

How to decipher unfamiliar handwriting

A short introduction to palaeography

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Introduction

What is palaeography?

Literally, palaeography means 'old writing', from the Greek words 'paleos' = old, and 'grapho' = write.

It is generally used nowadays to describe reading old handwriting, rather than its original meaning of interpretation of ancient scripts.

We are now so used to reading print that it is becoming increasingly rare to have to read – or write – handwritten documents. Palaeography is not so much learning a new language or alphabet, but learning to read script again.

If you want to practice any of the techniques in this guide, there are examples beginning on page 12 for you to work through.

How do we read?

The huamn mnid deos not raed ervey lteter by istlef, but the word as a wlohe. The oredr of the ltteers in the word can be in a toatl mses but you can still raed it wouthit any porbelm.

We expect to recognise words and letter shapes but this doesn't happen with unfamiliar handwriting. Effectively, we need to revive the methods we used when we first learnt to read: looking at the individual letters separately and breaking the words down into their most basic form. Usually very few letters are completely unrecognisable or indecipherable from the context.

Spelling

Spelling was not standardised until the 18th century, when education became more widespread, although even after this point there was still some variety in how certain words were spelt. Spelling of names and places can vary greatly, sometimes in the same document. Often phonetic spellings were used; if a word looks totally unfamiliar, try reading the text out loud, e.g. *belhaus* = bellows. However, this becomes less of an issue over the course of the 19th and 20th centuries. There are also local differences in the use of language, and the meaning of words has changed over time.

Handwriting

Styles of handwriting have been influenced by the challenges of writing with pen and ink. The way the shape of the letters flow results from the shape of the quill or nib. The downstrokes were usually heavy, with the upstrokes lighter as the pen pushed against the paper, rather than scratched into it.

Cursive or 'joined-up' writing (usually sloping) had the advantage of speed, with the pen lifting from the paper less often, which also helped to avoid ink smudges. After the 1870 Education Act, more people learnt to write and a wider variety of styles were used, and so the regularity of handwriting was lost (unfortunately, making palaeography more tricky).

The type of paper used can also affect handwriting. Many letters used to be written on laid paper, which was marked with parallel lines or water marks. Parallel wires in the paper mould could make the ribbing quite prominent, which can make the formation of letters uneven.

Techniques

Palaeography is not a theory. It is a skill which, like swimming or cycling, may seem impossibly difficult to begin with, but will improve with practice. It is really just a case of “getting your eye in”.

A series of techniques can be applied which will help with any difficult-to-read handwriting, whatever its age.

Before you start

- Consider the physical factors which will help to improve performance - **proper light** is essential.
- An **ultra-violet lamp** can be tried for faint ink. A magnifying glass can also be of assistance, particularly if you are using original records.
- If no damage will be caused to the document, try **photocopying** or scanning it. Take a high quality image so you can enlarge the text. Copying in **colour** can be useful, although yellowed pages can be easier to read in black and white.
- **Gather information** about the document if you can - it will be a lot easier if you know what the document is supposed to say. Early documents usually followed set patterns, with very regular types of handwriting, which makes them easier to understand. By the 19th century, these structures were no longer being strictly followed, but it may still help if you know the context.
- Have help at hand: know where to find help in the form of dictionaries, glossaries, wordlists, and so on. Use the **internet** as a research tool to check facts, possible place names, etc.

While you're reading

- Try to identify **individual** letters:
 - Compare them with similar-looking letters on words you have already deciphered.
 - Look at the adjacent letters, considering which letters are likely to sit together. For example **-act** would be more likely than **-acx**.
- Remember that with **practice** letter-forms become familiar, and you will begin to recognise whole words as you work through the document.
- When faced with a difficult or unfamiliar style, look through the document for a passage you can read (more) confidently – you don't have to start at the beginning. Use this as a '**key**' to decipher the rest of the document, and to test your guesses for plausibility by comparison.
- If you get stuck on a word, leave it: **move on** and then return when you've got more of the sense of meaning, or can compare letters further on in the text. Maybe even come back to it another day – sometimes after a break it's immediately obvious.
- Text which doesn't make sense should be **doubted**, even if you think you've read it correctly. Be guided by the sense required in the context.
- Use other **transcriptions**, if available, for comparison.

