



# **Withering Letters**

## **Reference: WL**

## Withering Letters

WL

Withering Letters

1781-1799

Letters of William Withering to various correspondents. Subject matter relates mainly to botany and medical matters particularly concerning the plant *Drosera*.

**Administrative history:** William Withering, botanist and physician, is credited with the introduction of digitalis into the practice of medicine. Withering was born in Wellington, Shropshire, England in 1741. He followed in the medical footsteps of his father who was an apothecary-surgeon. Withering received his degree in 1766 from the University of Edinburgh. Withering published 19 articles during his lifetime. After fighting a long battle with tuberculosis, he died on 6 October 1799, at the age of 58. Digitalis purpurea in the 18th century was a blessing for people with dropsy. At the same time, foxglove concoctions began to appear in an attempt to cure, albeit unsuccessfully, illnesses such as asthma, epilepsy, hydrocephalus, insanity and others. The 18th century brought foxglove into medical light, but it would take several hundred years before its true healing powers could be harnessed completely.

Reference: Hand Kocher, Digitalis Purpurea Cardia Glycoside (<http://www.csoll.tamu.edu/FLORA/wilson/481/me dbot/bot2.htm> ).

**Arrangement:** Letters WL/2-21 are individual items stored together; WL/1 is inserted in 'Life of William Hutton' (1817) rDA 690.B6. Letters WL/2-7 were formerly inserted in volumes 2-3 of 'An arrangement of British plants, according to the latest improvements of the Linnaean system: with an easy introduction to the study of botany' by William Withering (1818) rQK 306.A3.

21 items

Access: Open

**Access conditions:** Access to all registered readers

**Copyright:** Permission to make any published use of any material from the collection must be

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sought in advance in writing from the Director of Special Collections. Identification of copyright holders of unpublished material is often difficult. Special Collections will assist where possible with identifying copyright owners, but responsibility for ensuring copyright clearance rests with the user of the material.

**Language:** FrenchEnglish

**Acquisition:** This is an artificial collection; it was begun with a purchase of letters made in 1963/64. A number of additions have been made subsequently.

**Related material:** University of Birmingham Information Services, Special Collections Department also holds the Withering Collection: Papers of T.W. Peck and K.D. Wilkinson (GB0150 WP), acquired whilst writing 'William Withering of Birmingham' (Bristol, 1950).

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|------|--|------|
| WL/1 | Letter to George Robinson  | 1794 |
|      | Letter to George Robinson, bookseller, dated 10 November. Concerns the third edition of the Botany, Jonathan Stokes and Withering's accounts |      |
|      | 1 item   |      |
|      | Access: Open   |      |
|      | <b>Physical description:</b> Original letter inserted in 'Life of William Hutton' (1817) r DA 690.B6   |      |
| WL/2 | Letter to Hon William Bagot  | 1797 |
|      | Letter dated 22 October. Concerns various plants and, in particular, the herb Sium nodiflorum  |      |
|      | 1 item   |      |
|      | Access: Open   |      |
|      | <b>Copies:</b> High quality copy on staff R drive  |      |
| WL/3 | Letter to Hon William Bagot  | 1797 |
|      | Letter dated 2 August. Concerns the plant Drosera  |      |

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- 1 item  
Access: Open  
**Copies:** High quality copy on staff R drive
- WL/4 Letter to Hon William Bagot 1797  
Letter dated 4 November. Concerns Drosera and other plants
- 1 item  
Access: Open  
**Copies:** High quality copy on staff R drive
- WL/5 Letter to Hon William Bagot 1798  
Letter dated 12 June. Concerns Drosera and other plants. Withering also regrets that Bagot will be unable to come to Edgbaston to meet Mr Griffith of Garn.
- 1 item  
Access: Open  
**Copies:** High quality copy on staff R drive
- WL/6 Letter to Hon William Bagot 1798  
Letter dated 10 March. Concerns Fumaria and other plants
- 1 item  
Access: Open  
**Copies:** High quality copy on staff R drive
- WL/7 Letter to Hon William Bagot 1799  
Letter dated 15 April. Concerns Drosera and other botanical matters
- 1 item  
Access: Open  
**Copies:** High quality copy on staff R drive

