

“A parcel of mash’d old rags”: some provisional remarks on the Burns Paper Database.¹

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Considering their widespread publication and global reach, the works of Robert Burns are perhaps worth far more than the paper they were originally written on, even taking into account the substantial cash value of a genuine manuscript by the poet. Yet paper - to us a relatively disposable medium - was for Burns a crucial part of a complex creative process and a central part of his life as poet, farmer and exciseman. The Burns Paper Database is a project to capture some of that life and, for the first time, to record the various details about the paper on which Burns wrote. Using recent technology - the software database and the digital image - to compare and assess Burns’s manuscripts, we can develop an aid to dating and authenticating Burns’s manuscripts and even reveal clues about the writing of specific works.

As a poet who was characteristically self-aware about the process of writing, Burns also frequently showed awareness of the medium on which he wrote. On 18 July 1788, Robert Burns replied from Mauchline to the bookseller Peter Hill (1754-1837), excusing his failure to maintain a regular correspondence with his friend and business representative in Edinburgh:

“You injured me, my dear Sir, in your construction of the cause of my Silence.—From Ellisland in Nithsdale to Mauchline in Kyle, is forty & five miles; there, a house a building, & farm inclosures & improvements to tend; here, A new—not so much indeed a *new* as a *young* wife—Good God, Sir, could my dearest BROTHER expect a regular correspondence from me!—I who am busied with the sacred Pen of Nature, in the mystic Volume of Creation, can I dishonor my hand with a dirty goose feather, on a parcel of mash’d old rags?”²

Here, Burns sets up a contrast between the transcendent process of creation (or, as the double entendre of ‘Pen’ and ‘Volume’ suggest, *procreation*) and the grubby business of writing letters to friends using a dirty quill on what he calls a ‘parcel of mash’d old rags’, or what we

¹ This work is part of the AHRC project “Editing Robert Burns for the 21st Century” based at the University of Glasgow that underpins the first phase of the Oxford University Press Edition of the Complete Works of Robert Burns. The article is based on a presentation given at Greenock West Church on the 16 June 2016. My thanks to Burns Scotland and Greenock Burns Club for organising the symposium, to Bill Dawson and Gerry Carruthers, and to Patrick Scott for his input. Credit also goes to Ralph McLean and the National Library of Scotland for assistance with images and permissions.

² *The Letters of Robert Burns*, ed. by J. De Lancey Ferguson and G. Ross Roy (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), I, p.295. Referred to hereafter as *Letters*.

might refer to quite simply as ‘paper’. As fanciful as Burns’s image is, it shows a degree of insight into the very real process of making something as apparently simple as paper. As a publishing poet, Burns ‘networked’ with individuals engaged in closely related industries, and his circles of acquaintance included papermakers as well as editors, booksellers, printers and so on. We know that Hill, for example, later visited the poet in Dumfries, bringing with him Cameron the papermaker and Ramsay, printer of the *Edinburgh Evening Courant*, both of whom Burns referred to as ‘my trusty & well-beloved veterans in intimacy’.³ But even prior to this Dumfries visit, Burns was presenting Hill with an insightful poetic image regarding paper production and the scraps of old textiles that were ‘mash’d’ to make paper, which in the late eighteenth century was still made by hand.

‘Old’ or not, rags were in great demand by eighteenth-century papermakers as the raw material for their product, with finer examples of linen, muslin or cambric rags being particularly valuable for making ‘white paper’ suitable for writing and for printing. While the modern reader may associate paper with plant fibres such as wood pulp, eighteenth-century paper was still produced from textile remnants. Not only the papermaking industry but a whole set of cultural activities also, from commerce to printing, depended on the recycling of ‘mash’d old rags’, as the following verse from the period suggests:

Rags make paper,
 Paper makes money,
 Money makes banks,
 Loans make beggars,
 Beggars make rags.⁴

It was ultimately such recycled rags on which Burns, the arch ‘recycler’ of Scots verse and song, depended to preserve his moments of inspiration.

To make paper, the papermaker would dip a wooden-framed mould lined with wire into a solution made from these rags. The mould essentially worked like a sieve, allowing excess water to drain away, leaving a film of the rags on the wires, which the papermaker would turn out onto a woollen felt to form a sheet of paper. This process would repeat to form multiple sheets, which would then be dried, treated with size and pressed to form

³ *Letters*, II, p.314. See also James A. Mackay, *The Complete Letters of Robert Burns* (Ayr: Alloway Publishing, 1987) p.309; s.v. ‘Hill, Peter’ (1754–1837) in *The Burns Encyclopedia*, edited by Maurice Lindsay, online edn. <<http://robertburns.org/encyclopedia/HillPeter17541511837.450.shtml>> [accessed 24 June 2016].