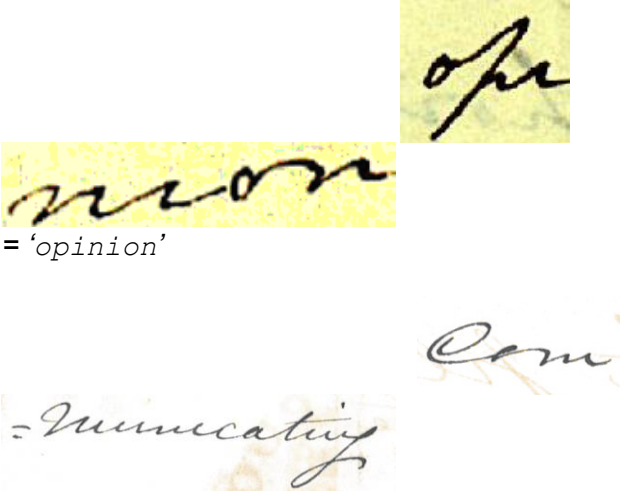
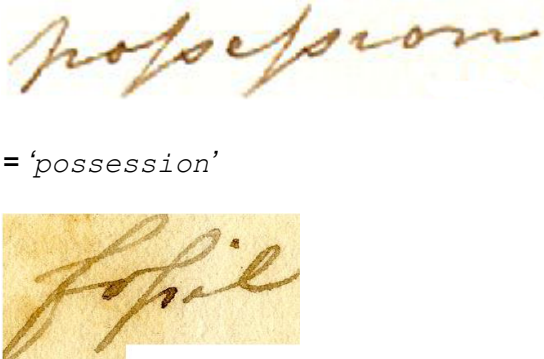

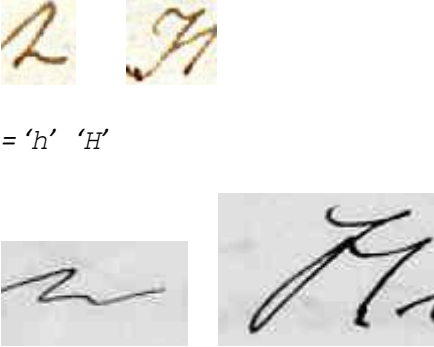
- Draw up your own **help checklist** to refer to: oddly shaped letters, unusual abbreviations and other idiosyncrasies of various writers.
- If you're spending a long time reading old handwriting, try to take a short **break** every hour or so. Focus on objects in the distance to exercise the eyes and save you from headaches and eyestrain.
- If you're trying to decipher a specimen label which has very little text, but you know who wrote it, contact the Archives to see if there are any letters from the same person against which you could **compare** the writing.
- If the writing is on very thin paper, insert a piece of **plain paper** underneath it

If you're transcribing

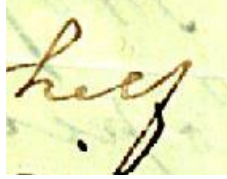
- Copy the text with the original spellings.
- If you expand an abbreviated word, write the added letters out in square brackets, e.g. p[er]son.
- Following the lines and layout of the original document often makes for easier reading and comparison.
- **Translation** is when words are changed into modern spelling - you might wish to do this alongside the transcription if you are presenting to a wider audience.

