



**The Devonshire Collection Archives**

**GB 2495 DF12**

**Papers of Georgiana Cavendish, Duchess of Devonshire (1757–1806)**

**18th century - c.1820**

### **Administrative/Biographical History:**

Cavendish, Georgiana (née Spencer), Duchess of Devonshire (1757–1806), was the eldest daughter of John Spencer, first Earl Spencer and his wife, Margaret Georgiana Spencer (née Poyntz). Of her four siblings, only two others survived to adulthood: George John Spencer, who became second Earl; and Henrietta.

The family moved in political and literary circles, and travelled widely during Georgiana's childhood. In 1772, aged fifteen, when staying with her family at Spa in the Netherlands, she met William Cavendish, 5<sup>th</sup> Duke of Devonshire (1748-1811). The couple married two years later.

During the first nine years of her marriage, she suffered multiple miscarriages, failing to produce the expected male heir to the dukedom. She found diversion in fashionable society, becoming a style icon: almost overnight, society began imitating her clothes and mannerisms. However, her social success was marred by heavy drinking and an insatiable addiction to gambling. The friends and hangers-on of the Devonshires, known as the 'Devonshire House circle' (after the Devonshires' main London residence) included many celebrated politicians, wits, and literary figures, such as Thomas Grenville and Richard Brinsley Sheridan. But it also included most of the rakes, libertines, profligates, and notorious women of the era, including John Frederick Sackville, third duke of Dorset, Charles James Fox, Frances Villiers, countess of Jersey, and Elizabeth Lamb, Viscountess Melbourne. They perfected the 'Devonshire House drawl', a kind of aristocratic patois that was part affectation, part baby-talk.

The Duchess was encouraged by Fox to take a more active role in the Whig party, and in September 1780 she made her first election appearance on behalf of the party, climbing the hustings at Westminster to support Fox. At the same time as she was bringing popularity to the party, Georgiana was also gaining influence through her friendship with the young Prince of Wales, afterwards George IV. They were close enough to provoke rumours of an affair but Georgiana always denied that one ever took place.

During the 1784 election campaign, the Duchess, along with several other Whig women, actively canvassed voters; her success made her a target for the pro-government press which launched a vicious campaign against her, insinuating that she was exchanging kisses for votes. Thereafter she was hounded by cartoons, handbills, ballads, and newspaper articles, all of which portrayed her as a sexually depraved woman who was corrupting the voters of Westminster. The election was a disaster, both for the Whigs and for Georgiana, who was left with a tattered reputation and thousands of pounds worth of debts.

Her personal life was also in turmoil: in 1782, she befriended Lady Elizabeth (or Bess) Foster, daughter of Frederick Augustus Hervey, fourth earl of Bristol. Bess had separated from her husband, and was living almost destitute with her aunt in Bath. Clever, articulate, and ambitious, Bess became part of the Devonshire household – as Georgiana's best friend, and the Duke's mistress. This curious *ménage à trois* lasted for the rest of Georgiana's life. Lady Elizabeth had two illegitimate children by the Duke, a son, Augustus Clifford, and a daughter, Caroline Rosalie St Jules.

Bess encouraged Georgiana to live a less self-destructive lifestyle, which may have helped to ensure the successful birth of Lady Georgiana Cavendish, later Countess of Carlisle (known as Little G, 1783-1858) and Lady Harriet Cavendish, later Countess Granville (known as Harryo, 1785-1862). However, the Duchess's gambling debts were spiralling out of control, and she was the victim of threats and blackmail from various loan sharks. She constantly borrowed money from everyone, especially the Prince of Wales.

When the regency crisis of 1788–9 gave the Whigs an opportunity to return to power, Georgiana was once again busy with party politics. Her diary of the intense squabbling and manoeuvring which took place remains the most quoted source material for the period. Georgiana jockeyed with Sheridan to advise the Prince; she also acted as a party whip, cajoling and pressing party members to remain loyal to Fox. But Fox badly miscalculated his strategy and the Whigs were crumbling even before George III recovered his senses. Georgiana's attempts to maintain party morale and win public support for the Whigs were blocked by Jane, duchess of Gordon, who was employed by William Pitt to counterbalance the weight of Devonshire House. However, it was Georgiana who received the most blame for dividing society down party lines. As soon as it was practical to do so, the Devonshires and Bess went abroad to France to escape the atmosphere of blame and resentment at home.

While abroad, the Duchess conceived and gave birth, in June 1790, to a long-awaited son, William George Spencer Cavendish, Marquess of Hartington (1790-1858). She also witnessed the harassment and imprisonment of her friends. She could not ignore the plight of Marie-Antoinette and, although she counted many aristocratic revolutionaries among her friends, she did not support the French Revolution *per se*.

