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THE KEY TO THE FAMILY DEED CHEST

HOW TO DECIPHER  
AND  
STUDY OLD DOCUMENTS

*BEING A GUIDE TO THE READING OF  
ANCIENT MANUSCRIPTS*

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*WITH AN INTRODUCTION*  
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## INTRODUCTION.

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**B**OOKS written to teach any branch of human knowledge are, in most cases, written by persons who have long known and used the knowledge which they impart, and, perhaps for that reason, have more or less forgotten the steps of the ladder up which they have climbed ; but in this case the process has been so recent that the difficulties and dangers of each step have been remembered, and the reader accordingly warned against them.

The meaning of the various kinds of documents which are likely to be found among the title-deeds of an estate, or among the archives of a parish or a corporation, are described without needless technicalities, in a practical way, which will appeal to those who begin to work among such material without previous knowledge.

The first step, of course, is to learn to read.

This wants perseverance and a quick eye, but regular practice will soon enable the student to read any ordinary documents, which at first seemed utterly unintelligible, and gradually the power of understanding really difficult and obscure MSS. will be acquired. But this first step must be thoroughly mastered, for to attempt to get information from old writings without thoroughly knowing the forms of the letters, and the different systems of abbreviations and contractions, would be like trying to keep accounts without knowing how to add up a column of figures.

And indeed paleography is the foundation of all history. There may be historians, like the late Mr. Freeman, who have but little knowledge of the science (he, I believe, boasted of his inability to read a manuscript), but then such writers rely on the paleographic knowledge of others, who have edited the manuscripts which they desire to use, and they have, or ought to have, sufficient scholarship to judge which are the best editions, and even occasionally to detect editors' mistakes.

But an acquaintance with this branch of knowledge is often of the greatest use to biographers and historians. It is much better, for instance, to be able to judge whether a certain document is of the age which it professes, or in whose hand

a draft of a treaty is, than to have to accept the opinion of someone else.

The mistakes made through want of this knowledge are common, and sometimes very amusing. Familiar enough is the old story of the parish priest in the time of King Henry VIII., who in the canon of the Mass, in the prayer after taking the wine, read the word '*sumpsimus*' as *mumpsimus*, because he had a thirteenth-century missal in which *s* and *m* are much alike, and refused to alter his mistake when it was pointed out to him. It was referred to by King Henry VIII. in his speech to the Parliament in 1545, and, in fact, this ignorant priest has 'made himself an everlasting name' for conservative stupidity.

In more recent times, the historian of one of our beautiful north-country abbeys talks of a gift of a silver chest by the founder in the eleventh century. The reader wonders what this chest could have been—was it a native work or imported? was it some ecclesiastical ornament or merely a strong box? But on turning to the document on which the account is based, the meaning is clear. It was not a chest of silver, but an ordinary coin known as a mark of silver. The MS. reads *unāmarcāargenti*. The writer of the book had not noticed the contraction over the first *a*, divided the words wrongly, and read it *unam arcam*, instead of *unam marcā*.

In another similar book the story is narrated of the ill-treatment by a forester of an abbot whose house was near a royal forest. The abbot was no doubt like the monk who made the celebrated pilgrimage to Canterbury—

‘ An outrydere that lovede venerye.

\* \* \* \* \*

He yaf nat of that text a pulled hen  
That seith that hunters been nat holy men.’

And perhaps the forester had good reason to complain of him. But in the account of the quarrel, the forester is said to have gone into the abbot's kitchen and taken away his cabbages—not very likely things for a forester to take, as he probably would have found something far better worth carrying off. However, on looking at the MS. it appears almost certain that what was read as *chous* is really *chens*, that is, *chiens*. In fact, they were the

‘ Grehoundes he hadde as swifte as fowel in flight,  
For priking and for hunting for the hare,’

who were perhaps lying before the fire asleep after a long afternoon's coursing.

In the same case it is said that the forester's treatment of the tenants on one of the abbey farms is so bad that no one dare die there ; it is suggested, because the forester would not allow anyone to come to administer the last consolations of religion. But the words *de murir*, on which the



observation is based, are merely a careless scribe's writing of *demeurer*.

In another book farmers are represented as using stones for fuel, which are suggested to have been coal; but this results from mis-reading *petarum* (peat), as if it were *pet<sup>a</sup>rum*, a contracted form of *petrarum* (stones).

The spreading desire to know something of paleography is very remarkable, and is much to be commended. For all persons who interest themselves in the documents to which they may have access in the possession of private persons, or in repositories not generally known, are helping in the grand work of making clear the laws and customs and mode of living of our ancestors, and thus constantly come across information, not to be found in our more public collections of records, which often throws light on many dark passages of history.

C. T. MARTIN.





## CHAPTER XII.

### ABBREVIATIONS, ETC.

**I**N most books treating of ancient handwriting, the abbreviations and contractions are put forward as the most important part ; certainly it is necessary to study them carefully, but it was never intended by the old scribes that they should be regarded as a language in themselves. At first they were used to save time and space, then, by degrees, they increased in multiplicity as well as complexity, till banished altogether by the invention of printing, upon the advance of which the professional scribe disappeared.