Things to watch out for

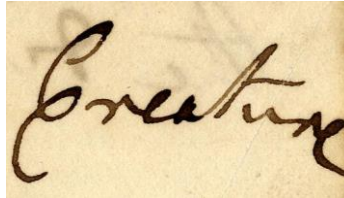
Letters

Description	Example
<p>Often when a word will not fit onto a line, it will be split onto two lines – sometimes without hyphenating the two bits of the word, or using ‘=’ on the second line.</p>	 <p>= 'opinion'</p> <p>= 'communicating'</p>
<p>The long s, resembling an f, is usually the first used in a double s word, e.g. <i>kindnefs</i>, <i>fifulnefs</i>. To avoid getting the long s and f mixed up, the f will have a cross stroke, even if it's hardly noticeable. The context will make it clear whether it is a long s or an f. Writers would often use both long and short s, sometimes even in the same word. The long s was still used in the 19th century.</p>	 <p>= 'possession'</p> <p>= 'fossil'</p>
<p>With more formal language, there might also be an unusual use of capital letters, often emphasizing important words.</p>	 <p>= 'Town'</p>
<p>There can be a large difference in the shape between lower case and capital letters.</p>	 <p>= 'h' 'H'</p> <p>= 'n' 'N'</p>

Changed letter shapes, e.g. the letter **h** was sometimes written with the stick above the line of text and the arch curving below: **h**, the letter **p** (particularly on the end of words), could often look like an **f**, the letter **c** could look like a capital **E** with its elongated tail.



= 'help'



= 'Creature'

Spelling was still not absolutely standardised in the mid 19th century, although increasingly so thereafter. The addition of an extra e or s at the end of a word or name is common.

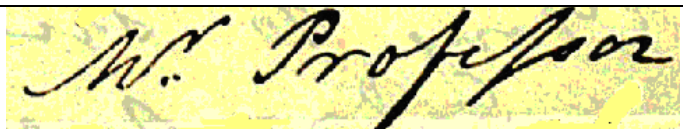


= 'sliped' (i.e. slipped)



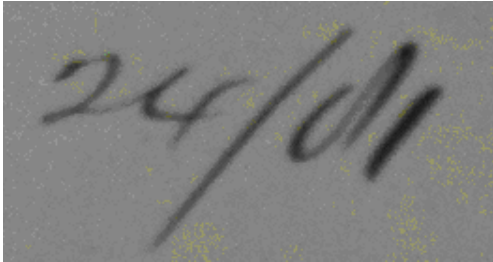
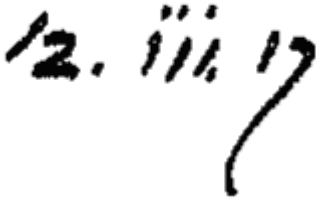
= 'Rheenoceres' (i.e. rhinoceros)

Occasionally **two titles** are used.

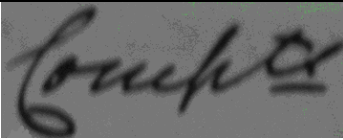
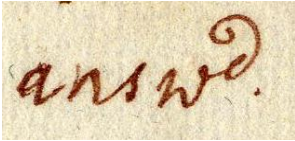
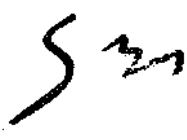



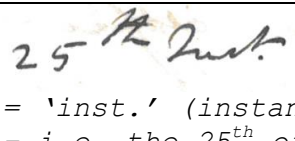
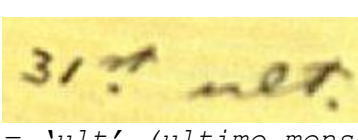


= 'Mr Professor'

Numbers

Description	Example
<p>Numbers also changed shape, e.g. 8, often when used in dates, could be an old-fashioned form where the top loop was to the right of the lower loop, making it tilt over. Several professions also wrote numbers differently, e.g. architects wrote 8 as two separate circles, one above the other, but not joining.</p>	 <p>= '24/81'</p>
<p>Roman numerals were frequently used. These were sometimes written in lower case, with a j at the end of the number, e.g. MDCCLXXXij. (See Appendix 1).</p>	 <p>= '12.iii [March].17'</p>

