

# Mail Order Groceries: Mrs. Purefoy's Letter to her London Grocer, 1746

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On a cold December Sunday, the 74-year-old widow Elizabeth Purefoy sat at her desk in Shalstone manor to write a letter to Mr Wilson, her grocer in London. This was something that she had done many times before and would continue to do for years to come. Some of the food ordered on this occasion was perhaps bound for the Christmas table as the goods were received the following Tuesday; but this letter-writing was part of the regular routine by which the Purefoy household (Elizabeth lived with her unmarried son, Henry) maintained its stock of groceries.

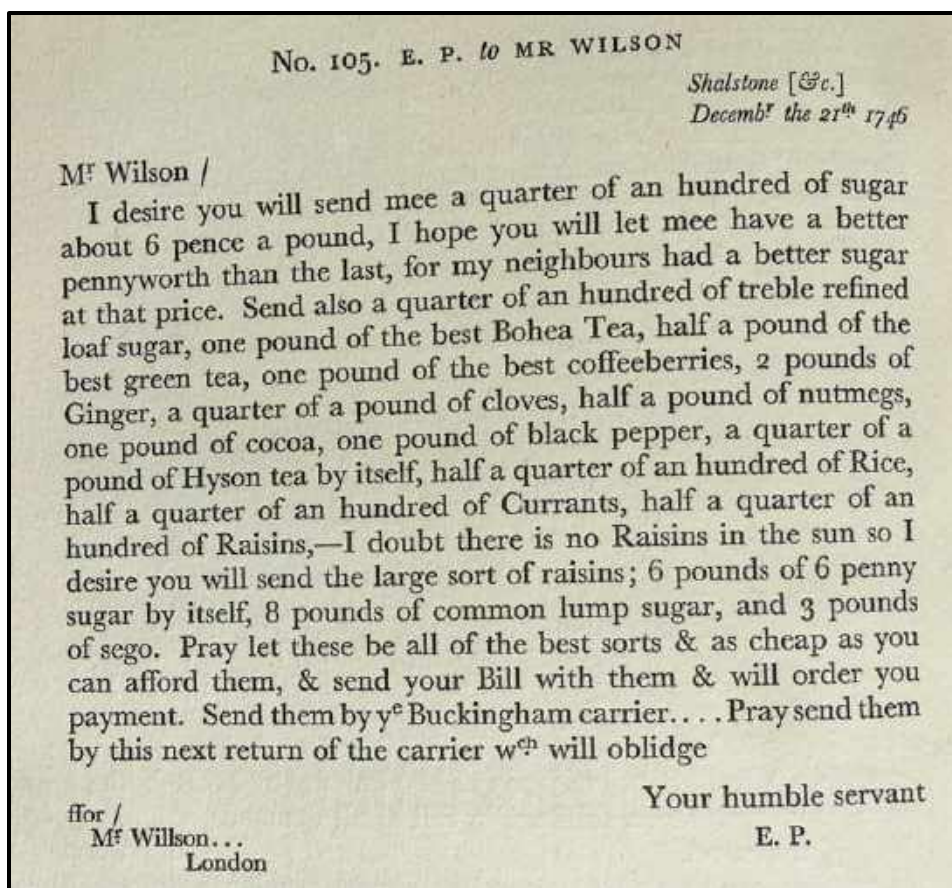


Figure 1. Letter from Elizabeth Purefoy to Mr Wilson, 21 December 1746 – G. Eland (ed.) *Purefoy Letters, 1735-1753* (Sidgwick & Jackson Ltd, London, 1931).

Letters are a familiar source for historians and always useful in class because they allow students to see something of the character, pre-occupations and motivations of people, quite apart from opening a window on particular incidents and practices. Over the years, I've used dozens of letters in teaching, but this remains my favourite and I've used it for thinking about topics as varied as prudent economy and household management, to the consumer revolution, to global food supplies.

In giving the letter to students, I generally offer a bit of context: a brief biography of Elizabeth Purefoy and an idea of the location of Shalstone: about a mile from the market town of Brackley in Buckinghamshire and 75 miles from London. Other than that, I want to see what they make of it and what the letter might tell them about the broader topic being considered.

Reactions from students vary hugely. Most start off with an observation on the apparent dullness of the letter: it's just a shopping list. A few stall right at the start, but most begin to think deeper. Some students drill into the format of the letter, drawing comparisons with online shopping today, both in the need to be very specific about requirements and the speed of delivery – did she really get these things just two days later? But then they start asking why Elizabeth was sending to London: were these things not available more locally, and how had she chosen to buy from Mr Wilson. This gets some students thinking about Elizabeth as a consumer, and a canny one at that. They are quick to note that she complains about the price and quality of the sugar, using her neighbours' experience in an attempt to lever better service from Mr Wilson. Occasionally, they also note her awareness of the seasonality of supply and the extent to which commodity types could be substituted – raisins of the sun being swapped for “the large sort”.

Other students become preoccupied with the things being ordered, most of them familiar from the shelves of supermarkets or their store cupboards at home: sugar, raisins, tea, coffee, cocoa, nutmeg, cloves, ginger, pepper, rice. The quantities involved raise some eyebrows and they start asking questions: what did she do with all that sugar, or how long did it take to use 28 pounds of raisins or 8 ounces of nutmeg? (You can see them picturing their small spice jars at home). This prompts discussion of how we could find answers to these questions, perhaps in contemporary cookbooks. The more observant note the different types of sugar and sometimes equate this with the varieties available today, although the niceties of ordinary, lump and treble refined often needs some explanation. Others spot that Elizabeth asks for ‘best’ Bohea tea, green tea and coffee, which prompts conversations about the different grades of these commodities and how they might be distinguished by the consumer.

It often takes some prompting for students to think beyond the grocer's shop and consider where in the world these things came from. But the effort is worthwhile because Elizabeth's letter can then act as a springboard for discussions of global trade: goods from the Caribbean, China, the Levant, southern Europe, the Spice Islands and American colonies coming together on the page and presently in her store cupboards. On occasions, students have then become fascinated with the time and distance involved; others have been anxious about what this says about links with plantation and slave-based production systems.

Of course, not all of these observations emerge in every class – much depends on the theme of the course unit and the topic under consideration. However, one of the pleasures of the letter is that it can take the students in so many different directions. There is rich detail and nuance in what seems at face value to be a boring list. In itself this is a useful reminder to students that they should approach sources with an open and enquiring mind. It also illustrates what can be gained by reading both with and against the grain.