

BBC Learning English

6 Minute English

Love letters



NB: This is not a word for word transcript

Yvonne: Hello, I'm Yvonne Archer and Rob has joined me for today's 6 Minute English. Now Rob, put your **romantic** hat on and tell us, have you ever sent or received a love letter?

Rob: Mm – both actually. I have sent one and I've received one as well.

Yvonne: And why don't you write love letters any more?

Rob: Because there's not enough time.

Yvonne: Well, today we're going to make time for love, because we're talking about 'Wives and Sweethearts'. It's an exhibition at London's National Army Museum. The exhibition includes letters from soldiers on **the front line** to their loved ones which date back over the last 200 years. But before we find out more – here's today's question, Rob.

Rob: OK!

Yvonne: In which year was The Royal Mail – Britain's postal service – founded?

- a) 1516
- b) 1710 or
- c) 1780

Rob: I would say, quite a long time ago – probably 1710.

Yvonne: OK, we'll find out whether you're right or wrong later on! Now, back to "Wives and Sweethearts" – the collection of letters at the National Army Museum. It aims to show us how army life affected personal relationships between soldiers and their wives, sweethearts and families. But Rob – what would you say is '**a sweetheart**'?

Rob: It's a nice word, isn't it? And 'sweetheart' is quite an old-fashioned noun – so now, we usually say 'girlfriend' or 'boyfriend'. But basically, a sweetheart is someone we're sweet on – someone we like a lot and hold dear to our heart. We're very fond of them.

Yvonne: So we might call a child 'a sweetheart' - or even a colleague who we really appreciate. So, thanks for that explanation Rob - you're a sweetheart!

Rob: And so are you!

Yvonne: Now, the letters in the exhibition were sent during the Napoleonic War, the Crimean War, World Wars I and II and even during the conflicts we're experiencing today. So they go back as far as 200 years. Let's listen to some excerpts...

Insert 1: Excerpt from love letters

1. I do miss you so very much...
2. Shall we become engaged in a sort of distant way?

- Yvonne:** The number of words used in the first excerpt gives the impression that the letter was written a long time ago, doesn't it, Rob?
- Rob:** Yes, it does. And today, we'd probably be more direct and simply say: "I miss you very much", but instead, we heard "I do miss you so very much".
- Yvonne:** Now the second writer seems quite **shy** or unsure of how the young lady feels, because instead of simply asking his sweetheart to marry him, he suggests that they become **engaged** while he's still away.
- Rob:** He suggests that they get engaged 'in a sort of **distant** way' because he's far from home and can't propose marriage in person.
- Yvonne:** OK, well let's hope she accepted his proposal and that they got married after the war. But of course, not all the letter writers were reunited, as Dr Frances Parton, organiser of the exhibition, explains:

Insert 2: Dr Frances Parton, Exhibit Organiser

Some of them are very moving and quite distressing. Obviously, we've looked at all the aspects of a soldier's relationship and sometimes that can be very, very difficult when it involves separation and obviously, in worst case scenarios, bereavement.

- Yvonne:** Rob, Dr Parton describes some of the letters as '**very moving**'. What does she mean by that?
- Rob:** Well basically, when we read them, they make us feel very emotional – perhaps even tearful.

Yvonne: And some aspects – areas – of a soldier's relationship can involve '**worst case scenarios**'.

Rob: 'Worst case scenarios' are situations that couldn't possibly be sadder or more dangerous, for example. And here, Dr Parton is talking about the fact that in some cases, soldiers and their loved ones died.

Yvonne: Mm - well luckily, Caroline Flynn-MacCloud's husband recently returned safely from a seven month **deployment** in Afghanistan. They have a wonderful collection of love letters as a result, which are included in the exhibition at the National Army Museum.

Rob: Wow – they must be very different from the love letters written by soldiers hundreds of years ago.

Yvonne: Well funnily enough, Caroline says that they're not!

Insert 3: Caroline Flynn-MacCloud, wife of a soldier

Letters begin with the declaration of love and how much one is missing someone and end pretty much the same way, and also saying not to worry. And in the middle, you have a whole sort of section about quite banal things. When I wrote to him, sort of everyday things to show life was going on as normal without him. And he wrote a bit about what he was doing, but frustratingly, very little about what he was doing.

Yvonne: So letters start by saying how much people love and miss each other and they end by asking each other not to worry. But the middle of the letters are quite interesting, aren't they?

Rob: Yes, they are. That's where the **banal** things are written – the most ordinary or even boring information about everyday life. But Caroline's husband didn't tell her much about what he was doing out in Afghanistan.

Yvonne: No, perhaps soldiers aren't allowed to send too many details home because of security issues and of course, they don't want to worry their loved ones at home, do they?

Rob: No.

Yvonne: Well I don't know about you Rob, but I think I'm going to try to get to that exhibition – and perhaps write a few more love letters of my own!

Rob: A good idea, actually. It'll be good to get pen to paper again and not rely on e-mail.

Yvonne: Exactly. Right Rob, earlier, I asked: in which year was the Royal Mail founded? And you said...

Rob: I said 1710.

Yvonne: And you were....wrong!

Rob: Oh dear!

Yvonne: It was in 1516.

Rob: I am surprised. That is a long time ago so think of how many letters have been sent since then.

Yvonne: Especially love letters.

Rob: Yes.

Yvonne: Do join us again soon for more "6 Minute English".

Both: Goodbye!

Vocabulary and definitions

romantic	someone who has a lot of positive and sometimes unrealistic ideas, particularly about love
the front line	place where soldiers are directly fighting their enemy in a war, and in danger of being killed
a sweetheart	term used to express fondness for someone else, sometimes in a romantic way
shy	person who is quiet, nervous and uncomfortable with other people
engaged	two people who have promised to get married to each other
distant	far away
very moving	something which makes you emotional
worst case scenarios	the most unpleasant or unsatisfactory situations you can imagine
deployment	movement of army troops to a place
banal	something that is very ordinary and not interesting

More on this story: <http://www.national-army-museum.ac.uk/exhibitions/special-displays/wives-sweethearts>

Read and listen to the story online:

http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/learningenglish/general/sixminute/2011/110214_6min_english_love_page.shtml