AN ARCHAEOLOGY OF JUNK MAIL (OR THE UNINTENDED BIOGRAPHY OF SIR CHARLES WHEATSTONE)
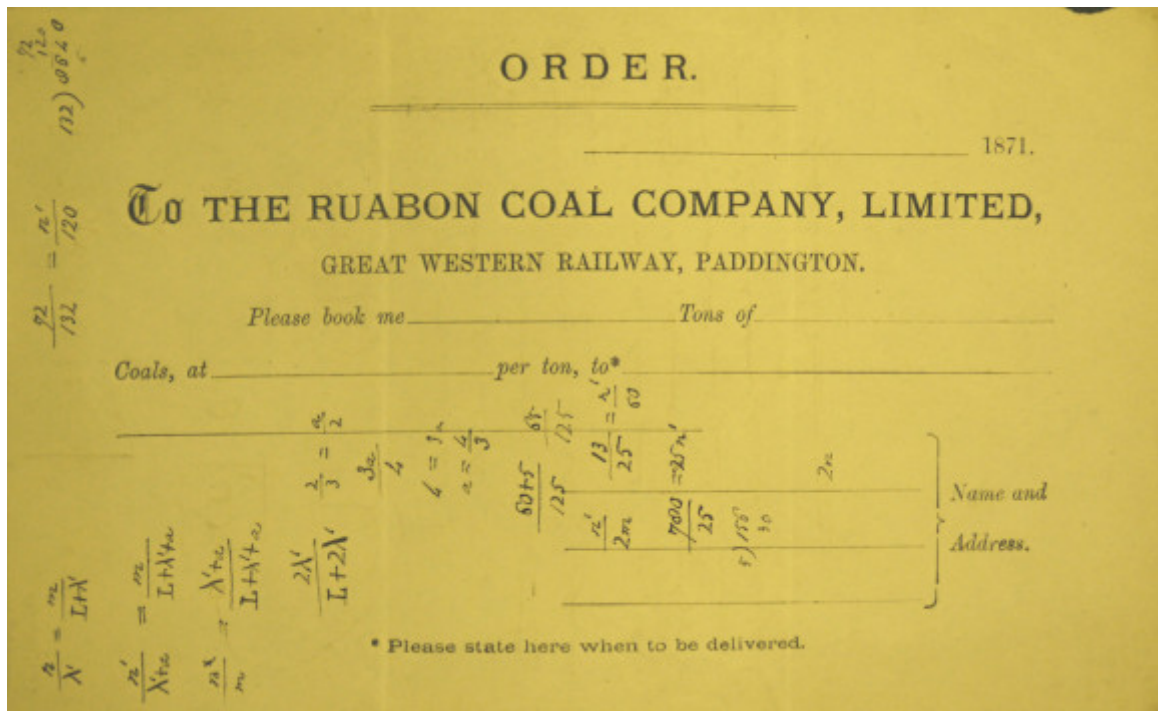
Today I will be mostly cataloguing images (it's more exciting than it sounds, honest. Do read on). The 304 images are the backs of the private notes kept by Professor Sir Charles Wheatstone, one of the Nineteenth Centuries greatest electrical pioneers. While this is not the traditional approach to recording the sage words of the famous there is a very good reason for it as I shall explain.

The experience of working with a person's private archive, their uncensored outpouring of thoughts, generally leaves the researcher feeling closer to the subject of study. There is a distinct notion of 'getting to know you'. When leafing through papers, pattern recognition (that most human of traits) kicks in and the researcher goes about the largely unconscious business of harvesting fragments of the person from the scraps of text. As informative as they are ambiguous, elements such as writing style, thought processes, influences, demeanour, the things a person chooses to write about or omits are stitched together in the mind of the researcher into a kind of operational humanity.

It can be like making friends (indeed, quite literally). Even if the researcher finds they don't actually like the person they are constructing, they begin to understand and tolerate them, making excuses for them as you would an eccentric uncle. In fact, the idea of family – an underlying connection that goes beyond knowing or liking – may be the best analogy to the relationship a researcher has with a private archive. The faults and uncomfortable truths are as present as the great deeds. There has been no tidying-up, no sanitising and no hyperbolising.

With all this in mind I found it odd, even worrying, that on my many forays into Charles Wheatstone's private papers I was experiencing none of this. Where was this man's voice? The unquantifiable *feeling* of him? I was so aware of his discoveries and in awe of his work. I was better placed than most to understand both the physics and the intellectual circles in which he moved. I would not miss small connections, overlook names dropped, or misunderstand the importance of *that* reference at *this*particular time. In short, I had put all the usual effort into this relationship and had the distinct feeling of being snubbed. Where was he? Charles Wheatstone. He wasn't a person, just a series of scientific discoveries.

All this is going on in my head at the same time as I'm leafing through his collected notes. Tiny scraps of paper covered in tinier, inscrutable writing. A lot of it is double sided. Sometimes the content is contiguous, sometimes it isn't. Sometimes it's written at right angles. Sometimes torn through. Sometimes there is a definite 'front', sometimes not. As an archaeologist with a lively distrust of words (lying, terrible things) I'm looking at the scraps of paper as things in their own right. Paper quality, reuse, dating evidence, etc. and I noticed that CW was a horder. He kept everything. Wrote on everything. There were scraps no more than three by four inches. The bottoms ripped from the letters of others. The backs of bills and shopping lists. And piece after piece of advertising.

This man was frugal to the point of kleptomania! He saved all his junk mail. Everything that came through his letter box was roughly ripped, stacked and used as note paper. The backs of things became CW's external brain. The download area for his ongoing thoughts. Every so often you could see he had a 'clear-up', making paper folders to collate his scrappy notes in. And at every one of these tidy-up sessions, more junk mail was employed to create order from the chaos of leaflets, tickets, bills and circulars.

And then it hit me. These weren't the backs of things. They were just different fronts. The junk mail was doing a different job, telling a different story, that of Wheatstone's life. As Spuybroek notes the influence of a famous person can be read through the actions of those they came into contact with. And it occurred to me that the junk mail Wheatstone received was a reflection of the type of person other people (his contemporaries in some way) thought he was. Circulars, advertising, solicitations and begging letters, invoices, memos and notes, invitations, compliment slips and receipts, all glimpses into his private life.

And so the piece is slowly growing, the unintentional biography of Sir Charles Wheatstone authored by 304 scraps of paper from the community in which he lived and worked. It seems to be at the centre of a knot of thoughts, a nexus, doing several things at once. It is adding a much needed personal dimension to the biography of the eminent scientist Sir Charles Wheatstone. It is an exploration of the history of junk mail (something which – amazingly – doesn't yet exist) and it's also something perhaps more important. It is an approach to the study of archives which has been rather neglected. What other information lies beneath papers? How many fronts have interesting backs? How do our archiving systems obscure or indeed destroy this ancillary information? Either by its omission from the catalogue or its separation from the all important (for archaeologists at least) original context?

Now, my new project Scrambled Messages sees me based at the English Lit Dept at KCL where I was shocked to discover that context is a dirty word, pertaining to all that is extraneous, all that is background.

Within the discipline of course it is perhaps the exact opposite. Context is King. For archaeologists it is all that connects and informs on the materials involved. In this case it would be the wider Victorian society of coal merchants, book sellers, clubs, societies and charities whose work was becoming implicated in Wheatstone's life. It is also the process by which the paper arrives at his house, the process of making Wheatstone employs to transform it into 'notepaper' and the way in which it is stored and deployed by the great man himself. So perhaps this paper I'm working on today will also help to rehabilitate the term context within the wider setting of the Arts.