Abbreviations

Description	Example
<p>The most common form of abbreviation was contracting a word by missing out letters from the middle, e.g. 'Wm' stood for 'William'. Sometimes a horizontal dash, or other mark, would be made over or under the missing letters to highlight the omission.</p> <p>Alternatively, letters may be omitted from the end of words, e.g. <i>yest.</i> for yesterday. Sometimes a full stop would be placed at the end of the word, as is conventional now, to signify the suspension of the word. (See Appendix 2)</p>	 <p>= 'comp[]liment[s]'</p>  <p>= 'answ[]d'</p>  <p>= 'Y[]rs'</p>  <p>= 'D[]ttlo'</p>
<p>Special signs might be used to signify a word, e.g. the ampersand (& or a personal variation) for 'and'. It was used with the letter c, &c, for 'et cetera'. These were still being used in the 20th century.</p>	 <p>= & (personal variations)</p>  <p>= '&ccc' (i.e. etc)</p>
<p>Latin abbreviations were often used. (See Appendix 3).</p>	 <p>= 'inst.' (instante mense, this month - i.e. the 25th of this month)</p>  <p>= 'ult' (ultimo mense, last month - i.e. the 31st of last month)</p>

L, s, d is an abbreviation meaning pounds, shillings and pence (originally Latin for *librae*, *solidi* and *denarii*).

Before 1971, money was counted in pounds, shillings and pence, with 12 pence in one shilling, 20 shillings in one pound, 240 pence in a pound. (See Appendix 4).

By the 19th century, 'l' was generally represented by '£', but 's' and 'd' continued to be used.

The image shows the handwritten abbreviation '11d' in black ink on a yellow rectangular background. The '11' consists of two vertical strokes, and the 'd' is a simple cursive letter.

= 11 (old) pence

Other things to bear in mind:

- **Punctuation** was often erratic, sometimes even non-existent.
- Abbreviations may have changed over time.
- The letters **u** and **v** were sometimes interchangeable, as were **i** and **j** (e.g. 'James' spelt 'Iames', or 'justice' spelt 'iustice')
- Sometimes **y** and **i** were both used e.g. 'being' spelt 'beying' .
- @ was sometimes used for 'per', to represent 'for', e.g. '@1b' meant 'for one pound'.

Cross writing

A decent photocopy is extremely useful when trying to decipher **cross written** documents. Cross writing was used for various reasons:

- as a technique to save writing paper when paper was scarce or expensive
- as a method to save weight when travelling or simply to get full value for the postage
- or even to add some privacy to personal correspondence, because it took extra effort to read.

The writer, upon reaching the end of the page, would turn the paper ninety degrees and add a second layer of text. You should read it first the way you would normally read the letter, focusing only on the lines **across** the page.

Then **turn the page** to read the cross writing, ignoring the first lines. Thin paper may mean that you may also have the challenge of the crossed lines of writing from the other side also visible.

Sometimes letters were even **re-crossed**, where after writing the first to fourth pages in crossed style, the writer went back to turn the page forty-five degrees and cross write over it again; thus fitting **six** pages of writing onto **one** sheet of paper.

It looks impossible at first glance, but once you get the knack of blocking out the different lines, the mind does adapt, and cross written letters are surprisingly legible.

See page 16 for an example.