The contracted words most frequently used are not always necessary to the sense of the sentence, which may be arrived at without them. It is a waste of time to puzzle over a word after its meaning has been arrived at. Many persons who require MS. extracts from public offices take rough notes with the letters of the contracted word ; these

can be extended afterwards at home, when there is time to seek in dictionaries for the abbreviation or its meaning ; with practice the opening words of a sentence will very often supply the context. The oldest forms of contraction are a straight line over a word or a curve ; these indicate that a portion of the word only is present, but no clue is given as to the letters left out, or else the straight line may mean *m* or *n*.

Later on the straight line above a word came to represent the letters *m* and *n*. In words where these letters were duplicated the second one was omitted and the line placed above to indicate its absence. This continued in use until late in the eighteenth century. *Coṃon* meant 'common,' and *coṃendation* 'commendation.' If a curved line was over the end syllable of a word, it meant one or more letters omitted at the end of a word.

Verbs are the most troublesome class of contracted words, for a contraction over a verb may mean any syllable, according to the proper grammatical conjugation. Here it is that knowledge of the Latin grammar is a necessity. The meaning of the sentences may often be deciphered without extending the words, and the correct conjugation of the verbs can be added afterwards by another person, if the student's knowledge of Latin is too limited to accomplish this with accuracy. Certain signs or contractions are fairly constant in their

meanings, always taking the place of special syllables. Thus a bold apostrophe above the line will be found to indicate 'er,' 'ir,' 'or,' 're.'

—=ur.

3=et, us. In Domesday 'et' is written 7.

ꝛ=ram, ras, ris.

ℓ=is.

º=us, ous, os.

A small letter over a word shows that a syllable is left out of which this letter formed part.

The letter 'p' had a system of its own, frequently used in old deeds and also in old letters:

p=per, par, por.

ṑ=pre.

ṑ=pro.

In old court rolls 'and' is written '˜t,' and 'est' appears as '÷,' especially in court-hand law deeds.

A line drawn through the head of the letter 't' means also the addition of other letters, as *is, e*, etc. This contraction in names is apt to be confused with double 'tt.'

It is said that our alphabet did not formerly contain as many letters as at present. The letters 'i' and 'j' were identical until a recent period. 'W' is said to have been derived from two 'u's,' and is always so written in old deeds, joined together, while 'u' and 'v' were used indiscriminately. In old manuscripts the short-

stroke letters were formed alike; thus 'n,' 'u,' 'w,' 'i,' are merely strokes or minims, difficult to distinguish, more particularly where any of these letters occur side by side in the formation of words; to count the strokes is the only guide. Practice and a knowledge of likely words to be employed solve the knotty point.

The chief difficulty of all lies in the correct rendering of names, for these have perpetually changed in their spelling. In a single deed several different forms may be observed, the result of clerical copying. Even with names the system of abbreviation was carried on, especially among court rolls; this will be noticed in such surnames as 'Couper' written 'Coup,' 'Shepherd' as 'Shep.'

In certain styles of mediæval writing the terminals of words are carried upwards with a long sweep, and are confusing in their resemblance to abbreviation marks. Here, again, practice alone accustoms the eye to decide whether a word is complete or not.

Dots and other kinds of stops in writing have only come gradually into use in their present significance, and the use of these is now less observed than early in the last century.

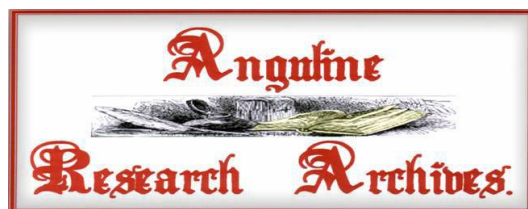
In the Anglo-Saxon manuscripts, as in Roman inscriptions, the dot is freely used to denote contractions as well as to divide the words from each other. In Domesday this is also noticed; but

with later manuscripts the dot, or point, such as is used in Norman times, fell into disuse in favour of lines or curves for the abbreviated syllables. Upon the introduction of printing our various kinds of stops are first observed. It is said that the Elzevirs invented some of them. The reversed semicolon is commonly observed in some manuscripts.

Sooner or later, in any antiquarian search, the printed sources of information will be exhausted, and are not unfrequently found to be untrustworthy, especially existing county histories, which, being compiled by men unacquainted with every minor detail of the locality, are naturally liable to confuse places of similar names. Nor is it possible in so large a subject as a county history to enter minutely into the separate parish histories of places and people. Thus after awhile the untrustworthiness and insufficiency of book-knowledge will be discovered, and some more original source of information become desired. Manuscripts exist in plenty, but are of little value unless studied personally; for professional readers, although able to read quickly and correctly, only give the information desired; whereas in a personal search one subject opens out fresh clues to others of equal importance, and new light is continually being thrown upon hitherto unnoticed points; moreover, only by a personal investigation can the antiquary be certain that he has obtained *exactly* what he

required. There are now plenty of opportunities open to the public of seeing the old documents pertaining to various offices and societies, besides private collections, but without some previous knowledge of the old handwritings, etc., this permission is practically valueless. Therefore, 'Persevere and practise' is the best motto I can give to those interested in the matter, for proficiency comes quickly to those who seek it; and, as in all subjects, 'Nothing succeeds like success.'





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