⁴ Quoted in Dard Hunter, *Papermaking: The History and Technique of an Ancient Craft* ([2nd edn. 1948] New York: Dover, 1978), [p.v].

reams.⁵ It is the mould that becomes key to identifying the paper on which Burns wrote. Were you to hold Burns's manuscripts to the light, you should see the tell-tale signs of the 'laid' paper on which he usually wrote: a pattern of vertical 'chain' lines approximately an inch apart and, running perpendicular to this closer horizontal 'laid' lines, all of which are simply the impression of the wires of the mould on which the paper was produced. One might, depending on whether the original sheet of paper has been subdivided by either Burns or later collectors (as often appears to be the case), also see a watermark or a countermark or both: elaborate designs made with wire stitched onto the mould. For the purposes of identifying the paper on which Burns wrote – and indeed in helping to distinguish the genuine manuscript from the spurious – such impressions as remain on the paper give clues about the paper and the papermaker.⁶

The following example of Burns's 'Epistle to Mr Tytler of Woodhouselee',⁷ provides a particularly fine example of the tell-tale signs of eighteenth-century 'laid' paper and thus what we might expect one of Burns's manuscripts to look like (**fig 1 below**). We see clearly the vertical 'chain' lines and the more densely packed horizontal 'laid' lines, plus a characteristic darkening of the horizontal laid lines where they meet the chain lines on the mould. In this particular example, a single sheet of paper folded in half by Burns to make multiple pages across which to write his letter, we are also fortunate to have the watermark and countermark. On the right, underneath the writing, one can just make out the figure of Britannia, a common British watermark; on the left, the countermark shows that this paper was manufactured by R. Williams. We can also see a number of repairs to this manuscript in the darker areas where tape has been applied across tears and the seams of folds:

⁵ A contemporary account of the paper-making process is cited in A.G. Thomson, *The Paper Industry in Scotland 1590-1861* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1974), pp.30-31.

⁶ Note that the same laid paper was used for printing books; however, a survey of the paper used in the early editions of Burns's published poetry is not part of the current project.

⁷ 'Epistle to Mr Tytler of Woodhouselee', on long-term deposit to the National Library of Scotland, Acc 10610. With thanks to the manuscript's owners for their kind permission to include this image.



Fig. 1. 'Epistle to Mr Tytler of Woodhouselee', National Library of Scotland, Acc 10610.



Fig. 2. Britannia watermark from Epistle



Fig. 3. Countermark from Epistle (with part of address visible)

While writing paper was not the only medium used by Burns (who even etched on glass with a diamond-tipped stylus), it was a crucial part of the creative process which led to the wider dissemination of his work through print. At a basic level, paper provided not only an effective medium on which Burns could write his thoughts but an easy means of transporting his work. Sending a letter or a verse was a simple matter of folding the paper into an envelope, addressing it, and sealing it with red wax stamped with one of the poet's seals, as the 'letterlocking' or distinctive patterns of folds, creases, and other marks on Burns's manuscripts confirm. In the above verse to Tytler, we see that the verse epistle form here was more than a poetic affectation; this particular manuscript reveals distinctive signs of letterlocking, having been folded, addressed on one side to William Tytler of New Street, sealed (the circular trace of the red wax seal can be seen on the left of the countermark on figure 2), and posted to its addressee.

The Burns Paper Database is an attempt to compile such information. In the database, we record significant details of Burns's manuscripts such as the name, holding institution, date, size of paper, watermarks, countermarks, and other relevant details. By taking digital images of manuscripts where possible, including through a cold-light source or lightbox, we can also record significant visible features, including watermarks and countermarks, which

identify the papermaker and the type of paper used by Burns, the majority of which is the ‘laid’ paper described above.⁸

