



How To Undertake Palaeography

Why study palaeography?

Palaeography is the study of old handwriting. It is an essential skill for historians and can be particularly useful if you are keen to 'de-code' old documents relating to your village.

Being able to decipher an inventory or will, for example, will give you a huge insight into a person's wealth, how certain buildings may have looked, along with how land was divided and used. Transcribing documents acts as a key to understanding an otherwise unrecorded part of village life.

When first looking at a document it can appear to be written in a foreign language. Scribes often used many abbreviations, usually so as to write more quickly and sometimes to save space, making it even harder to interpret them. There are plenty of online resources to help you get to grips with transcribing and it really is the case of practise makes perfect.

What is needed:

An enquiry to the Lincolnshire Archives will help you find out what manuscripts are available for your village, some of which may have already been transcribed.

If you are new to the Archives it is advisable to make an appointment when you visit so that a member of staff can help you get settled in. The team are extremely helpful and also offer introductory sessions for groups, if booked in advance, they can be contacted on 01522 782040.

The Archives may allow you to photograph a document which will allow you to work on it in the comfort of your own home. Please be aware that there are costs attached to this and copyright restrictions will apply.

Method:

Further on in this guide you will see a list of websites, some of which offer free courses to get you started with your palaeography studies. We have listed a few points below which will help when transcribing.

Knowledge of individual letter-forms, ligatures, punctuation, and abbreviations enables you to read and understand the text. It sometimes helps to create a bit of a code. Make a note of the letters which you can understand, this will help you begin to spell out many of the words in the document.

Understanding your document and familiarising yourself with the language in the document will help you to decipher common words and phrases, which will help you 'get your eye in' and begin to spot certain writing features. Some documents are written in Latin, so it is advisable to start with a basic level and work up.

Knowledge of writing materials can also help you identify the periods in which a document or manuscript may have been produced. By assigning a date and a place of origin you will get a better idea of what style and formation of handwriting has been used in it. It is important to take into account that many words will have been written phonetically and will not look like the words we use today.

Secretary Hand will be one type of script you are likely to come across. It was used in Britain's Courts and parishes from 1500-1750, after which it was slowly replaced by Italic Hand, or a hand similar to the handwriting we use today. Secretary Hand was a flowing, looping handwriting that was used to allow scribes to quickly copy documents.





While Secretary Hand was commonly used all over England during this time, individual scribes wrote differently due to their geographic location and time spent on a document. Scribes often used abbreviations. There are certain patterns to the abbreviations used which are covered in many of the training links provided below.

Aim to create a transcription and translation, it is usually necessary to provide a glossary and footnotes to go alongside this. This will allow your work to be shared and understood by others.

It is important to take a consistent approach, especially if you are working in a group or in order for your transcription to be made public. The links below have different suggestions for you to follow so it is advisable to create a set of guidelines for you and your group to work to, enabling your research to have consistency.

Where to find out more:

Lincolnshire Archives

<http://www.lincolnshire.gov.uk/residents/archives/>

National Archives

<http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/palaeography>

Institute of Historical Research

<http://www.history.ac.uk/research-training/courses/online-palaeography>

Medieval Writing

<http://www.medievalwriting.50megs.com/writing.htm>

