A guide to

Reading Old

Handwriting

In relation to Postal History

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Introduction

This document is aimed at helping the reader to read the content of letters within their collections, with the aim of increasing their understanding through the contents, something of the social background of the times or the author.

As most of the postal history items that are likely to require this treatment are from the period following the introduction of uniform postage, (January 1840 onwards), the details relating to periods of use will be arranged in reverse order, thus the first section will deal with the script types typical of the 1800's and the earlier periods following after.

This approach, although at first sight, might appear to be a little strange but has the added benefit of easing the reader into deciphering text. Generally, the more modern types are easier to read than the earlier types, thus by gaining practice on a letter from the early Victorian period, we can apply the skills gained to the earlier and slightly more difficult scripts.

The earliest letters most collectors are likely to encounter are those bearing the Bishop Marks which was introduced on letters from 1661, however the style of writing used by the people who penned these items may be of an earlier type, and thus the types are taken back prior to this date to provide as much information as possible.

As we are reminded later, when comparing the types assigned to specific periods, a certain degree of overlap should be allowed as the writer may have been educated at some time in the period prior to that indicated.

If you come across any problems with this document then please let me know, this may include general errors or blooming great gaps where I have not covered a specific problem area.

Finally, the copyright bit …

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As this is a work in progress, the contents and the headings used may change. Those in black type are already included in this document; and those in red are provisional heading for sections that will be included in later versions.

Contents

How to start

One of the easiest ways to teach yourself to read old handwriting is to look through parish registers, and these are a good way of cutting your teeth, as much of the entries are, (at least), partly predictable. It is much more difficult to start cold on a piece of writing such as a letter where you are not sure what kind of document it is or what phrases to expect.

A seventeenth century piece of text can look totally unreadable at first sight, however if you have trained yourself on the later years, you will find certain words or phrases stand out, which allow the rest to be reconstructed.

Victorian letters can present some problems owing to bad writing or personal styles and the further back you venture the greater the variations, ranging from the rounded type with spellings that startle to the crabbed hand of some of the "more educated" members of society such as clergymen. Another point to remember is that, as with modern handwriting, some people have evolved styles which are very much their own, with some letters that are not quite like anyone else's. We are however able to read their communications as the whole word can only be one thing, despite the strange squiggle that may appear in the middle. This situation is an advantage in reading older handwriting – the single letters may look difficult, but in combination they make sense.

Included in this document are a number of different forms for the individual letters from circa 1600 to the 1800's, and it will be noticed that some of the different letters, even in the same group, may be very similar. In these cases it should be noted that the person who writes a letter 'c' which looks very much like an 'r', will in most cases have a distinct version of the later that they use. Capital letters tend to give that most rouble, as here there is more scope for individual choice. The trick here is to match the letters with other confirmed examples in the document, and in almost every case this will allow the correct assignment. In some of the cases where this is encountered, the body of the word is quite clear and only what appears to be a bundle of pen strokes at the beginning throws the reader. This will generally only present a problem with names as will be shown later.

As already stated, the alphabets for different periods are included here, but these should only be regarded as approximately dated, since a lot depends on the age of the person writing the letter. An elderly man educated in the 1680's does not suddenly change his style simply because he is writing a letter in the 1720's, and young clerks tended, (at times, especially with important letters or documents), to experiment with the writing styles of a former age. In modern times, scrolls of honour are often written in gothic lettering and wedding invitations printed in old English, but the recipients can generally work out the odder-looking letters because they know what it ought to be saying. The same rule applies to old letters and documents – once you know the phrasing to expect, you can read the words; it is just a matter of breaking yourself in on the more readable items and then tackling those that appear at first sight to be written in Greek.
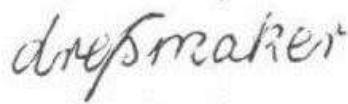
Victorian Education

The bulk of the early Victorian education in regards writing stems either directly of indirectly from Victorian vicars, curates or parish clerks with the style they were taught being passed on into the education system of the time. These people were generally taught a round hand style of penmanship, which is fairly similar to modern writing but with a few odder capitals. The most obvious thing you will encounter, (by people educated in the first half of the century), is the long 's'. This is used extensively in words with 's' like Miss, dressmaker and permission, the common error being in trying to read this as a 'p' or 'f'. Documents or letters that are written by more highly educated people tend to give more trouble, and in general, the more used a person was to writing, the less neat it was. This continues in the modern age with doctors' prescriptions being a prime example.