The paper database is being compiled as a co-operative effort among partner institutions in the Burns Scotland organisation, which includes major libraries, museums and heritage organisations, and clubs linked with Burns in Scotland.⁹ The survey is being carried out by the Centre for Robert Burns Studies at the University of Glasgow as part of the AHRC project, ‘Editing Robert Burns for the 21st Century’. We are surveying a range of manuscripts in Burns’s hand held by a number of participating institutions, the aim being to provide a sample section of the paper used by Burns, and to allow comparison between manuscripts that are now distributed across various sites. Although the database is for the internal consumption of Burns Scotland partners in the first instance, potential applications may be found within the wider Burns community (indeed we have already met with Paisley Burns Club to compare an excise manuscript in their possession to an identical manuscript held by Dumfries and Galloway museums). Work began on the database in October 2013, and since then we have worked in close co-operation with partners in Burns Scotland to survey, at time of writing, some 220 manuscripts held in the National Library of Scotland, the Writer’s Museum in Edinburgh, and Dumfries and Galloway Museums, with work ongoing at the Robert Burns Birthplace Museum in Alloway. Even at this early stage, we have enough to begin to make some preliminary remarks, which I would like to do now.

One can tell a considerable amount from examination of Burns’s manuscripts. In addition to the readily apparent, for instance the type of document (poems, songs, correspondence, excise, other notes, fragments and miscellaneous), dates, addresses, and so forth, the database allows the collation of additional information on such things as postmarks, sizes, condition, information related to the source of paper (watermarks, countermarks), letterlocking and the distribution of material, and even the ‘afterlife’ of manuscripts. By the latter, I mean traces of what happened to the manuscripts after they were written by Burns or dispatched to correspondents, editors, and so on: in a number of instances, one sees signs of the afterlife of manuscripts in the years since their first use, the attempts at preservation and cataloguing, the marginalia and writing in other hands, the accompanying notes of

⁸ In only two cases out of the more than 200 manuscripts surveyed so far have I encountered manuscripts purported to be by Burns written on ‘wove’ paper. This was a new type of paper attributed to James Baskerville and pioneered by James Whatman in Kent in the 1750s, which was produced on a mould with a fine ‘woven’ mesh of brass wires, leaving a smooth textile-like impression in contrast to the distinctive pattern of chain and laid lines of ‘laid’ paper. For a description of wove paper, see Hunter, pp. 125–30.

⁹ For further information about Burns Scotland, see <<http://www.burnsscotland.com/about.aspx>>.

authentication and provenance, the binding and mounting for collection and display, sometimes even the later distribution of manuscripts written with the same quire of paper or pages of the same verse manuscript.

As with any database, the information held in the Burns Paper Database is somewhat ‘inert’ until users run a ‘query’, which allows users to do a range of things: for example, checking the current distribution throughout collections of documents composed within a certain time range, or comparing watermarks and countermarks, or identifying the make of paper on which Burns wrote at a certain time. If, for example, we run a database query to check countermarks and arrange the results according to date, we see some quite telling results, as in the following selection (**fig 4**), covering part of 1786–87:

Ref	MS Title	MS Date?	MS	Wat	Countermark	Papermaker	Mill location	Country
# NLS	Masonic Song, Tune Shawnboy, Coulter C	1786	1786	Lily				
# NLS	To David Brice, Glasgow, Watson Collecti	12 June 1786	1786	Post	[L.V. Gerrevin	[Lucas Van Gerrevink]	Alkmaar	Holland
# WM	Robert Burns to James Burness, writer, M	5 July 1786	1786	Post	L.V.Gerrevink	Lucas Van Gerrevink	Alkmaar	Holland
# BBM	To Gavin Hamilton Esq, Mauchline	3 May 1786	1786	Post	L.V.Gerrevink	Lucas Van Gerrevink	Alkmaar	Holland
# NLS	Lines to Lord Breadalbane, Watson p.15	1 June 1786 [s	1786	Post	L.V.Gerrevink	Lucas Van Gerrevink	Alkmaar	Holland
# NLS	Fragment: The Devil's Daybook, Watson C	25 June 1787	1787					
# NLS	Epigram to Mr Elphinstone, translator of P	1787	1787					
# WM	Robert Burns to James Burness, writer, M	September 17	1787					
# BBM	To Miss Isabella MacLeod	16 [*March] 17	1787	Band	Edward and John Band		Somerset	England
# NLS	Letter to Mrs McLehose, Watson Collecti	25 January 178	1787		C. Taylor	Clement Taylor	Maidstone, Kent	England
# WM	Letter from Robert Burns to James Burne	4 Sep 1787	1787		C. Taylor	Clement Taylor	Maidstone, Kent	England
# WM	Letter from Robert Burns to Peter Hill	17 May 1787	1787		C. Taylor	Clement Taylor	Maidstone, Kent	England
# BBM	Letter from RB to Creech, Glasgow 4 June	4 June 1787	1787		IV?			
# BBM	Letter to Peter Miller Sep 1787	28 Sep 1787	1787		J. Buttanshaw	John Buttanshaw	Hamptons Mill, Maidstone, Kent	England
# BBM	Letter from RB to James Hay, 6 Nov 1787	6 Nov 1787	1787		J. Buttanshaw	John Buttanshaw	Hamptons Mill, Maidstone, Kent	England
# NLS	To Mr Beugo, Watson Collection p.5	[Dec?] 1787	1787		J. Buttanshaw	John Buttanshaw	Hamptons Mill, Maidstone, Kent	England

