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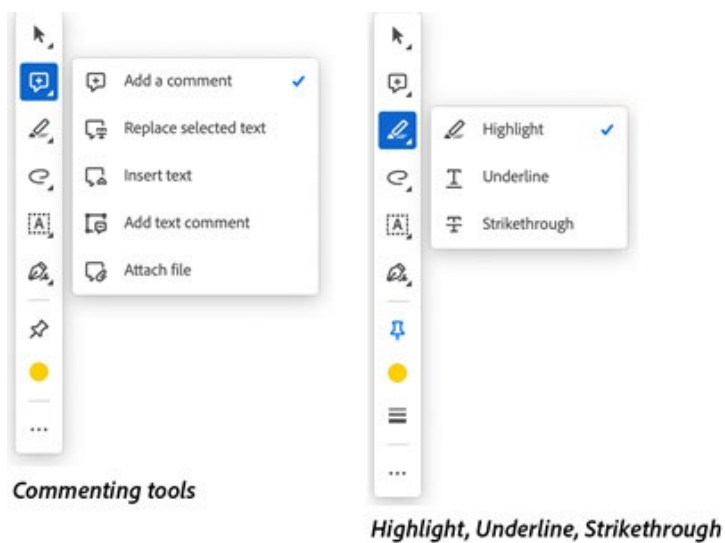
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## Short notes

### Was Gilbert White the first to use an ‘X’ as a kiss?

KEYWORDS: ampersand – Christian symbology – correspondence – eighteenth-century – kiss – palaeography – valedictions – Gilbert White.

The Reverend Gilbert White (1720–1793) has previously been credited by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as the first person to use an ‘X’ to signify a kiss at the end of a letter,<sup>1</sup> a subject which gained much popular press and is often repeated, but is this a documented historical fact, or merely romantic speculation from White’s admirers? Two elements of White’s letters have been considered to be representations of kisses, a series of ‘xxxxxxx’ in a 1763 letter to Catherine Battie (1744–1800) and the ‘X’-like symbol at the end of many of his valedictions. The former has been previously discounted,<sup>2</sup> the latter continues to cause further speculation in discussions between White’s academic and amateur researchers. To investigate, I consider three key questions: Why would White write kisses at the end of his letters? Who were the recipients of these supposed kisses? And finally, could these marks represent something else?

#### **Affection and reputation: was White a ‘Busser’?**

Let us begin with the question of motive. Why might White have included kisses in his letters? One possible clue lies in his early reputation. According to his biographer and great-grandnephew Rashleigh Holt-White (1850–1930), White’s university nickname was ‘Busser’ (Holt-White 1901: 1: 54). This term, referenced in a letter from his friend the Reverend John Mulso (1720/1–1791) in 1750,<sup>3</sup> likely derives from *buss*, a slang term for a kiss.

This suggests that the young White may have been more affectionate than the hermit-like figure we have inherited from many later biographies. Unfortunately, none of White’s letters from his university years survive – only account books – so we must turn to later life for further clues.

White never married, most likely for financial reasons. His income was perennially strained, as evidenced by his account books and receipts that detail his careful budgeting. He was never successful in securing a well-endowed living through his connections at Oriel College, Oxford, and received Queen Anne’s Bounty on more than one occasion due to the modesty of his clerical income.<sup>4</sup> Marriage would have required resignation from his Oriel fellowship, resulting in a significant loss of financial security.

He might, of course, have married for money, and he is known to have maintained social connections with several women.<sup>5</sup> However, there is little evidence of any serious courtship. Mulso occasionally teased White on this subject, but heiresses willing to relocate to a rural Hampshire village seem to have been in short supply. As a result, we find no billets-doux, no

‘S.W.A.L.K. (Sealed With A Loving Kiss)’ inscriptions, and no love notes in White’s extant correspondence.<sup>6</sup>

### Who received White’s kisses?

Among the surviving corpus of White’s letters,<sup>7</sup> we can broadly categorize his correspondents into three groups: family, friends, and professional colleagues, all of whom received letters bearing supposed kisses.

Among the family letters, we find correspondence with his brothers, his sister Anne (1731–1807), his brother-in-law Thomas Barker (1722–1809) and numerous nieces and nephews. His letters to Barker are particularly notable for their discussions of meteorology, a shared interest, though they also convey familial warmth. Letters to his brothers and sister blend practical matters with domestic news and personal updates. Those addressed to his siblings’ children often exhibit a fond, avuncular tone – playful and advisory in nature.