Useful websites

www.scottishhandwriting.com/cmBef.asp

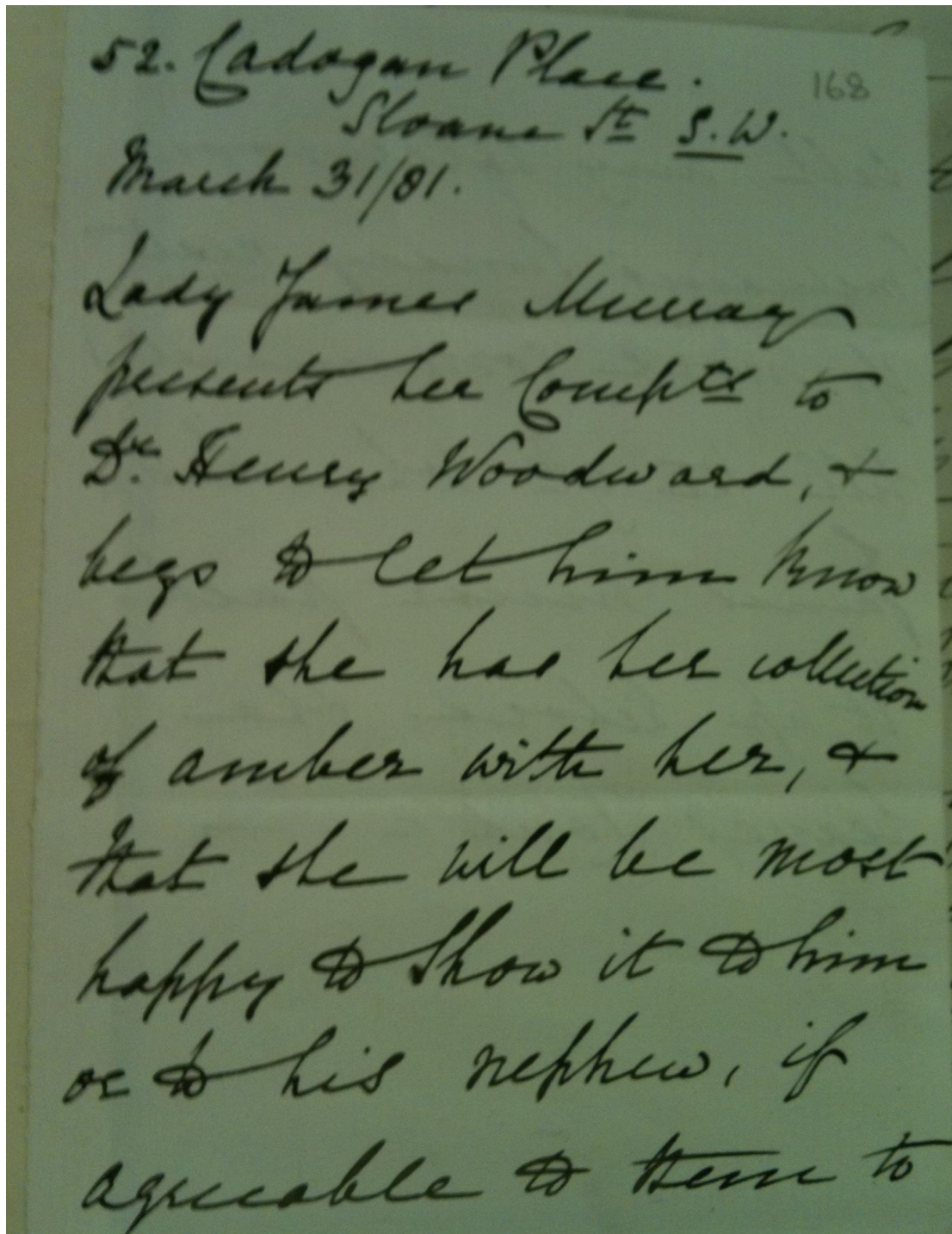
www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/palaeography

Practice Documents

Ultimately the key to palaeography is practice. If possible, practise with documents that have already been transcribed, allowing you to compare your interpretation.

The following examples are of 19th and 20th Century handwriting, which you can use to try out the techniques covered in this guide. Transcriptions are provided on page 17.