fig 4: Burns Paper Database query arranged by date and countermark

In this small sample alone we can already see paper from a range of different paper makers being used in a short, but significant, period in Burns’s career. In May to June 1786, Burns is writing on Dutch paper from the firm of Lucas Van Gerrevink. This isn’t the only time Burns uses Dutch paper: he also writes at various points on paper marked ‘L.V.G’ for Lubertus van Gerrevink of North Holland, while other manuscripts have Dutch watermarks. Burns’s use of imported paper is not unusual, as the Dutch led in the manufacture of paper during the period, yet the database also reflects the growth of the British papermaking industry, which had been producing the finer ‘white paper’ for writing throughout the century and had risen steadily to help meet domestic demand and lowering reliance on importations from Holland and the continent.¹⁰ The other papermakers in this small sample reflect the industry of English papermakers during the period.

¹⁰ For an overview of the rise of the British Papermaking in the eighteenth century, see Alfred H. Shorter, *Paper Making in the British Isles* (Newton Abbot: David and Charles, 1971), pp.37-66.

We can therefore begin to see patterns suggesting that Burns is writing on specific sets of paper at specific times, as one might expect when one considers how he might have bought paper. Burns refers to the purchase of paper in his correspondence, as in the following line from a letter to Robert Cleghorn of October 1793:

I have just bought a quire of Post, & I am determined, my Dear Cleghorn, to give you the maidenhead of it.—Indeed, that is all my reason for, & all I can propose to give you by, this present scrawl.¹¹

Besides the lewd metaphor, Burns also reveals the mundane detail that he bought paper in the standard imperial quire of 24 sheets, in this case the ‘Post’ size (paper was taxed and sizes standardised at the time). This detail alone suggests the possibility that we might find ‘clusters’ of paper used by the poet at specific periods, something that indeed seems to be borne out by a cursory analysis of the database. In our example above from the earlier period of 1786–87, Burns appears to be using, at the very least, paper from 6 different quires. Focussing further in on 1787, we can see that Burns is using paper from at least 4 different quires in this sample set alone. Early in the year, he writes to Isabella MacLeod on paper manufactured by Edward and John Band of Somerset. Towards the end of the year he is using paper by John Buttanshaw, of Hampton Mills, Kent. Kent was an area associated with papermaking, home also to such major names as Whatman, and, again in the sample above, Clement Taylor (c.1745-1804) of Maidstone, Kent, who hailed from a papermaking family, and also served as Member of Parliament for Maidstone, an individual whom the radical John Gale Jones describe as ‘a worthy and sensible man, and a strenuous friend to reform’.¹²

Of course, that other ‘friend of reform’, Robert Burns did not choose such paper according to political sympathies in the same way as one might exercise ethical consumer choices today. The database presents some evidence that Burns simply used what was at hand, and it seems that Burns wasn’t really fussy about which paper he used. Indeed, the patriot bard of ‘Scots Wha Hae’ and ‘Such a Parcel of Rogues in a Nation’ writes frequently on material from places as remote from Scotland as the south-east of England, or on paper with a watermark depicting Britannia with her Union Jack shield and trident, as in his verse epistles to William Tytler and to John Lapraik. What in other contexts acts as a patriotic

¹¹ *Letters*, II, 254–55.

¹² Cited in *The History of Parliament: The House of Commons 1790-1820*, ed. R. Thorne (Boydell and Brewer, 1986). <<http://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1790-1820/member/taylor-clement-1745-1804>> [accessed 24 June 2016].

symbol of the new British Imperial State, in this context merely represents the foolscap size of the paper Burns was able to acquire. Where a modern writer might be able to express a preference for favourite brands such as Moleskine for composition or Basildon Bond for letters, Burns would have been dependent on supply, which would have been variable in late eighteenth-century Scotland. As one might expect, there is little evidence of ‘brand loyalty’ in the database.

