

Information about styles of handwriting

Handwritten documents use different styles of handwriting.
People who lived and worked on the land had no need to write.
Originally the government, the law and the church created written documents.
Business and personal writing became more prevalent during the 16th century.

The Secretary Hand

The Secretary Hand was the style of handwriting used for business, government and private use in the sixteenth century.
The aim of the Secretary hand was to write with elegance, clarity and individuality. It was derived from the Book Hand of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries and the Court Hand that was used for government and legal documents.

In 1618 Martin Billingsley – a professional penman, wrote that the, 'secretary.....is the oneley vsuall hand in England, for dispatching of all manner of bu(si)nesses for the most part, whatsoeuer.'

Note: Until the seventeenth century u & v (and i & j) were regarded as two forms of the same letter.

The Italic Hand

The secretary hand lasted until the mid seventeenth century. It was superseded by the Italic or Italian Hand because of its simplicity, beauty and speed of writing.

Roger Asham, a scholar from Cambridge, taught Elizabeth 1st to use the Italic Hand. The Italic hand was popular with men of learning rather than the common hand of business. It was the hand used for writing in Latin in the sixteenth century.

Martin Billingsley wrote that the Italic hand, 'is vsually taught to women, for....theymust be taught that which they may instantly learn.'

The majority of letters written by women in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries are written using the Italic Hand.

The Court Hand

The courts of law and government offices in Westminster required scribes who could produce documents quickly. The Court Hand style of handwriting was designed to be written quickly and legibly.

Court Hand styles were usually cursive and made no attempt at elegance. Over time different courts and government offices developed their own style. Some of these styles were:
the Chancery hand
the Common pleas hand
the Exchequer hand.

These came to be known as set hands- as distinguished from free hands that referred to scribes who were not trained in a particular style.

Examples of these styles of handwriting can be viewed at local Record Offices.

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