Before leaving England, she had become involved with the young Whig politician Charles Grey (1764-1845), and in 1791 she became pregnant with his child. Incensed, her husband offered her the choice between divorce and exile abroad. The Duchess chose exile for the sake of her three children and once again travelled to the continent, with her sister and sister's husband, her mother and Lady Elizabeth. Afraid she would die in childbirth, she wrote a letter to her baby son stating 'As soon as you are old enough to understand this letter it will be given to you. It contains the only present I can make you - my blessing, written in my blood.'

However, on 20 February 1792, her daughter Eliza Courtney was born without complications to mother and child. Eliza was given up to live with Charles Grey's parents. Georgiana was never allowed to acknowledge their true relationship and she felt tremendous guilt over Eliza's fate for the rest of her life.

During her exile, she and her companions travelled through France, Switzerland and Italy, eventually settling in Naples where they were lionized by Neapolitan society. Years previously, in 1779, the Duchess had anonymously published an epistolary novel, *The Sylph*. She also wrote poetry, and during her exile, wrote her best-known poem, *The Passage of the Mountain of St Gothard* – later privately published.

After her husband recalled her in 1793 she promised to withdraw from society. The next few years were marred by illness and heartache. In 1795 Charles Grey married without first

informing her. The following year she developed an infection in her right eye which spread to her left, leaving her scarred and three-quarters blind. Although initially unwilling to rebuild her life, Georgiana gradually overcame her handicap. She took a renewed interest in the world around her, increased her mineral collection at Chatsworth, and supervised the refurbishment of Chiswick House.

The resignation of William Pitt in 1801 lured the Duchess back into the political arena, and two important friendships were rekindled: Charles James Fox and the Prince of Wales were once more constant visitors to Devonshire House. Georgiana resumed her former role as one of the Prince's closest advisers and was instrumental in getting Fox and the Prince to settle their differences, as well as reuniting the different Whig factions into a force that could be coordinated. Whilst Pitt returned as Prime Minister in 1804, following his death in 1806, the new government – the 'ministry of all the talents' – largely consisted of the coalition that Georgiana had helped to build.

However, the Duchess died shortly afterwards, at Devonshire House, on 30 March 1806, of a liver abscess, and was buried on 8 April at All Saints', Derby.

Principal source: Amanda Foreman, 'Cavendish [née Spencer], Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). By permission of Oxford University Press.

**Custodial History:**

The material in the collection was largely created or acquired by Georgiana Cavendish, Duchess of Devonshire, and remained within the family; its exact archival history is unknown.

**Source of Acquisition:**

The material was extant in The Devonshire Collection prior to 1 August 2011.

**Scope and content:**

The collection includes a series of notebooks, poetry manuscripts, and scrapbooks authored or compiled by Duchess Georgiana. The majority of the notebooks contain poetry and creative works; one of the scrapbooks appears to have been added to after the Duchess's death. There are some pamphlet publications and manuscripts of works by others, which were either dedicated to, or concern, Duchess Georgiana and her husband, the 5<sup>th</sup> Duke of Devonshire; these are largely anonymous, but there is a verse signed by David Garrick. In addition there is a small quantity of correspondence, most of which dates from the final two years of the Duchess's life (the majority of her correspondence is contained in the 5<sup>th</sup> Duke's Correspondence Series, DF 2495 CS5), and a lock of her hair.

**System of Arrangement:**

The archive has been arranged into the following series:

DF12/1: Notebooks and scrapbooks, c. 1773 - 1820

DF12/2: Publications, 18<sup>th</sup> century - 1805

DF12/3: Correspondence, [1798 – 1806]

**Conditions Governing Access:**

The collection is open for consultation. Access to the archive at Chatsworth is by appointment only. For more information please visit: <https://www.chatsworth.org/art-archives/access-the-collection/archives-and-works-of-art/>.

**Conditions Governing Reproduction:**

Copies of material in the archive can be supplied for private study and personal research purposes only, depending on the condition of the documents.

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**Extent:**

2 boxes

**Language of Material:**

English

**Preferred Citation:**

Devonshire MSS, Chatsworth, DF12

**Related Material:**

There is extensive correspondence of Duchess Georgiana in the 5<sup>th</sup> Duke's Correspondence Series (GB 2495 CS5); in addition, the London Series (Currey Papers) includes eight bundles of accounts, receipts and related correspondence of the Duchess (see GB 2495 L/24/104-111).

