

1 Hour Basic Tutorial: Introduction

The handwriting in manuscript documents and volumes written in Scotland between 1500 and 1750 is usually a mixture of formally taught handwriting styles. One such form Italic, is, by and large, fairly easy to read, since its letter forms are very similar to modern letters. However, in the sixteenth century a form of handwriting was developed, which became known as Secretary Hand, and this was an administrative/business 'shorthand' used throughout western Europe. Some Secretary Hand letters are characteristically different from the modern equivalents and must be memorised.

This tutorial introduces the novice palaeographer to commonly occurring Secretary Hand letters.

Step 1. What Secretary Hand looks like

Step 2. Key letters: the Secretary Hand *e* and *s*

Step 3. Other commonly-occurring Secretary Hand letters: *a*, *b*, *c*, *d*, *h*, *r* and *t*

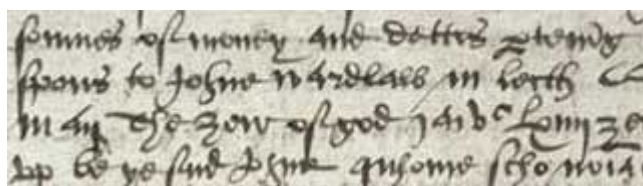
Step 4. Phonetic spelling and Scots words

Step 5. 'Sic braw secretarie hand'

Step 6. Short test in identifying Secretary Hand letters

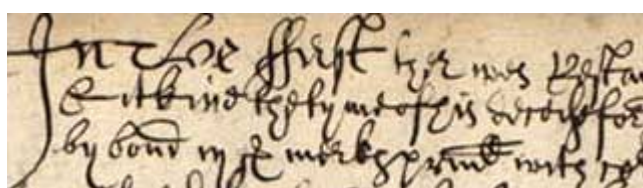
Step 1: What Secretary Hand looks like

Look at the example below. It is from a testament of 1564.



The writing looks odd because many of the letters are in their Secretary Hand forms (e.g. *a*, *b*, *c*, *d*, *e*, *g*, *h*, *k*, *r*, *s*, and *t*). Other problems are Latin numerals, archaic letters (the yogh and the thorn), Scots vernacular words, phonetic spelling, abbreviations, and interchangeable letters (at this time the letters *u*, *v* and *w* were variations of the same letter, as were the letters *i* and *j*). Do not spend time reading the example. Go on to the second example and then to the rest of the tutorial.

Now look at the second example. It is from a testament of 1722.



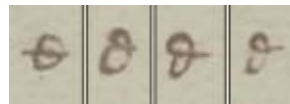
Some letters are recognisably Secretary Hand, but the writing is not as neat as the previous example. Many letters are cursive (either untidy versions of Secretary Hand, Italic, and other writing styles, or forms of the writer's own invention). Other problems include elaborate letters which interfere with other letters or make several words look like one continuous word. Do not spend time reading the example. Go on to the rest of the tutorial.

Step 2: Key letters: the Secretary Hand *e* and *s*

If you can develop the ability to read two particular Secretary Hand letters, the *e* and the *s*, without thinking, you will have taken a huge step in Early Modern Scottish palaeography. This is because the letters *e* and *s* are the most frequently used vowel and consonant, respectively, in English and Scots.

Secretary Hand *e* looks a bit like the Greek letter theta: θ . Once the brain of a palaeographer begins to recognize the Secretary Hand *e*, without having to stop and think, or $r\theta f\theta r$ to a $k\theta y$, his or $h\theta r$ $r\theta ading$ $sp\theta\theta d$ $incr\theta as\theta s$ $mark\theta dly$, if only $b\theta caus\theta$, the $l\theta tt\theta r$ θ is $th\theta$ most commonly us θd vowel in Scots docum θnts .

Here are some examples of Secretary Hand *e* from 17th century Scottish documents.



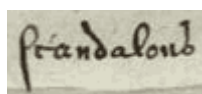
The letter *s* in Secretary Hand comes in two forms: the *long s*, which descends below the line:



and the *short s*:



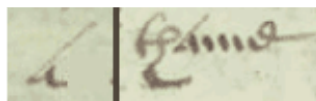
There was a tendency to use the *long s* when starting words, and the *short s* when finishing words: as in the word *scandalous* below.



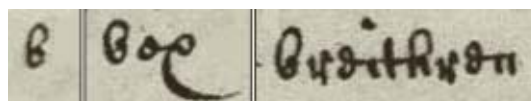
Step 3: Other commonly occurring Secretary Hand letters

Several Secretary Hand letters are very different from their modern equivalents. The letter *k* can fox even experienced palaeographers. The letters *x*, *y* and *z* can be easily confused, especially with the archaic letters *thorn* and *yogh*. There are separate pages about these letter in the coaching manual: www.scottishhandwriting.com/coachingManual.asp. However, for the novice palaeographer there are a few more letters which occur quite frequently and must be learned.

