

WM

A forgotten art?

As a new film celebrates the power and consequence of the written word, WM editor Claire Rees finds out about the campaign to bring the letter back to life ...



WHEN was the last time that flutter of envelopes onto the doormat signalled the arrival of an actual letter, rather than a handful of bills?

A declaration of love, or simply a catch-up by prose, by way of several sheets of crisp white paper instead of a hurried ping on the mobile – wishful thinking for a time gone by?

In Audrey Tautou's new film, the plot rather charmingly centres around an anonymous love letter, and the slew of misunderstandings that follow its receipt.

Beautiful Lies, out in cinemas now, sees French cinema's sweetheart embark on an old-fashioned match-making mission when she discovers the man who sent the note (intended for her) could instead help her bereaved mother out of her depression.

And so she sets about re-routing the letter in her mother's direction, before penning a series of her own, disguised as paper-shaped messages from the heart of an admirer. It's not difficult to buy Tautou, she of whimsical Ameli e fame, living in a world where the letter is the obvious form of communication.

But for most of us, it's a set of circumstances that would have been played out over text, at least.

According to Royal Mail research, nine out of 10 people say

they love receiving handwritten letters in the post, but most feel too overawed by the process of sending one to start up a correspondence.

And saying something over the internet or via your mobile phone saves both time, and embarrassment.

Edwin Dyson, of A Vintage Affair vintage shop in Cardiff and founder of Blind Lemon Vintage, has been writing letters since he can remember and hasn't let technology get in the way of his passion for it.

"I'm hugely into social networking, I blog, I do all my marketing online, but there's nothing like writing and receiving a letter," he said.

"I write one and receive one up to twice a week."

Edwin, 37, says the pleasure of sitting down with his antique fountain pen (he has six) and a piece of Conqueror paper ("laid, with horizontal ridges") beats typing 144 characters on Twitter. And he has a group of friends across the country, and in France and the US, who are helping him maintain the tradition.

"Usually it's a summary of what they've been doing that week, or important news," he says.

"But they're never round robin letters like an e-mail, I e-mail this group all the time, but the whole point of a letter is that it's personal to you.



■ Audrey Tautou as Emilie Dandrieux in Beautiful Lies

"Somebody has taken that time, that love and attention and put it down onto paper through ink. I also like the element of delay. It's exciting."

Without letters we wouldn't have had the heartbreaking words to Fanny Brawne from John Keats' deathbed, nor more recently the telegram to Stanley Kubrick from Federico Fellini which simply read: "I need to tell you my emotion".

In 2008's Sex And The City film, a fictional book called 'Love Letters of Great Men', read by Carrie at bedtime, spawned an actual bestseller.

A website, lettersofnote.com,

gathers and sorts letters, telegrams, faxes, and memos in a bid to remind us of the beauty of them as a long-lasting collectors' item.

You can't fill an old shoe box with text messages – how many of us will still have records of those first flourishes of love when we're old? And while BBM messaging has been blamed for spreading the England riots, pen and paper has been helping to pick up the pieces – see the Peckham Peace Wall, where locals can pin their messages of love and hope to the front of a boarded-up Poundland.

Just watch your grammar, says Edwin, who admits he has a strict,

puritan approach to one of his favourite pastimes.

"My parents always instilled in me the proper way to write letters, from thank you notes to letters to my grandparents," he said.

"I'm quite particular, the address is indented and on the right hand side, with the date on the left.

"You can get good guides on the internet.

"And if I do say so myself, my spelling is pretty damn good. I think if you're going to take your time to actually write a long letter, spelling and grammar shouldn't let you down."

■ Beautiful Lies is out now.

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