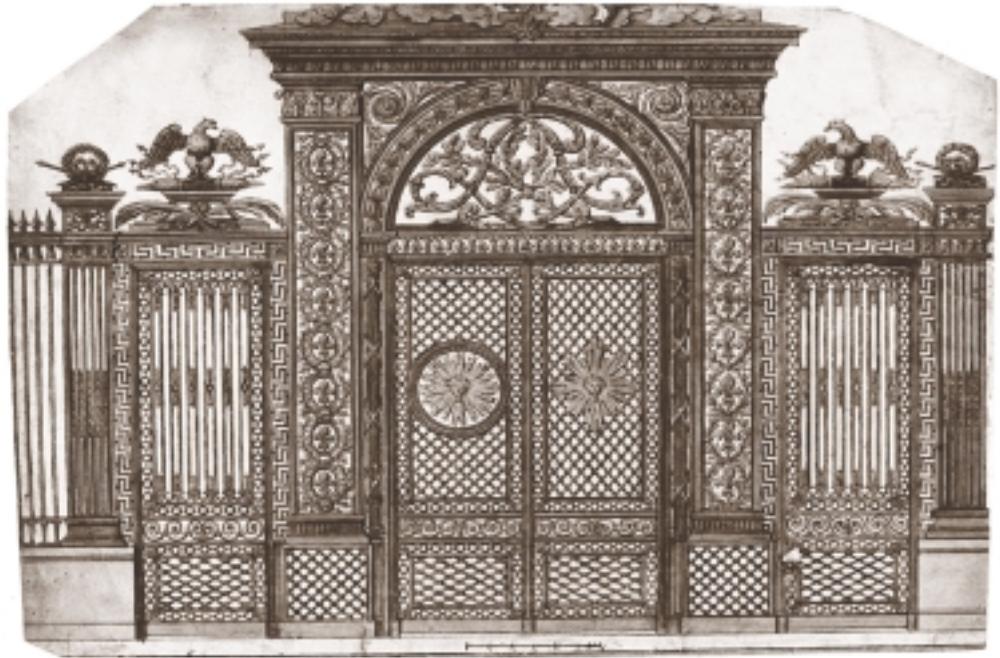


# The Rothschild Research Forum

Melanie Aspey, Archivist to The Rothschild Archive, describes the thinking behind a new approach to information exchange in the world of Rothschild studies



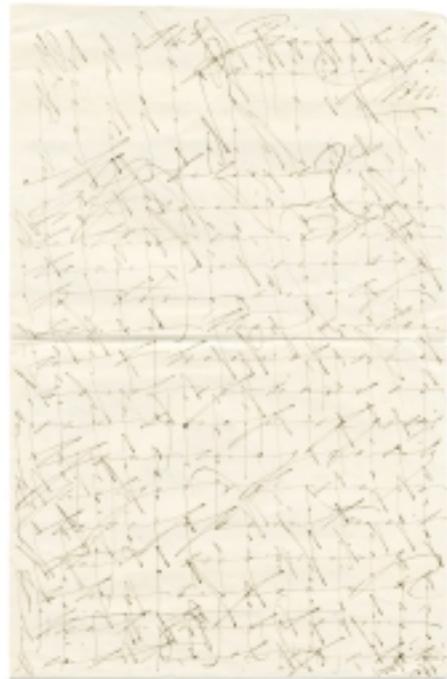
Anonymous design for a wrought-iron gate, French, late 18th century. From the collection of Edmond de Rothschild at Waddesdon Manor, featured in the Rothschild Research Forum

A CENTRAL AND PERSISTENT GOAL of The Rothschild Archive has been to function as an international research centre for the study of Rothschild history in its many forms, a hub of knowledge on research materials around the world and a link between those resources and the researchers who can interpret them. To this end, across the years, the archivists have made contact with other organisations – museums, archives, libraries, private collections – in order to build up information on sources that complement the Archive's own holdings. In some instances, photocopies or microfilm have been acquired and made available for consultation in the Archive's reading room.

Locating collections and making contact with custodians has become infinitely easier as information becomes more readily available through the World Wide Web. Similarly, the dissemination of the information gathered by the Archive can also be achieved more effectively now through the Internet. In May 2003, three years after the launch of the Archive's web site ([www.rothschildarchive.org](http://www.rothschildarchive.org)), a new web-based project – the Rothschild Research Forum – was launched to take maximum advantage of this new potential and to take The Rothschild Archive to new and wider audiences. In doing this, the Archive will work in a series of partnerships. Indeed, the very creation of the Forum stems from discussions between the Archive and colleagues at Waddesdon Manor, a former Rothschild property in Buckinghamshire which is home to the internationally renowned Rothschild Collection of furniture, porcelain, paintings and other works of art. While the Archive is at

heart a documentary resource and Waddesdon's collection is largely object-based, the distinction is not entirely clear cut. Furthermore, in many instances, an understanding of one collection can only be achieved by reference to the other. Documents may explain the acquisition or background of a particular painting or piece of furniture; the painting itself may define or explain a reference in a document.

