

# BRITISH HANDWRITING

By Vona Williams

"The record is in English," you say, "But I can't read it." This is a problem that occurs often with newcomers to family history research in the British Isles. From very early times up to the 1700's, the records used to obtain information on our ancestors are often in the English language but appear totally foreign. It is necessary to learn to read a different style of handwriting to be able to read the records. The purpose of this class is to introduce you the old handwriting and give you some techniques that will help you read the documents that are of value to the genealogist or family historian. The handwriting of these documents is often referred to as "Old English" but it is really early modern English covering the time period from about 1500 to 1750. "Old English" is used by scholars to designate the Anglo-Saxon language which was in use from about 500 to 1100 A.D.

## HISTORY

From the Anglo-Saxon times to the present day, the handwriting has changed dramatically. The handwriting from 1100 A. D. to about 1485 was a mixture of Anglo-Saxon, Old French and Latin. Then appears the *book hands* and the *charter hands* which were replaced by the *Gothic handwriting*. The *Gothic handwriting* was popular because it could be written faster. This soon emerged into court hands such as *chancery*, *exchequer*, and *common pleas*. About 1500 another hand was introduced called the *secretary hand*. Most documents used by genealogists or family historians such as parish registers and wills are written in the *secretary hand*. We will be focusing on the *secretary hand* in this class. Around 1750 the style of handwriting emerged into the round hand which is basically the style of handwriting used today.

## PROBLEM AREAS IN READING THE HANDWRITING

Some problem areas that will be of great help in learning to read the handwriting are discussed below:

**Documents themselves.** Handwriting isn't the only cause of records being difficult to read. The age of the records, the materials used to make the records, the care and storage of the records all affect how readable the record is today. Also, the researcher is seldom able to look at the original record but has to deal with a copied version and sometimes a copy several generations removed from the original. The quality of the reproduction affects the readability of the record. Microfiche and microfilm copies of records might be scratched to the point that it affects the readability of the film or fiche.

The tools used by the scribes can also be a cause for an unreadable record. Quill pens were used and ink was not always the best. Sometimes the ink was watered down. Over the years ink might have fallen off the paper. Parts of letters might be missing where the pen missed the paper when it should have been writing. Extra lines and dots might be on the paper where the pen hit the paper when it was not suppose to.

**Abbreviations and spelling.** Abbreviations are very, very common in the records.

Abbreviations are indicated in many different ways. Some of the ways are listed here: raised letters, colon, semi-colon, period, line through a descending or ascending letter, curvy line above the word or at the end of the word, straight line drawn above the word

Spelling is a problem for most beginning genealogists or family historians because names and other words can be spelled many different ways. During the time period of the *secretary hand*, words were spelled exactly how they sounded to the writer. Most of the population did not know how to write and so they could not tell if the writer was spelling the information correct or not. The surname Smith might be spelled Smithe, Smyth, Smythe, or maybe even Smethe.

**Latin.** Latin is very common in records before 1733. An extensive knowledge of Latin is very useful in reading the records but it is not absolutely necessary. Once you become familiar with some of the common words used in the records of genealogical value it is possible to get the genealogical information necessary from the records. There are many printed sources to help you with Latin words. A few are listed in the bibliography at the end. There are also sites on the Internet that can help you with Latin.

It is important to know that every Latin word has a different ending on it according to how it is used in the sentence. Even names have different endings according to how they are used.

**Dates.** Before 1752 the calendar year began on the 25<sup>th</sup> of March. This is called Lady's Day. In 1752 the beginning of the year was moved to January 1. Before 1752 January, February, and March (up to the 24<sup>th</sup>) were the last months of the year, not the first.

Dates of events which happened before 1752 in the months of January, February, and March up to the 25<sup>th</sup> should be recorded as double dates. The date listed in the record is recorded and then the year as it would be in our calendar is listed. Example: 21 February 1725 would be recorded as 21 February 1725/26.

Sometimes September, October, November, and December are abbreviated as 7ber, 8ber, 9ber, and 10ber. These do not mean the 7<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup>, or 10<sup>th</sup> month. The 7, 8, 9, 10 indicate the names of the month.

Dates are often written in Roman Numerals. Some of the Roman numerals are: I, II, V, VI, X, L, C, D, M.

The date can sometimes be listed as a saint day such as Michaelmas rather than the number. Some of the sources listed in the bibliography will give you the date for saint days.

## HELPS FOR READING THE HANDWRITING

No matter how well you can read the handwriting, there are times when you will run into something that stumps you. The following are ways you can try to read the difficult words.

Start with the latest year and work to earlier years.

Before trying to read the document just sit and look at it. Then read it, reading only those words that come easily. Read it again and figure out the words that you couldn't read earlier.

Read for logic.

Find the letters you can't read in other words on the page.

Find the same word written again.

In parish registers look for another entry involving the same people.

Read on through the record and then come back to the unreadable word.

Get up and move to a different location or just walk away and then return.

Use reference materials such as surname books, gazetteers, place name books, etc.

Try a different reader.

Study each letter of the author's alphabet to see how it is made.

Lay a paper over it, usually a bright colored paper works best.

Try tracing the letter with your finger.

Write down on a piece of paper the letters you can read.

Use some imagination but not too much.

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### SECRETARY ALPHABET

la la l  
da da d  
na na n  
Aa Aa

Bb Bb  
Bb B  
Bb Bb

Pr Pr  
Lr Lr  
Or Or

Ss Ss  
Tt Tt  
Uu Uu

Vv Vv  
Ww Ww  
Xx Xx

Rr Rr  
Pp Pp  
Aa Aa  
Ff Ff

Gg Gg  
Hh Hh  
Ii Ii

Ll Ll  
Mm Mm  
Nn Nn

Oo Oo  
Jj Jj  
Kk Kk  
Ff Ff  
Gg Gg

Qq Qq  
Rr Rr  
Ss Ss

Tt Tt  
Uu Uu

ne m m m

me m m m

we m m  
me m me  
me we

ne n n n  
me n n n

o o o o

o o o

o o o

o o

p p p p p

pe pe

pe p p p

pe pe p p p

pe p p p

pe p p p p

pe p p

pe p p

pe p p p p

pe p p p p

pe p p p p

pe p p p p

b u n n v

b u n n w

b u b u n n

b u b u p

v u p

w o w w w

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y y y  
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