Perhaps the warmest friendship is represented by White’s correspondence with John Mulso. Sadly, only Mulso’s side of the correspondence survives; Holt-White (1901: 1: 37) reported that White’s letters were destroyed by Mulso’s family after his death. Nonetheless, the tone of Mulso’s letters indicates a deep and playful friendship, but with the loss of Whites’ letters we have no comparison with any possible ‘kisses’ here. White’s letters to other friends, such as Archdeacon Ralph Churton (1754–1831) of Brasenose College, Oxford, are lively and informal – particularly when discussing what to do in London during Churton’s visits.<sup>8</sup> There also remains the question of the 1763 letter to Catherine Battie. The ‘Miss Batties’ (Catherine (Kitty), Anne and Philadelphia), daughters of the London physician William Battie (1704–1776), had stayed with the then 43-year-old White during that summer, and a number of poems and notes were exchanged and kept by Catherine. In the 1763 letter White signs off with ‘I am with many a xxxxxx and many a Pater Noster and Ave Maria’. However, it is now widely accepted that the row of ‘x’s are not kisses, but a reference to faith and piety.<sup>9</sup>

White is best known for his letters to fellow naturalists Thomas Pennant (1726–1798) and Daines Barrington (1727/8–1800), primarily in their heavily revised, published form in *The natural history and antiquities of Selborne* (White 1789).<sup>10</sup> In their original form, these letters are polite and respectful, but not intimate or affectionate. While they do move beyond the strictly natural historical, they contain no evidence that would support the idea White intended the supposed ‘X’s at the close to be read as kisses.

The often raised ‘X’ mark can be found in the many of White’s valedictions, regardless of the recipient and is present in correspondence with all the above. While one might send a kiss to a relative or firm friend, I contest that it is unlikely that he would intend the same degree of affection to noted colleagues in natural history.

### The case of the ‘X’: a palaeographic explanation

And yet, the so-called ‘X’ at the end of certain letters, often appearing twice, continues to mystify readers. Could it be that the modest clergyman-naturalist from Selborne was the unlikely originator of a now-universal symbol of affection?

Some commentators have speculated that the ‘X’ is a religious cross, reflecting White’s piety. In the medieval period a single ‘X’ was inscribed at the end of documents as a *crux decussata*, Saltire or St Andrew’s Cross; these themselves may have origins in the X for a kiss at the end of a letter, as they are known to have been kissed as a symbol of faith (Steffler 2002: 66).<sup>11</sup> But there is a more mundane explanation. An examination of White’s handwriting across multiple letters, reveals that the same symbol appears repeatedly within the body of the text, not

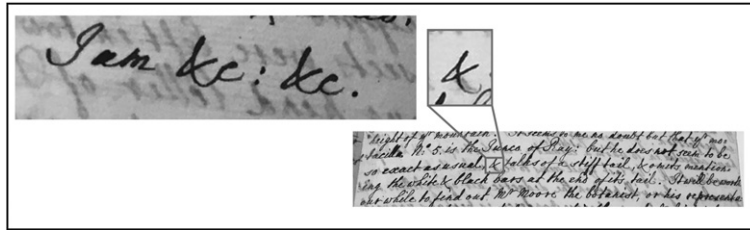



Figure 1a and 1b. (above left). An example of Gilbert White's '&c' within the valediction. Figure 1b (below right). An ampersand (&) denoting 'and'. Both examples come from a letter to his brother John (1727–1776), dated 25 January 1771. Linnean Society of London, Gilbert White Letters collection of the Selborne Society (SS3.3.7a).

only at the end. What we are seeing is not a kiss, nor a cross, but the once-common shorthand: '&c' – an abbreviation for *et cetera* (Barkess 2015: 9 & 17; Tschichold 2018: 6–9).

In White's hand, this symbol was rendered with an ampersand followed by a lower-case 'c', which – when written swiftly or at a slant – can easily resemble a slightly askew 'X' (Figure 1a). In valedictions such as 'I am your humble servant, &c &c,' or simply 'I am, &c &c' White was following convention, not expressing overt affection. In addition, White used 'X's elsewhere in his correspondence to mark letter corrections, edits, and redactions, as well as using the ampersand symbol to denote 'and' (Figure 1b).