The Forum has been conceived as a 'portal', a means of harmonising resources from a number of locations for the benefit of researchers, and of the archivists and curators working with them, creating a single source of information on Rothschild collections, wherever they may be and of whatever type. The partnership with Waddesdon Manor is seen as the first of a number, which will create a consortium of Rothschild resource-holders working together for a community of very diverse researchers. The Forum



is embedded in the existing websites of both the Archive and Waddesdon Manor ([www.waddesdon.org.uk](http://www.waddesdon.org.uk)). It is visible to all but accessible only to registered members. Restricting access in this way is simply an extension of the policy in operation for users of the Archive reading room, who are asked to provide two written references in advance of a visit. It was important to maintain this level of screening for a number of reasons, not the least being that the contributors of material, whether in the form of guides to sources, published articles or comment on the message board, could feel assured that other members of the Forum would treat the contributions responsibly.

The structure of the Forum has been designed to offer direct access to the documents published there from a number of points, the most immediate of which is the introductory page. The Rothschild world is first of all divided into four 'chapters': family, estates, collections and business, and each chapter might contain sources from all contributors. Each of the chapters is subdivided to make navigation easier, for example, 'Rothschild

*above*  
A cross-written letter from Charlotte de Rothschild, wife of Baron Lionel, whose letters to her son are being published in the Research Forum

*opposite*  
A silver gilt cup by Christian van Vianer from the collections at Waddesdon, described in the Forum



Family' contains sections of brief biographies, sources for the study of individuals and transcriptions and summaries of correspondence. Users can also browse through a chapter of contributions from each partner and from Forum members and view virtual exhibitions. The 'A to Z' chapter summarises all the contributions and there is a chapter of 'News' to alert Forum members to website updates and to events of interest such as the publication of new books.

Approximately 300 web pages have been published in the first three months since the launch. The pages range in size from a brief biographical sketch of a family member (150 words plus an image) or a timeline of Rothschild business involvement in a particular country, to a detailed summary of Rothschild family accounts in the Paris bank from 1870-1919 or a database of receipts for purchases made by Baron Lionel de Rothschild between 1852 and 1879.

The inclusion of a search button allows a rapid search through the entire site. A search for the term 'Louis XV', for example, produces a listing of 28 documents in which the term occurs. These include the receipts and accounts described above; the transcripts of letters of Charlotte, Baroness Lionel de Rothschild in 1866, commenting on furniture of the period that is to her taste (all from The Rothschild Archive's collections); inventories of various rooms at Waddesdon Manor in 1898 and 1922, Alice de Rothschild's notes on the provenance of the Waddesdon collection, a wine trail around Waddesdon (from Waddesdon's collections); and lecture notes on the Rothschild women as collectors. Thus not only is the source material for the acquisition of works of art fully searchable, regardless of the provenance of the finding aid, but descriptions and comment on them from the Rothschild owners can be placed alongside it, together with academic discussion.

Apart from such thorough coverage of the history of Rothschild collections, the picture of the various strands of Rothschild business is also being enhanced through the same simple search mechanism. A search for 'Mexico' will lead to relevant sources in the *Guide to the Archive*, to a list of key dates in Rothschild's business connections with the country; to the transcript of a letter from the agent, Lionel Davidson, giving his first impressions of Mexico in 1843; to letters from August Belmont in 1861 discussing a proposed US treaty with Mexico; and to others from Charlotte de Rothschild in London referring to the health and condition of the Empress of Mexico, then in Paris.

The members of the Forum (at the time of going to press they number well over a hundred) are drawn from all corners of the world and their interests stretch across the full range of Rothschild involvements and into many unforeseen areas. To date they include, for example, newspaper history (especially *The Times* and the relationship with the Rothschilds); the history of the Rothschilds in Frankfurt; Anglo-French relationships in the 19th century; Rothschild and 19th-century Brazil; cultural geographies of art collecting and the patronage of the arts; nineteenth century Anglo-Jewish History, specifically emancipation and identity development; the history of the Rothschild family and its connection with natural history.

Contributions to the Forum's Message Board also indicate the diverse nature of their interests. Commissions from Fabergé, Jewish emancipation, books written by members of the Rothschild family and looted art have all featured in recent months.

Researchers will always need to consult original material. Even a project as ambitious as the Research Forum can only serve to highlight important sources and to provide the answers to some questions in a virtual environment. The approach is clearly working: in the first month after the launch of the Forum, enquiries to the Archive increased from a previous high of 50 per month to 108.



Amschel, Charlotte and Evelina: three of the Rothschild family members whose brief biographies appear in The Forum