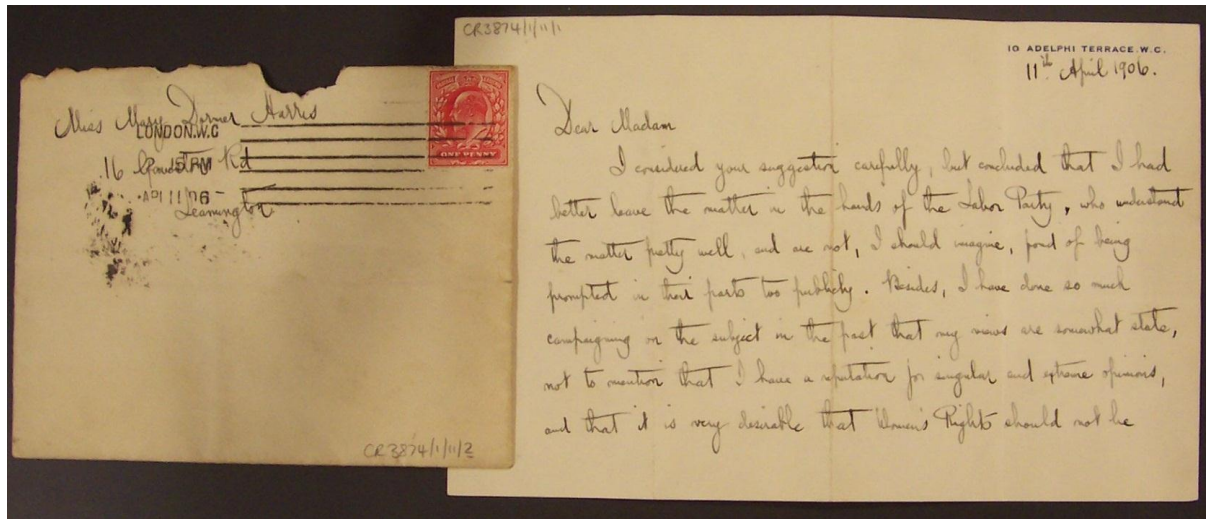


Letter and original envelope from George Bernard Shaw to Mary Dormer Harris

11th April 1906 - [CR3874/1/11](#)



See below for a larger image

Dear Madam,

I considered your suggestion carefully, but concluded that I had better leave the matter in the hands of the Labour Party, who understand the matter fully well, and are not, I should imagine, fond of being prompted in their parts too publicly. Besides, I have done so much campaigning on the subject in the past that my views are somewhat stale, not to mention that I have a reputation for singular and extreme opinions, and that it is very desirable that Women's Rights should not be associated with anything out of the normal common sense run.

Thank you, all the same, for the suggestion.

Yours faithfully,

G. Bernard Shaw

A Literary Figure, Drama on the Stage and In Politics

Taking Mary Dormer Harris's life in a broader framework, it was no surprise that she should write to George Bernard Shaw asking for support for such a cause as women's suffrage. As a member of the Leamington and Warwick Dramatic Study Club, she was one of the first to perform at the Loft Theatre in Leamington, and saw her own plays performed during its formative years, along with a number of George Bernard Shaw's. As such, Dormer Harris

would have known of his depiction of strong women characters from his plays, and indeed in 1891 he had written, “unless woman repudiates her womanliness, her duty to her husband, to her children, to society, to the law, and to everyone but herself, she cannot emancipate herself. It is false to say that woman is now directly the slave of man: she is the immediate slave of duty; and as man's path to freedom is strewn with the wreckage of the duties and ideals he has trampled on, so must hers be.” An active member of the Fabian Society and, thus, involved in the formation of the Labour Party, it is perhaps surprising that Shaw refused to offer a note of support on Mary Dormer Harris’s request.

Mary Dormer Harris and Women’s Suffrage

This letter is a fine exemplar of Mary Dormer Harris’s political beliefs. A staunch supporter of the women’s suffrage movement, she supported the National Union of Women’s Suffrage Societies (NUWSS) and was reported as attending the second meeting of the Leamington and Warwick Women’s Suffrage Society in 1906 (See Field 2002: 44). Many years’ later, in 1913, Mary Dormer Harris was still attending meetings arranged to further the cause of women’s suffrage (see Field 2002: 53)

A Wider Context

Women’s Suffrage is more well known today through images of Emmeline Pankhurst (who had read pamphlets authored by Shaw during her period of imprisonment in 1912), and militant acts such as Emily Davison being trampled to death by the King’s horse *Anmer* at the Derby of 1913. As with many political movements however, there was a wide spectrum of beliefs and action, and Mary Dormer Harris belonged to the more moderate wing of the Suffrage cause. With marches taking place in Leamington and Warwick in the early years of the 20th Century, it is clear that the cause attracted support and drew attention as much in Warwickshire as elsewhere.

George Bernard Shaw

In the month in which fellow Nobel Laureate Seamus Heaney has died, it is worth remembering that he comes from a great Irish literary tradition, among which George Bernard Shaw holds a pre-eminent place. A prolific playwright, including the classic *Pygmalion*, he was also a novelist, critic, and serial letter writer, including to such luminaries as Coventry actress Ellen Terry.

References

Crawford, Elizabeth (2000) *The Women’s Suffrage Movement: A Reference Guide 1866-1928*. London; New York: Routledge

Field, Jean (2002) *Mary Dormer Harris: The Life and Works of a Warwickshire Historian*. Studley: Brewin.

Miss Mary Damer Harris
LONDON.W.C

16 Grand St. Rd

APR 11 1906

Leamington



CR3874/1/1/1

CR3874/1/1/2

10 ADELPHI TERRACE, W.C.

11th April 1906.

Dear Madam

I considered your suggestion carefully, but concluded that I had better leave the matter in the hands of the Labor Party, who understand the matter pretty well, and are not, I should imagine, fond of being prompted in their parts too publicly. Besides, I have done so much campaigning on the subject in the past that my views are somewhat stale, not to mention that I have a reputation for singular and extreme opinions, and that it is very desirable that Women's Rights should not be