DF100/17/168



52. Ladogan Place. 168
Sloane St. S.W.
March 31/81.
Lady James Murray
presents her Compl^{ts} to
Dr. Henry Woodward, &
begs to let him know
that she has her collection
of amber with her, &
that she will be most
happy to show it to him
or to his nephew, if
agreeable to them to

DF100/17/169

167

A private collection
for hire or sale
118 Sans domine Terrace
M. Trudon Fulfill
Machinery
can be viewed by
private appointment
by addressing Messrs
Phillips & Co. Ltd.
Chancery, Bevis Marks
Street, London E.C. 4
etc. Louis, Albany

BRITISH MUSEUM
P. NO. 1636
APR 1881

Guiney Bay Oct. 5th 1883

Dear Dr. Woodward

441

I have been so poorly I could not sooner answer your favor of the 31st Mr. So far from thinking of the inspection delay'd, I did not expect to hear so soon from you. I am too poorly still, & too much in need of pecuniary aid, to do other than accept your offer. I hope at the same time, you will not think me ungrateful, if I feel somewhat disappointed. From the length of time, & great labour that has attended the acquisition of these fossils, I have perhaps attached an undue value to them.

But I think you will hardly imagine that the sum you mention will not pay me at

Tophet Shop

DF 100/1/2

Sydney August Down
Sept 2^d 1821

Sir

I hope you will not be offended, by my
addressing you on the subject of a Tophet which
had the honour of, sending up to the British
Museum at the desire of Mr Buckland, for
the sum of fifty Pounds, which I hope you
have received safe, I am very sorry to hear
that the fossil is considered dear, the same
sum was offered for it before. Mr Buckland
saw it. I shall be very happy to make a
difference in the price of any other fossil
that I may find hereafter and which may be
thought good enough to be purchased by the
British Museum. As I am a widows woman
and my chief dependence for supporting my family
being by the sale of Tophets I hope you will not be
offended, by my wishing to receive the money
for the last Tophet as I assure you its not so much
in need of it. I am Sir with the greatest respects
Your obedient humble Servant Mary Anning

Transcriptions

DF100/17/168

52 Cadogan Place
Sloane St S.W.
March 31 [18]81

Lady James Murray
presents her Compliments to
Dr Henry Woodward, &
begs to let him know
that she has her collection
of amber with her, &
that she will be most
happy to show it to him
or to his nephew, if
agreeable to them to

...

DF100/17/169

A private collection
for hire or sale
118 Lansdowne Terrace
London Hills
Hackney
Can be viewed by
kind appointment
by addressing Miss
Phillips as above,
China, Birds, Fossils
Stones, Bones of Sharke
etc Coins, Letters of

...

DF100/17/441

Gurnet Bay Feb 5th 1883

Dear Dr Woodward
I have been so poorly I
could not sooner answer your
favor [*sic*] of the 31st ult. So far from
thinking the inspection delay'd, I did
not expect to hear so soon from you.
I am too poorly still, & too much
in need of pecuniary aid, to do other
than accept your offer. I hope at
the same time, you will not think
me ungrateful if I feel somewhat
disappointed. From the length
of time, & great labour that has
attended the acquisition of these

fossils, I have perhaps attached
an undue value to them.
But I think you will hardly
imagine that the sum you
mention will not pay me at
...

DF100/1/2

Fossil Shop
Lyme August Dorset
Sept 2d 1821

Sir,
I hope you will not be offended by my
addressing you on the subject of a fossil which
I had the honour of sending up to the British
Museum at the desire of Mr Buckland for
the sum of fifty pounds, which I hope you
have received safe, I am very sorry to hear
that the fossil is considered dear, the same
sum was offered for it before Mr Buckland
saw it I shall be very happy to make a
difference in the price of any other fossil
that I may find hereafter and which may be
thought good enough to be purchased by the
British Museum, As I am a widow woman
and my chief dependence for supporting my family
being by the sale of fossils I hope you will not be
offended by my wishing to receive the money
for the last fossil as I assure[sic] you Sir I stand much
in need of it. I am Sir with the greatest respect
your obedient humble servant Mary Anning

