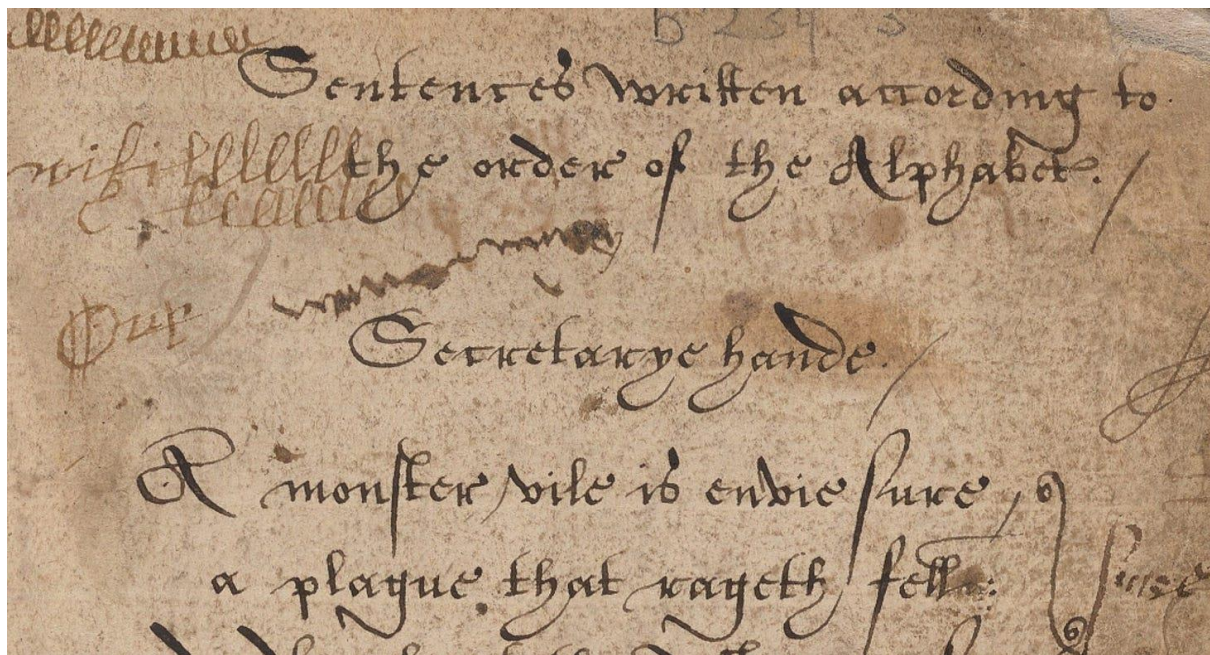


Secretary Hand

Joe Saunders

Secretary Hand was used in western Europe in English, German, Welsh, and Gaelic documents from around 1500 to 1700. It was a flowing handwriting that enabled scribes to efficiently write and copy documents. Secretary Hand is found in all kinds of records from this era of British history such as probate material. It also filtered through to other sources of the period, such as letters and parish registers.



William Hill, Commonplace Book. James Marshall and Marie-Louise Osborn Collection, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University. [Osborn b234](#). Early 17th century.

Secretary was the last form of cursive gothic script, developing from the Book and Court Hands of the medieval period. It was adopted for business, church, government, and personal use. From the seventeenth century handwriting began to follow the humanist italic hand, the forbear of the handwriting commonly used today. Modern historians are therefore familiar with italic forms, while Secretary lettering is unfamiliar and is daunting to the unexperienced eye.

It is necessary to learn a whole new way of thinking about letters to read Secretary Hand. Take the document letter by letter, not word by word. If anything, it is more like deciphering a puzzle than reading. Prepare and take time learning letters and abbreviations with the help of an alphabet guide (such as [English Secretary Hand Alphabet Examples](#)) found in books or online. Have this to hand when you begin reading. Although this was a

standardised hand you have to familiarise yourself with every new scribe. Moving through each new document use other letters within it as your go-to alphabet reference.

As with all historical records reading and understanding Secretary Hand documents is greatly enhanced with an appreciation of the context of their creation. Most of these documents were written by scribes in a formal setting. The writing was therefore meant to be easily recognisable and interchangeable from one scribe to another. They were usually formulaic texts so there will be lots of standard terms and phrases. Therefore, once you've learnt Secretary letters and the format of the document you will be able to work your way through with increasing confidence. While names of people, places and things can be difficult they are often repeated elsewhere in the document to compare with. There was change in style over time to bear in mind, and of course the usual provisos are also applicable, that handwriting can be rushed, the pages damaged or poorly digitised. A break and a fresh pair of eyes can be invaluable in deciphering seemingly impossible words or phrases.

Secretary Hand requires practice but can be learnt methodically with time and patience. Once you have it you have it forever. And of course, you improve with experience.

Remember,
Secretary Hand is
Fun

'Remember, Secretary Hand is Fun' typed in the Joscelyn Script Font.

In 2020 'Joscelyn', a Secretary Hand font was released. It is based on the hand of a scribe who reproduced John Joscelyns's *Historiola* into the MS Corpus Christi Cambridge 488. Joscelyn was secretary to Mathew Parker, a sixteenth century Archbishop of Canterbury. He

contributed to Parker's written works, was amongst the first Englishmen to recover the ability to read Old English (of which he compiled a dictionary) as well as writing the *Historiola*, a short history of Corpus Christi College. Download the font and use it to practice with, typing things and then switching them to Secretary Hand. [Joscelyn Script Font](#)
[› Fontesk](#)

References and resources:

There are many online tutorials to take in your own time. Some excellent ones are:

[Quarantine Reading: Learn to Read Secretary Hand | Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library](#)

[The National Archives | Palaeography tutorial](#)

[Alphabet Abbreviations | \(folger.edu\)](#)

[1 Hour Basic Tutorial \(scottishhandwriting.com\)](#)

Books:

Alf Ison, *A Secretary Hand ABC Book* (1982)

W. S. B. Buck, *Examples of Handwriting, 1550-1650* (1982)

Mark Forrest, *Reading Early Handwriting 1500-1700* (2019)

Bruce Durie, *Understanding Documents for Genealogy & Local History* (2013)