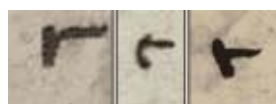
The Secretary Hand *a* is not dissimilar to the modern (written, as opposed to printed) *a*. In its most definitive form it has a diagonal stroke leading from bottom left to top right. This is sometimes referred to as an attacking stroke. It appears below on its own and in the word *thame*:



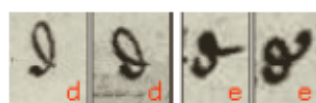
The Secretary Hand letter *b* was similar to the modern *b*, but nearer to a modern capital *B*, as you can see below.



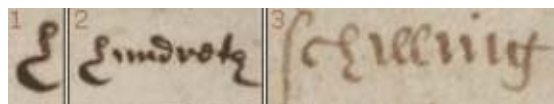
The Secretary Hand *c* in its most basic form looks like two sides of a square or the modern letter *r*, but more often the vertical stroke is curved or diagonal:



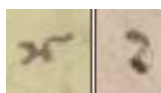
The Secretary Hand letter *d* is not unlike the modern form, but note how similar it is to the Secretary Hand *e*:



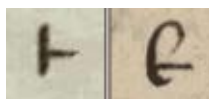
The secretary hand *h* looks like a butcher's hook and descends below the line. In the following examples, number 1 shows a classic secretary hand *h*, number 2 shows the word *hundreth*, but note how the *h* at the end of the word is much less well-formed, and number 3 shows another ligature in the word *schilling*, where, again, the *h* is not so well formed.



Two forms of the letter *r* should be expected. The first (a *curly r*) is formed by three strokes of the pen. The second (a *descending r*) is formed by three descending diagonal strokes of the pen.



The Secretary Hand *t* is very similar to the Secretary Hand *c*. In its most basic form it consists of a vertical stroke and a horizontal stroke, but there is a tendency for the top of vertical stroke to curl to the right, although not always as elaborately as in the second example below:



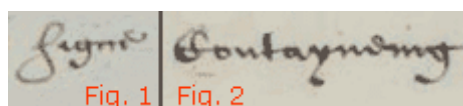
Step 4: Phonetic spelling

Bear in mind when reading Scottish documents that what we think of as standard, 'correct' spelling of words was, to a great extent, an eighteenth century invention. Therefore, when reading historical documents prior to 1850 do not expect consistency in spelling.

Many words were written phonetically, and this is particularly true of personal names and place names. This explains why names of people and places are spelt in a variety of ways, sometimes in the same document. It is a common anachronism to say that 'spelling was bad' in such and such a time.

This also means that, while there is room for intuition in reading old handwriting, you should always check the word you think you have seen, and make sure of the spelling. It may be a familiar word spelt slightly differently, or it may be a different word spelt in a way that makes it look like another, more familiar, word.

The word in figure 1 has often been misread in palaeography classes. Students reading too quickly and relying too much on intuition have sometimes misread it as *figure*. Only by looking more carefully do they realise that then word begins with a *long s* and is actually the word *signe*. Perfectly straightforward words can confuse readers because they are written in a way which appears odd. The word in figure 2 is *Contayneing*.



Some people who read sixteenth and seventeenth century documents on a regular basis, sometimes find that their own spelling deteriorates as a result, perhaps because they successfully suppress the part of the brain which identifies what to the modern eye are misspellings.

Soe, if you want to improove your abilitie to rede handrittin documents, gett yoused to seaing wurds rittin foaneticallie.

Step 5: 'sic braw secretarie hand'

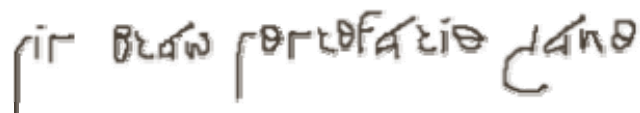
The lowercase Secretary Hand letters which give most trouble to beginners are the letters *a, b, c, d, e, h, r, s, t* and *w*.



Note that these will not be the only forms of the letters you will come across, but these forms are amongst the most common.

Reading old documents is like playing golf. The palaeographical equivalent of teeing-up and addressing the ball is to pause before plunging into the document and prepare yourself for what is in store. This short routine will increase your reading speed by reminding you of the most common differences between Secretary Hand letters and modern letters, and reminding you to expect Scots words and phonetic spelling.

Before you start reading any document with Secretary Hand, mentally rehearse the phrase *sic braw secretarie hand*, which means *such nice secretary hand*. This primes you to look out for Scots words like *sic* and *braw*, phonetic spelling like *secretarie* and the common Secretary Hand letters.



Practice writing this phrase (*sic braw secretarie hand*) on some scrap paper. Don't worry about being neat - you will come across very sloppy handwriting in original Scottish documents in due course, so you may as well get used to seeing badly formed Secretary Hand letters now! When you have written the phrase half a dozen times continue to the final page of the tutorial.

Step 6: Short test in identifying Secretary Hand letters

Test yourself by identifying the following letters. The answers are given at the foot of the page



Top row left to right: c, h, b, short s, d

Bottom row left to right: e, long s, a, r, t