Let us focus in on a couple of examples which show Burns using what is at hand. My first example is from the fragments found among the manuscripts surveyed, in this case the epigram from Burns on Mr. Elphinstone, translator of Martial, now part of the Watson Collection held in the National Library of Scotland:¹³

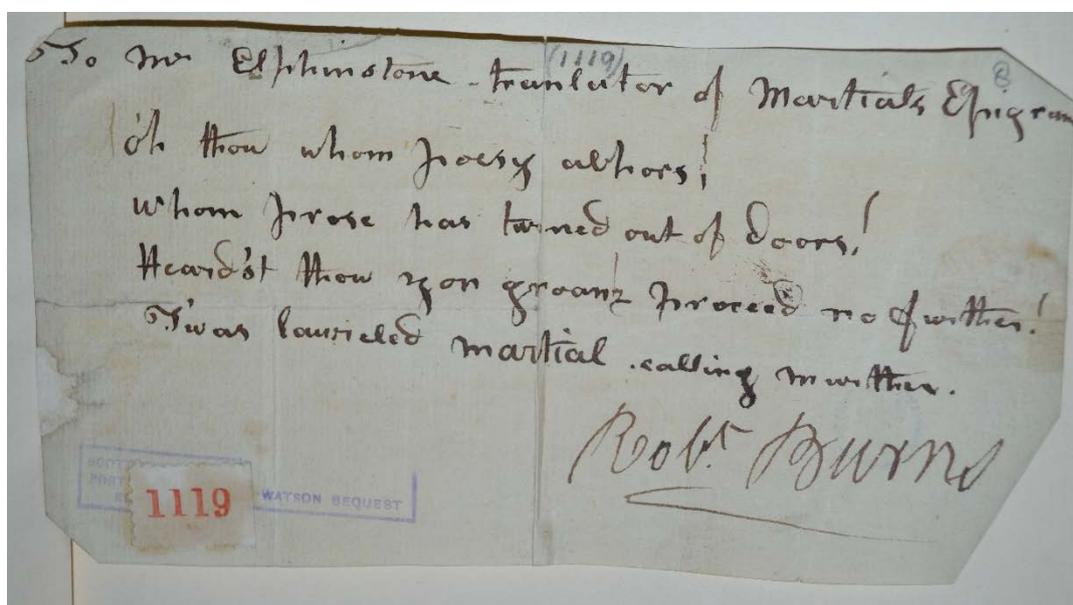


Figure 5: Fragment: ‘On Elphinstone’s Translation of Martial’s Epigrams’ (courtesy of the National Galleries of Scotland and the National Library of Scotland).

In a letter to Agnes McLehose dated 14 January 1788, Burns refers directly to this extempore composition:

Did I ever repeat to you an epigram I made on a Mr Elphinstone, who has given a translation of Martial, a famous Latin poet? The poetry of Elphinstone can only equal his prose-notes. I was sitting in a merchant shop of my acquaintance, waiting somebody; he put Elphinstone into my hand, and asked my opinion of it; I begged leave to write it on a blank leaf, which I did—¹⁴

¹³ National Library of Scotland, MS 586.

¹⁴ *Letters*, I, p.206.

It is possible that the fragment in the image above is the blank leaf referred to in this letter. If so, this must be the period equivalent to the back of a cigarette packet: one never knows when inspiration might strike and when one might need to find something quickly to write upon, even when waiting in a shop and flicking, bored, through a perfunctory Classical translation.

A further example of Burns apparently using the paper at hand, appears in the following example:

119	WM	Robert Burns to the Earl of Buchan, dated	7 Feb 1787	1787	Post	LVG
169	BBM	Elegy on the death of Captain Matthew H	1788-17	1788		LVG
194	BBM	Verse Epistle 'To Robert Graham Esq of Fi	5 Oct 1791	1791		LVG
94	NLS	Lines to Miss Ferrier, Enclosing the Elegy	1797	1797		LVG
131	DUM	Excise return	6th April 1791 ; 24	1791	Lion	R. Fleming
179	BBM	Excise Paper	1793	1793	Britannia	R. Reid & Co.
91	NLS	It was the charming month of May	1794	1794		R. Reid & Co.
139	DUM	Excise account	Summer 1794	1794	Britannia	R. Reid & Co.
49	NLS	Excise voucher, Watson p.31	March 1794?	1794	Britannia	R. Reid & Co.
64	NLS	Part of The Heron Ballads : The Election, C	1795	1795		R. Reid & Co.
125	DIIM	Burns's Autograph letter relating to Schr	13th April 1792	1792		R. Williams

Figure 6: Excise paper.

