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## Livingstone Letters from the Royal Geographical Society Published

The Geographical Society of London was founded in 1830 as an institution to promote the advancement of geographical science. Like many learned societies, it started as a dining club in London where select members held informal dinner debates on current scientific issues.

Under the patronage of King William IV, it

became known as The Royal Geographical Society (RGS) and was granted its Royal Charter under Queen Victoria in 1859. In 1912, it moved to its current location, Lowther Lodge in Kensington Gore, London. In 1933, some fellows of the Society broke away and formed the Institute of British Geographers (IBG). The two societies co-existed until January 1995 when the new RGS (with the IBG) was formed.

As a learned society and professional body the Society promotes geographical research and teaching, nationally and internationally, by expeditions and in the classroom. It fosters the role of geography and geographical information in policy, placing geography in current debates about the future of places, environments and communities.



*Exterior of the Royal Geographical Society (Rear Entrance).  
Credit: Gary Li.*

The RGS (with IBG) holds one of the world's pre-eminent geographical collections. Around 2 million items strong, it is an unparalleled resource. The Map Collection contains approximately 1 million maps and is the largest private map collection in the world. The Library Collection comprises some 250,000 items with coverage of the history, geography and exploration of, for example, the North and South Poles, the Himalayas, the Nile and Central Africa. The Artefact Collection holds a wide variety of objects, such as a pocket compass owned by Charles Darwin. The Picture Collection has over half a million images including photographs of such areas as Antarctica, Central Asia and Arabia as well as holding oils and watercolours by, for example, Thomas Baines, the artist on Livingstone's 'Zambesi Expedition'.

The Archives contain material arising out of the conduct of the Society's business and manuscripts relating to persons or subjects of special interest. The manuscript collection is particularly important for biographers of nineteenth and early twentieth-century travellers and geographers and to researchers of the development of geographical knowledge and the historical development of geography as a discipline.

The material is held in seven main groupings:

- **Fellowship Certificates:** These record the date of election and other relevant information about a candidate.
- **RGS Administrative Papers:** includes Council and Committee minutes, out-letter books and additional papers relating to the Society's history.
- **Correspondence Blocks:** letters to officers of the Society from 1830 and, in many cases, copies of the outgoing replies.
- **Journal Manuscripts:** published, part-published and unpublished manuscripts submitted for publication in the Society's periodicals, from 1830.
- **IBG records:** include Council and Committee minutes and correspondence of the IBG 1930-1995.
- **Special Collections:** for example, papers of David Livingstone and Henry Morton Stanley.
- **Library Manuscripts:** miscellaneous small groups of papers, diaries, log books, observations and letters which do not necessarily have any connection with the Society but which are of interest to historians of geography and exploration.

The [David Livingstone Collection](#) consists mainly of material which was



*Statue of Livingstone outside the Royal Geographical Society.*

*Credit: Gary Li.*

generated from the ongoing communications between the Society's officers, Livingstone and various fellows and contacts in government and the military from the period 1850-1873. The Collection falls into the following categories:

- I. 1850-52 Documents concerning the activities of the Boers around Kuruman and their behaviour with Sechele, and copies of letters to the London Missionary Society.
- II. 1853-58 Documents concerning the expedition to Loanda, Linyanti and the Victoria Falls, including letters from Livingstone to the RGS reporting on his progress, letters from English addresses (1857-8) asking for information on the mouth of the Zambezi, comments on his book, etc.
- III. 1858-65 Documents concerning the expedition to the Shire, Zambezi and Lake Nyassa, including Livingstone's reports to the RGS, a watercolour of Victoria Falls, report on the navigation of the Zambezi and letters from Livingstone to the Foreign Office.
- IV. 1865-73 Documents concerning Livingstone's last expedition (letters to the RGS, to Sir Henry Rawlinson and to Sir Thomas Maclear); a notebook of astronomical observations, a collection of news cuttings of 1872 about Livingstone and H. M. Stanley and copies of letters from Livingstone to the Foreign Office, Sir Bartle Frere, John Kirk, Sir Roderick Murchison and George Seward; letters of John Kirk, H.A. Churchill and others communicating

news and rumours about Livingstone.

V. A small group of papers relating to the death and funeral of Livingstone.

Also miscellaneous donated items: photostat copies of Livingstone's 1853-56 expedition journal, Diploma awarded to Livingstone by the International Congress at Antwerp 1871, a prayer book belonging to Livingstone and photocopies of items relating to the centenary of Livingstone's death.

In addition, the Archives hold other items relating to Livingstone which do not form part of

Carved section of bark from the tree under which Livingstone's heart was buried  
*Carved section of bark from the tree under which Livingstone's heart was buried.*  
*Credit: Royal Geographical Society.*

the main Special Collection: six letters from Livingstone to Sir George Back, typescripts of letters from Livingstone to Heinrich Barth and from Livingstone to Margaret Sewell and a prayer book that belonged to him. Holdings in the other sections of the Collections complement the above material and include nine manuscript maps by Livingstone and several relics associated with him: the cap worn at his meeting with H. M. Stanley, slave chains he brought back from Africa, a sextant used by him and an inscribed piece of bark from the African tree under which Livingstone's heart was buried.

We are very grateful to Sarah Strong, Archives Officer at the Royal Geographical Society, for all her help and interest in the project.

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