<u>DF12/1</u>	<u><i>Notebooks, Scrapbooks and Keepsakes of Georgiana Cavendish, Duchess of Devonshire</i></u>	<u>c.1773 - 1820</u>	<u>Section</u>
	12 volumes and 1 item		
DF12/1/1	Collections of Poetry written by Georgiana Duchess of Devonshire and others 10 volumes and 1 item	c.1773 - 1820	Series
DF12/1/1/1	Verses by Georgiana Cavendish, Duchess of Devonshire 1 volume	c.1775 - c.1803	Item
DF12/1/1/2	Pocketbook of Verse 1 volume	c.1773	Item
DF12/1/1/3	Notebook, St Albans, 1783 1 volume	1783	Item
DF12/1/1/4	Collection of Poetry 1 volume	18th century	Item
DF12/1/1/5	Collection of Poetry 1 volume	18th century	Item
DF12/1/1/6	Collection of Poetry, 'Des Bagatelles' [Trifles] 1 volume	c.1775	Item
DF12/1/1/7	Collection of Poetry and other Works 1 volume	c.1791 - c.1811	Item
DF12/1/1/8	A Poem and other Works 1 volume	[18th century]	Item
DF12/1/1/9	Notes and Verse 1 volume	c.1793 - c.1815	Item

DF12/1/1/10	Poems written by Georgiana Cavendish, Duchess of Devonshire, dedicated to her son, William Cavendish, Marquess of Hartington 1 item	November 1794	Item
DF12/1/1/11	Poems by Georgiana Cavendish, Duchess of Devonshire and Georgiana Countess Spencer, copied into an album [presented to Caroline Georgiana Howard] 1 volume	1820	Item
DF12/1/1/12	Collection of Poetry 1 volume	18th century	Item
DF12/1/2	Scrapbooks belonging to Georgiana Cavendish, Duchess of Devonshire 2 volumes	Late 18th century	Series
DF12/1/2/1	Scrapbook containing biographies and anecdotes 1 volume	Late 18th century	Item
DF12/1/2/2	Scrapbook 1 volume	[late 18th century]	Item
DF12/1/3	Keepsakes	1770	Sub-series
DF12/1/3/1	Lock of hair from Georgiana Spencer when she 13 years old, along with a note and wallet apparently used to store the hair	1770	Item
<b><u>DF12/2</u></b>	<b><u>Publications</u></b> 8 volumes and 1 item	<b><u>18th century-1805</u></b>	<b><u>Section</u></b>
DF12/2/1	Pamphlet, <i>The Calf's Will</i> 1 volume	c.1780	Item
DF12/2/2	Pamphlet, <i>The Diablo-Lady</i> , by Belphegor 1 volume	1777	Item

DF12/2/3	Pamphlet, <i>The Duke of Devonshire's Bull to the Duchess of Devonshire's Cow: A Poetical Epistle</i>	1777	Item
	1 volume		
DF12/2/4	Pamphlet, <i>The First of April: or, the Triumphs of Folly a Poem</i>	1777	Item
	1 volume		
DF12/2/5	Pamphlet, <i>The Diaboliad, a Poem</i>	1777	Item
	1 volume		
DF12/2/6	Pamphlet, <i>An Interesting Letter to the Duchess of Devonshire</i>	1778	Item
	1 volume		
DF12/2/7	A Catalogue of the works of John Smith, engraver. Compiled for the use of her Grace Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire, by William Gardiner	18th century	Item
	1 volume		
DF12/2/8	Manuscript, 'Historie de gotton L'Aveugle de Spa'	18th century	Item
	1 volume		
DF12/2/9	'Enquiries at Devonshire House', a poem concerning Georgiana Cavendish, Duchess of Devonshire	1805	Item
	1 item		
DF12/2/10	Poem dedicated to Georgiana Cavendish, Duchess of Devonshire	10 August 1785	Item
	1 item		
DF12/2/11	'The Chatsworth Sportsmen', a verse signed by David Garrick	6 Sep 1776	Item
<b><u>DF12/3</u></b>	<b><u>Correspondence</u></b>	<b><u>[1798 - 1806]</u></b>	<b><u>Section</u></b>
	1 file and 1 letter		
DF12/3/1	Letters sent by Georgiana Cavendish, Duchess of Devonshire to [Thomas Sheen] concerning financial matters	[1805-1806]	Item



DF12: Papers of Georgiana Cavendish, Duchess of Devonshire (1757-1806)

	1 file		
DF12/3/2	Letters and poems sent to [Georgiana Cavendish, Duchess of Devonshire] by William Robert Spencer	[c.1800]	Item
	12 items		
DF12/3/3	Letter from [Robert Adair] to [Georgiana Cavendish, Duchess of Devonshire]	[c.1800]	Piece
	1 item		
DF12/3/4	Letter from R FitzPatrick to [Georgiana Cavendish, Duchess of Devonshire]	[c.1800]	Piece
	1 item		
DF12/3/5	Letter from [Henry Charles] Englefield to [Georgiana Cavendish, Duchess of Devonshire]	[c.1800]	Piece
	1 item		
DF12/3/6	Letter from Georgiana Cavendish, Duchess of Devonshire to Dowager Countess Spencer	[6 September 1798]	Piece
	1 item		