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|-------|--|------|
| WL/8  | Letter to Dr John Ash  | 1798 |
|       | Letter dated 12 May and written from Edgbaston to Dr Ash, physician, Holles Street, Cavendish Square, London.  |      |
|       | Concerns medical matters, Thomas Beddoe's lectures at Bristol, R. A. Johnson and the Lunar Society   |      |
|       | 1 item   |      |
|       | Access: Open   |      |
| WL/9  | Letter to George Robinson  | 1796 |
|       | Letter dated 23 October and written from Edgbaston to Mr Robinson Concerns his Botany and the sale of it   |      |
|       | 1 item   |      |
|       | Access: Open   |      |
| WL/10 | Letter to Mr Rathbone  | 1781 |
|       | Letter dated 16 February and written from Birmingham to Mr Rathbone junior, merchant of Liverpool. Concerns his experiments on airs; Rathbone's experiments; William Withering's new machine 'for impregnating water with fixed air', with diagram; Joseph Priestley's experiments. With typescript transcript |      |
|       | 1 item   |      |
|       | Access: Open   |      |
|       | <b>Physical description:</b> Part of the last page has been lost   |      |
| WL/11 | Letter to George Robinson  | 1793 |
|       | Letter dated 14 October and written from Edgbaston to Mr Geo Robinson, bookseller, Paternoster Row, London. Concerns various of his books including the Botany. With typescript transcript   |      |
|       | 1 item   |      |

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- Access: Open
- WL/12 Letter to Adam Afzelius 1793
- Photocopy of letter dated 9 October and written from Edgbaston to Dr Afzelius. Welcomes him back from Africa and hopes to meet him soon. Concerns Withering's visit to Portugal and plants there and his plans for a new edition of the Botany. He also asks Afzelius for assistance in comparisons with Swedish plants
- 1 item
- Access: Open
- WL/13 Letter to Adam Afzelius 1797
- Photocopy of letter dated 21 February and written from Edgbaston to Mr Afzelius care of Sir Jos Banks, Soho Square, London. Concerns correspondence which Afzelius has had with C. P. Thunberg on the subject of Swedish plants and mentions a packet of Portugese plants which has gone astray
- 1 item
- Access: Open
- WL/14 Letter to Adam Afzelius 1798
- Photocopy of letter dated 6 January 1798 and written from Edgbaston to Mr Afzelius care of Sir Joseph Banks, Soho Square, London
- 1 item
- Access: Open
- WL/15 Letter to Torbern Bergman 1783
- Photocopy of letter dated 1 October and written from Birmingham and addressed 'Sir'. He sends a copy of his translation of Bergman's 'Sciagraphia Regni Mineralis'
- 1 item
- Access: Open

## Withering Letters

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|-------|--|------|
| WL/16 | Letter to Charles Peter Thunberg   | 1794 |
|       | <p>Photocopy of letter dated 13 September written from Birmingham to Professor Charles Peter Thunberg, Knight of the Royal Order of Wasa, Upsala, Sweden. He requests assistance in comparing certain English and Swedish plants.</p> <p>1 item</p> <p>Access: Open</p> <p><b>Language:</b> French</p>   |      |
| WL/17 | Letter to Charles Peter Thunberg   | 1795 |
|       | <p>Photocopy of letter dated 7 September written from Birmingham to Sir Charles Peter Thunberg, Professor, Knight of the Royal Order of Wasa &amp;c, Upsala, Sweden. Concerns mainly botanical matters and also sends thanks for the gift of a book and for help received and in return is sending a packet of Portugese plants. He also refers to Afzelius's visit to Sierra Leone and to the slave trade there. Written in French</p> <p>1 item</p> <p>Access: Open</p> <p><b>Language:</b> French</p> |      |
| WL/18 | Letter to John Coakley Lettsom   | 1787 |
|       | <p>Letter dated 4 October 1787 and written from Birmingham to Dr Lettsom, London. Concerns William Withering's election to the Medical Society and medical matters including Dr Sims on angina</p> <p>1 item</p> <p>Access: Open</p>   |      |
| WL/19 | Letter to John Coakley Lettsom   | 1788 |
|       | <p>Letter dated 19 August to Dr Lettsom, London. Concerns the Medical Society, various medical matters including an outbreak of influenza and scarlatina anginosa, and botanical matters</p> <p>1 item</p>   |      |

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- Access: Open
- WL/20 Letter to Dr I. E. Smith 1799
- Letter dated 6 March and written from Edgbaston to Dr Smith, physician of Norwich. Concerns botanical matters
- 1 item
- Access: Open
- WL/21 Letter to Davies Giddy [1795]
- Undated letter to Davies Giddy of Tredrea near Penzance, Cornwall and postmarked Birmingham where Withering was living.
- This letter was written while he was revising the text of his Botany for a third edition which was published in 1796 and has therefore been dated to the previous year. Withering refers in detail to others from whom he has asked or is intending to ask for help, namely Mr Thompson, Mr Fox the apothecary at Falmouth and Mr Stackhouse. He is asking for Giddy's help in obtaining specimens of specified plants, and answers to certain queries about them.
- He also writes about his health and about his lack of interest in public affairs.
- Davies Giddy (who subsequently took his wife's name, Gilbert, in 1817) was a noted antiquarian who was to become President of the Royal Society in 1817.
- 1 item
- Access: Open
- Publication notes:** This letter is the subject of a short article in in issue 2 of The Heslopian, Winter 2004