Here we see Burns in his job as Exciseman, writing various work-related documents on paper made by R. Reid and Co., who must have been supplying paper for the Excise in the 1790s. Yet, Burns also wrote *verse* on paper made by Reid: the figure below from the Heron Ballads shows that this ballad was written on the back of excise paper from Reid, as was the reworking of Ramsay's ballad 'It was the Charming month of May' composed around November 1794.¹⁵ In both cases, one simply has to flip the paper over to reveal the red ledger lines of excise paper.

¹⁵ National Library of Scotland, MS 15959, Acc 9649.

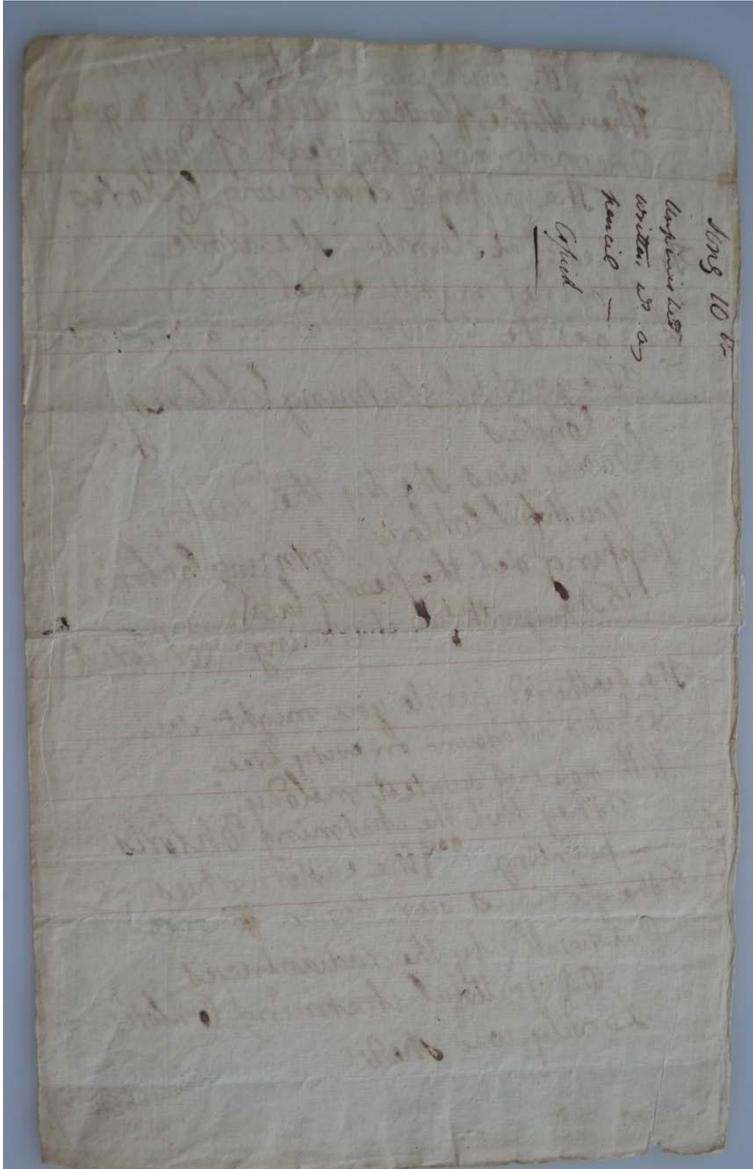


Figure 7: Red ledger lines on rear of 'It was the Charming month of May'