Commonly encountered forms of the 'ss'

Miss   Dressmaker

Examples of usage

There is also a skinny, pinched up style from this period that is reminiscent of someone scared of expressing themselves. In this style the round letters are flattened, especially the 'e', 'o', 'h', 'b' and 'g' with the capital letters receiving a similar treatment. It is reminiscent of the writer being given a small pen with a small bottle of cheap ink and being ordered to make it last for a year.
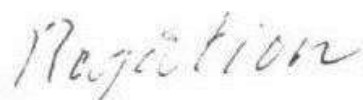
Some of the cross strokes were not very heavy and in many cases are almost non-existent causing confusion as there can sometimes be very little distinction between various combinations when parts are missing. This generally happens with 'in' which can be mistaken for 'm' or 'rr' if the dot vanishes. An incomplete letter, (usually on the curved portions), sometimes causes trouble resulting in an 'a' the looks like a 'u' or a 'd' which could be 'cl'.

Staines or
Hames or
Harries

An example how some words, (particularly names), can cause a problem

The problem capitals are 'S' and 'L' which look remarkably similar, but in most cases this will only cause confusion with the name of a person. In the same way, what has become known as the curate's limp 'R', (so called due to its frequent occurrence in church records), with almost no waist looks like an 'N'.

Rogation   Reeve

Examples of the limp 'R'

Another commonly encountered problem is the minimally written 'H' in which the central bar is reduced to a feeble tick on the second upright. In many cases in the body of letter, it will be apparent which is the case, however in the case of names, there may be some confusion.

Head   Stead

The two examples above, (taken from the same document), show clearly the similarity between the 'H' and 'St' at the start of the word. In this case it was comparison with other words and their use in context that allowed the name to be correctly read. It is worth noting this case as an example of the aforementioned similarity between letters and how the writer will have slight differences as seen between the 'S' and the left upright of the letter 'H'.

There are numerous names where this confusion between 'H' or 'St' can arise such as 'Stanley' and 'Hanley' or 'Stewart' and 'Hewart' and the only way to ensure with any degree of certainty which one is correct is by examination of the main body of the text noting the differences in confirmed cases.

The letters 'J' and 'I' and 'T' and 'F' al look very similar in many of the script types adopted, and in general the less curved they are the greater the chances of confusion. In general in relation to postal history and the reading of letters, common sense should aid in separation. The real problem comes with the more expansive style, where the writer is always in a hurry, and runs the letters together trailing ink across one letter on his way to the next, rather than taking the pen of the paper and placing it back again to start the next letter. The result of this style is confusion between 'i', 'm', 'n' and 'u' and also 'le' and 'b', 'gu' and 'gri' and the capitols 'K' and 'R'; as well as the 'J, I, T and F' group as already mentioned above. This style also presents problems with the 'H', which could be read as 'Th', 'St' or 'If' and the florid openwork 'B' which looks very much like an 'M'.

| Th | St | If |

Examples of the letter 'H' from various documents in the fluid style

| B | Barton |

Examples of the letter 'B' as encountered in the fluid style

The solution here is to get a feel for the writing style adopted for the letter or document in question then use some of the authors better moments to give a clue to the worst scrawls. Another trick, (adopted by many family historians), is to make an exact copy of the word by tracing and in many cases the act of writing the word yourself solves the problem.

Numbers

As with the letters, some numbers can cause problems. In the cases of a date, the presence of a dated cancellation, or the known period of use for a postal marking will solve most cases. The numbers which can cause problems in other areas of the document are the '6' and '8' which can look very similar in the open state and the '5' when the top is omitted can look similar to a 6. Also the '7' and '1' are often confused and the lightly squiggled '3' can at times also be confused for a '1'.

Typical examples of the numbers found in the period circa 1800

Typical letters of the alphabet circa 1800