



Oh to be in England...

A letter to Family written from Bristol in 1858.

A recent blog looked at a letter mailed from Paris in 1869. Recently discovered is a letter mailed from Bristol England on August 27, 1858. The letter is without an envelope, unsigned, and begins simply, "Dear Family..."

It appears likely that it was written by James Davis, husband of Margaret Amelia Floy, a great aunt of Stephen Mather's wife, Jane Floy Mather. The letter refers to "Marty" throughout and mentions a "celebrated papier mache manufactory at which we made some purchases we hope will please the little family." James and Margaret had two girls who at the time were ages twelve and eight.

As with the Paris letter, there are observations that reflect the prevailing attitudes, addictions, and attractions of the time.

On August 16, 1858, Queen Victoria sent a congratulatory note to President James Buchanan as the first official telegram to pass between the two countries with the completion of a transatlantic cable. According to Davis, the man in the British street was not enthusiastic...

"... It appeared...that you Yankees have been terribly excited about the successful result of laying the telegraph cable. Here in England the result has produced scarcely any excitement. John Bull is cold and phlegmatic on the subject. The papers merely announce the fact, pronounces it indeed to be a great work, but are very far from giving into any raptures about it..."

OF NOTE: The cable was destroyed the very following month when an engineer applied excessive voltage while trying to achieve faster operation.

Davis also reflects on the prevalence of smoking...

"...I think the practice is more universal than even among us at home. In conversation with a tobacconist in London, he told us that the number of shops for the sale of the weed ...greatly increased during the last few years. It is an expensive habit here, more especially for those who indulge in cigars..."

OF NOTE: History suggests cigars in England can be traced back to 1814, when officers returned from the Peninsular War with cigars gifted by their fellow Spanish officers.

Davis then goes on to mention a stop in Bangor in Wales...

“...Here we chartered a cab and drove out to see that mechanical wonder of the world, the Tubular Bridge. It was designed and erected by Stephenson the great railway engineer and is visited by a great multitude continually...”



OF NOTE: Unable to use an arch design because the Admiralty would not allow the strait to be closed to the passage of sailing ships, Stephenson conceived the idea of using a pair of completely enclosed iron tubes, rectangular in section, supported in the centre by a pier built on Britannia Rock. (*Britannica.com*)

And he reflects on a stop in Birmingham...

“...arrived at Birmingham...where we found a comfortable house at the Queens Hotel. As early as could be expected out of such a delightful bed, the best we have had in Europe we started off in a Hansom to view the city...”



OF NOTE: Queens Hotel was adjoined to Birmingham New Street Station, opened in 1854, was designed by John William Livcock. It was demolished in the mid-1960s.

And finally, he closes...

“...I see by the papers that the Vanderbilt has arrived and this letter must be mailed from here today in order to be in time for the Royal Mail Steamer that leaves Liverpool on Saturday. If all is well I shall follow her on the Vanderbilt on the following Wednesday...”

OF NOTE: The Vanderbilt was launched in 1857. It was obtained by the Union Navy in the second year of the Civil War and became the USS Vanderbilt, participating as part of the Union blockade of the Confederacy.