WP1/3/31

Columbia August 28th 1854

My Dear Mother
I take the opportunity though
very late of thanking you for your voluminous
letter dated May 22nd & also Thomas's which arrived
by the same mail. I have also received several
Times Newspapers so that there is now some chance
of getting some occasionally. I generally send
you two or three every month I suppose you
get some of them. I suppose you got the papers
giving an account of the fire I have been
in a great bustle ever since and no time
to attend to private matters. The fire was a
clean sweep of the whole town ^& left^ a district of
Fifteen acres, a blackened mass without a
single house upon it, where but a few hours
before (as the Irishman observed) you could not see

the town for Houses. As soon as day appeared and the smoke had somewhat cleared away so that the people could distinguish where their property once stood, a scene [*sic*] of bustle and activity prevailed, many putting up a canvas tent or shanty and commencing business with what few goods or chattels they had saved from the devouring element, others sent off for boards & timbers and carpenters were in great request, our timber yard was besieged all day, with several waggons

...

cross written text

...

now a particular friend stopping with me a Dr Pownall who is connected with our company a very intelligent & pleasant gentleman an old bachelor like myself but always talking of going home to get married. He is from the southern States. I have a great many fowls & they cost me nothing to keep. I have also a very small patch of garden in which I have Indian corn Melons & tomatoes. It is astonishing how luxurious the tomatoes thrive in this country I have only about a dozen plants & they bear immense quantities. The chickens eat a great quantity of them but they ripen faster than we can pick them & there are always green ones & also flowers on the same bush so there are a constant succession of them till the frosty nights kill them in England tomatoes are I suppose rare and dear and when I first tasted them here I thought I should never be able to eat them, but I now like them any way, either off the bush or sliced up with vinegar or stewed into a kind of sauce, or stewed up with sugar They are first rate and make a beautiful presence ~ We have some curious animals too in California you have I suppose heard of large spiders that catch birds & large insects

...

Appendices

Appendix 1

Roman numerals

I or j	1
II or ij	2
IV or iiij (not usually iv)	4
V	5
X	10
XL	40 (a smaller numeral in front of a larger numeral indicates subtraction)
L or l (note not i)	50
LX	60 (a larger numeral in front of a smaller numeral indicates addition)
C	100
D	500
M	1000

Appendix 2

Contracted words/Omitted letters

acct or acc or a/c	account
agst	against
Alexr	Alexander
Andr.	Andrew
apptd	appointed
Bart	Baronet
Chas	Charles
contd	continued
Decr	December
do	ditto
Dr	Doctor
Esq.	Esquire
Geo	George

Jas	James
Jo.	John or Johannes
it.	item
lrs	letters
Mr	Master
Mrs	Mistress
p.	per
Parliam.	Parliament
payt	payment
qrt	quarter
registran	registration
Revd or Rev.	Reverend
sd	said
sped	specified
Sr	Sir
St	Saint
subd	subscribed
Thos	Thomas
Wm	William
wt	With
yest.	yesterday

Appendix 3

Latin abbreviations

cf.	confer	compare
c. or ca.	circa	approximately
e.g.	exempli gratia	for example
et al.	et alii	and other people
etc.	et cetera	and the others, and other things
ib. or ibid.	ibidem	in the same place
i.e.	id est	in other words, that is

inst.	instante mense	this month
n.b.	nota bene	take notice
p.p. or per pro.	per procuracionem	signed on behalf of another person
q.v.	quod videre	[which] to see
ult. or ulto.	ultimo mense	last month
v. or vs.	Versus	against
viz.	videlicet	namely

Appendix 4

Money abbreviations

c.	cent
d.	penny
f.	franc
fl.	florin
L. or l. (the £ symbol originated from 'L')	pound (money)
q.	farthing
qr.	quarter
Rs.	rupees
s.	shilling

Appendix 5

Weights and measures

ac.	acre
bar.	barrel
bus.	bushel
c. or cub. ft.	cubic foot
cwt.	hundredweight

deg.	degree
dr.	drachm or dram
dwt.	pennyweight
ft.	foot
fur.	furlong
gal.	gallon
h.	hour
in.	inch
kg	kilogram
km	kilometre
lb.	pound (weight)
m.	mile or minute
mo.	month
oz.	ounce
pk.	peck
pt.	pint
qt.	quart
s	second
sq. ft.	square foot
st.	stone
yd.	yard