The mystery of the 'X' is thus a palaeographic misunderstanding, rather than an epistolary innovation denoting a kiss, which was not widely used until the late nineteenth century.<sup>12</sup>

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> What does the noun *X* mean?, *Oxford English Dictionary*. Available at: [https://www.oed.com/dictionary/x\\_n](https://www.oed.com/dictionary/x_n), section 11.6.

<sup>2</sup> The scholar Stephen Goranson noted on the American Dialect Society's listserv that White's X's may have in fact been crosses that represented not 'kisses' but 'blessings' (see Nancy Friedman, 2013, XOXO Marks the Spot, *Visual Thesaurus*. Available at: <https://www.visualthesaurus.com/cm/candlepwr/xoxo-marks-the-spot> (accessed 7 August 2025)).

<sup>3</sup> John Mulso to Gilbert White, August 30, 1750, University of Manchester Library Eng MS 911.23: 'My Father sets out in a Day or two for Canterbury to fetch Home that great Stranger Miss Hecky [Hester Chapone, née Mulso (1727–1801)]: She has design upon ye, poor Vicar, & talks of careering about with her Whitibus, who She says heightens & improves all Parties ... so You best know ye Meaning of your new Name, & whether it is a fond abbreviation of your Oxford Title of *Busser*.' See also Holt-White (1907: 39).

<sup>4</sup> Queen Anne's Bounty was a fund set up in 1704 to augment the income of the poorer Anglican clergy (Middleton 1937: 8). For references to White receiving sums from this fund, see his account books in the Hampshire Records Office, Winchester, 'Gilbert White Papers', Hampshire Records Office, 16M97/15.

<sup>5</sup> See 'The women in Gilbert White's life', *Gilbert White's house and gardens blog*. Available at: <https://gilbertwhiteshouse.org.uk/women-gilbert-whites-life/> (accessed 15 August 2025).

<sup>6</sup> Holloway (2019: 166–174) confirms that the 'x' as a kiss in correspondence was an affectation of the mid-nineteenth century. For a wider discussion of eighteenth-century courtship letters, see Vickery (1998: 45–58).

<sup>7</sup> As found primarily in the collections of the University of Manchester Library; the British Library; Bodleian Library, Oxford; Gilbert White Museum; and Selborne Society Collections, Linnean Society of London. Many letters are reproduced in Holt-White 1901. The digital edition of White's original letters to Thomas Pennant from the British Library (Add MS 35139) is available at: <https://editions.curioustravellers.ac.uk/letters>.

<sup>8</sup> Seventeen letters to Archdeacon Ralph Churton are held by the Bodleian Library as MS.Eng.misc.b.9.

<sup>9</sup> See Epstine, N., 2014 'A whole lot of history behind x and o' available at: [https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/a-whole-lot-of-history-behind-x-and-o-kiss-and-hug/2014/02/13/0c3e218a-9341-11e3-b46a-5a3d0d2130da\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/a-whole-lot-of-history-behind-x-and-o-kiss-and-hug/2014/02/13/0c3e218a-9341-11e3-b46a-5a3d0d2130da_story.html).

<sup>10</sup> See Holt, S., 2023. Gilbert White beyond his village. Masters thesis. University of Oxford. The digital edition of White's original letters to Thomas Pennant from the British Library (Add MS 35139) is available at <https://editions.curioustravellers.ac.uk/letters>.

<sup>11</sup> See Williams, D. G., 'Symbols of Faith: The Evolution of Christian Imagery from Antiquity to the Modern Era' (unpublished essay, available at: [https://defendtheword.com/uploads/3/4/6/1/34617673/symbols\\_of\\_faith\\_1-4-25.pdf](https://defendtheword.com/uploads/3/4/6/1/34617673/symbols_of_faith_1-4-25.pdf)). See also Jensen (2017) for a wider discussion on the evolution of the cross in Christian symbology.

<sup>12</sup> The *OED* gives Montgomery, (1879: 2: 54) as the earliest published account of the use of 'x' to represent a kiss in correspondence, indicating that it was common usage by this point. The earliest known example in written correspondence is from Winston Churchill in 1894 where he writes 'Please excuse bad writing as I am in an awful hurry. (Many kisses.) xxx WSC.' (Churchill, W. S. Letter 14 March in Churchill (1967: 1: 456)).

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**Alt Text**

Figure 1a and 1b. A compilation image showing extracts from two handwritten letters by Gilbert White to his brother John with examples of ampersands.