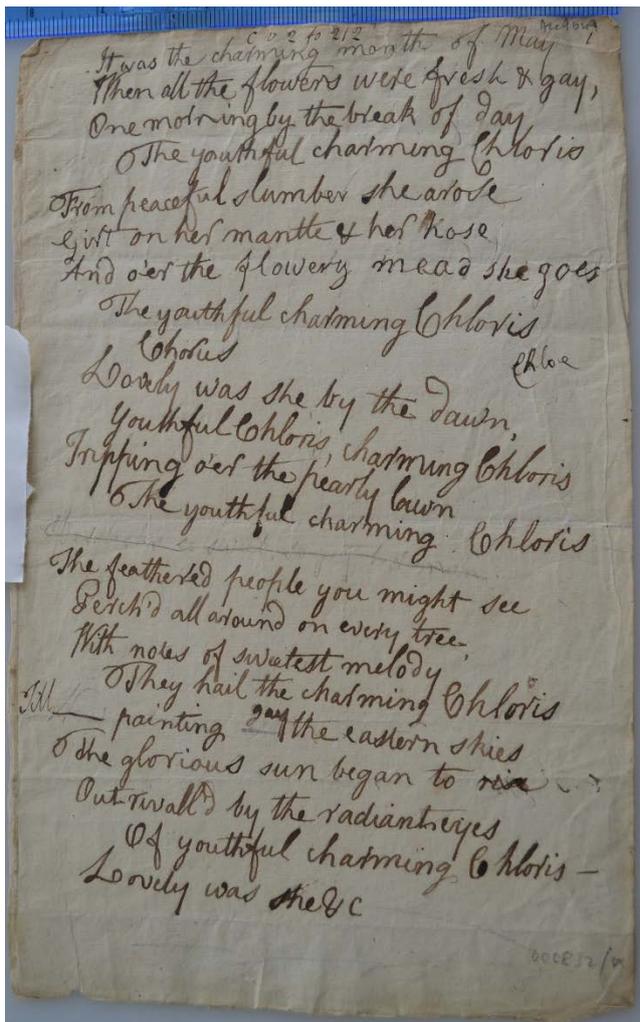


Figure 8: Face of ‘It was the Charming month of May’

Is Burns taking paper home from the work? It seems, at least, from the frequent use of excise paper for purposes other than gauging, that Burns is content to ‘repurpose’ paper from this source. In this particular example, we also have some intriguing hints about the composition of this verse. If one looks closely, the manuscript appears to be drafted in pencil, with some notable corrections, before being traced over later in ink. We find Burns writing in pencil elsewhere, such as in his tour journals when writing in a bumpy chaise would be awkward even with a portable ink-well,¹⁶ yet the use of pencil is not so frequent among the manuscripts surveyed for the database. Why then would Burns be writing on excise paper in pencil? If we cross-reference these features with a letter to editor George Thomson about the verse, November 1794, we find some intriguing detail about the specific composition of this verse that might explain its relatively unusual features:

¹⁶ I am grateful to Nigel Leask, editor of the *Oxford Edition of the Works of Robert Burns, Volume 1: Commonplace Books, Tour Journals, and Miscellaneous Prose* (OUP, 2014), for bringing this use of pencil to my attention.

On my ... visit the other day to my fair Chloris (that is the poetic name of the lovely goddess of my inspiration) she suggested an idea, which I in my return from the visit, wrought into the following Song...¹⁷

Did Burns actually put his pencil to writing this tribute to Jean Lorimer¹⁸ on the return journey from excise business in Kemmishall? The material in the database would seem to support such an interpretation.

There are many potential uses for the database, from revealing more about individual manuscripts, to comparing manuscripts held across different collections, right through to acting as a possible aid to authentication. On the latter point, excise paper is not in itself a guarantee of authenticity, as we know that forgers such as the infamous Alexander 'Antique' Howland Smith sourced appropriate eighteenth-century paper on which to commit forgeries of Burns.¹⁹ However, in the case of the above song to Chloris, one can see from the database alone, even without checking provenance, that this manuscript fits the profile of paper used by Burns (either that or all five are spurious and some lucky forger has been extremely fortunate in sourcing eighteenth-century excise paper). It is not my aim, however, to make points about the authenticity of manuscripts, nor to limit the potential uses of the database with my own personal analysis; that will hopefully be the job of others, who might also find other creative ways to use the Burns Paper Database as a resource.

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¹⁷ *Letters*, II, p.322.

¹⁸ s.v. 'Lorimer, Jean (1775-1831)', *Burns Encyclopedia*, <<http://www.robertburns.org/encyclopedia/LorimerJean17751511831.541.shtml>> [accessed 24 June 2016]. Lorimer was the daughter of a local merchant who attracted the attention of gaugers other than Burns.

¹⁹ See for example Mackay's account of Antique Smith in *The Complete Letters*, pp.764-66.