Appendix 6

Other abbreviations and initialisms

C.	Celsius Thermometer
ch. or chap.	chapter
curt.	current, the present month
F. or Fahr.	Fahrenheit's Thermometer

F.C.S.	Fellow of the Chemical Society
F.G.S.	Fellow of the Geological Society
F.L.S.	Fellow of the Linnaean Society
F.P.S.	Fellow of the Philological Society
F.R.A.S.	Fellow of the Royal Astronomical Society
F.R.C.P.	Fellow of the Royal College of Physicians
F.R.C.S.	Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons
F.R.G.S.	Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society
F.R.H.S.	Fellow of the Royal Horticultural Society
F.R.Hist.Soc.	Fellow of the Royal Historical Society
F.R.I.B.A.	Fellow of the Royal Institute of British Architects
F.R.S.	Fellow of the Royal Society
F.R.S.A.	Fellow of the Royal Society for the encouragement of Arts, Manufactures & Commerce
F.R.S.E.	Fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh
F.S.A.	Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries
F.S.S.	Fellow of the Statistical Society
F.Z.S.	Fellow of the Zoological Society
MS	manuscript
MSS	manuscripts
N.B.	North Britain (i.e. Scotland)
n.d.	no date
no.	number
N.S.	New Style: dating according to the Gregorian Calendar. This changed over in 1752 in most of Britain
O.S.	Old Style: dating according to the Julian calendar
p.	page
pp.	pages
q., qu., or qy.	query, question
rpts.	reports
Rt. Hon.	The Right Honourable

Appendix 7

English counties

Beds	Bedfordshire
Berk, Berks or Barks	Berkshire
Bucks or Buck	Buckinghamshire
Cambs	Cambridgeshire
Ches	Cheshire
Corn	Cornwall
Cumb	Cumberland
Derb or Derbs	Derbyshire
Dev	Devon
Dors	Dorset
Dur	Co. Durham
Ess	Essex
Glouc or Gloucs	Gloucestershire
Hants	Hampshire
Heref	Hereford
Herts	Hertfordshire
Hunts	Huntingdonshire
Lancs	Lancashire
Leic or Leics	Leicestershire
Lincs	Lincolnshire
Middx	Middlesex
Norf	Norfolk
Northants or Nhants	Northamptonshire
Northumb	Northumberland
Notts	Nottinghamshire
Oxon	Oxfordshire
Rut	Rutland
Shrops or Salop	Shropshire
Som	Somerset
Staff or Staffs	Staffordshire
Suff	Suffolk

Surr	Surrey
Suss	Sussex
Warw or Warws	Warwickshire
Westmor	Westmorland
Wilts	Wiltshire
Worc or Worcs	Worcestershire
Yorks	Yorkshire

Appendix 8

Military and Naval ranks

AB	Able Seaman
Adm	Admiral
Brig	Brigadier
Capt	Captain
Cdr	Commander
Cdre	Commodore
Col	Colonel
Cpl	Corporal
CPO	Chief Petty Officer
FM	Field Marshal
Gen	General
L/Cpl	Lance Corporal
Lt	Lieutenant
Lt Cdr	Lieutenant Commander
Lt Col	Lieutenant Colonel
Lt Gen	Lieutenant General
Maj	Major
Maj Gen	Major General
Mid	Midshipman
Mne	Marine
OC or OCdt	Officer Cadet
ORD	Ordinary Seaman
PO	Petty Officer
RAdm	Rear Admiral
Sgt	Sergeant

SLt	Sub-Lieutenant
VAdm	Vice Admiral
WO1	Warrant Officer Class 1
WO2	Warrant Officer Class 2
2Lt	Second Lieutenant