

Cracking the Code - Deciphering Old Scottish Handwriting

Handout prepared by Margaret Fox for

Scottish Indexes Conference

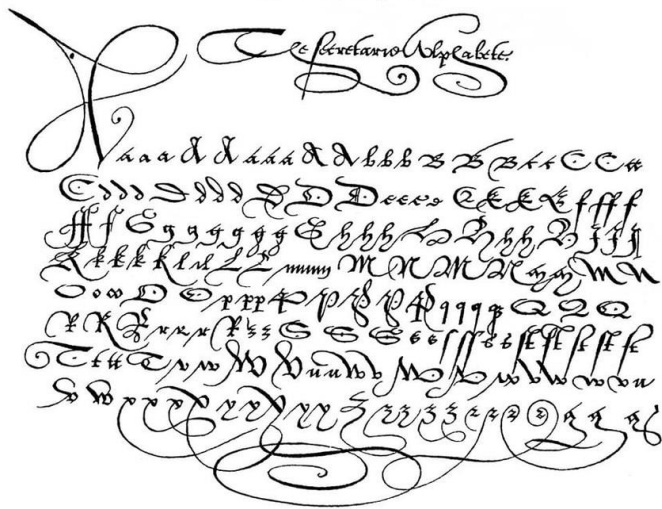
14 January 2023

This talk will:

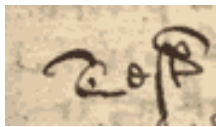
- **Introduce you to Scottish handwriting styles from the 16th to the 19th centuries found in a range of documents which are particularly useful for family history research**
- **Introduce you to Secretary Hand which was commonly used in formal documents during the 16th and 17th centuries**
- **Take a look at commonly used abbreviations and contractions**
- **Take a look at various ways of writing dates – 17th century**
- **Examine a range of kirk session records from the 16th to the 18th centuries highlighting words and phrases commonly used in them**
- **Examine a range of wills and testaments from the 16th to the 18th centuries highlighting words and phrases commonly used in them, and help you to understand the sums of money (represented by Roman numerals) found in the inventories of the deceased's possessions**
- **Examine late 17th and late 18th century tax records from the *ScotlandsPlaces* website which are rich in personal names**
- **Give an example of abbreviations in a 19th century sheriff court register**
- **Examine a range of documents from a family and estate collection from the early 17th to the early 19th century**
- **List resources which you may find useful when you pursue your research into records from earlier centuries**

Secretary Hand Alphabet

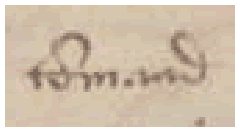
Secretary Alphabet



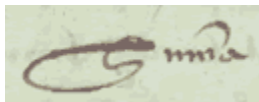
Commonly Used Abbreviations and Contractions



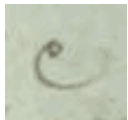
testament; squiggle joined on to last 't' replaces 'ament'



command; first 'm' replaced by squiggle



summa (Latin - sum or total); second 'm' replaced by squiggle



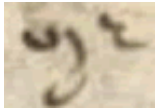
and - ampersand



letter known as a thorn, which represents 'th'; (so 'ye' is 'the', as in 'ye olde tea shoppe'!)



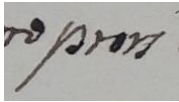
that; thorn represents 'th', 'a' missing, then superscript 't'



other; 'o' then 'th', 'e' missing then superscript 'r'



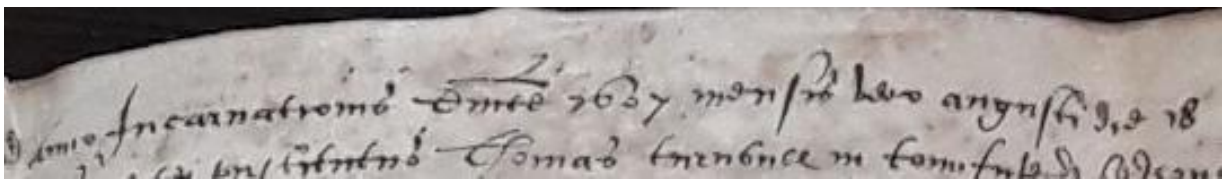
brother; 'bro' then 'th', 'e' missing then superscript 'r'



procurators, i.e. legal agents; 'curato' missing

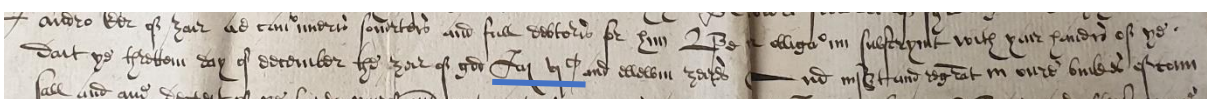
The above are just a few examples – you will come across many more! When confronted by a word which puzzles you ask yourself if it might be a contraction or an abbreviation. First decipher and try to get the meaning of the words surrounding it then you should be able to work out or guess what it says. **Remember – context is important - don't waste time struggling over a word in isolation.**

17th Century Dates

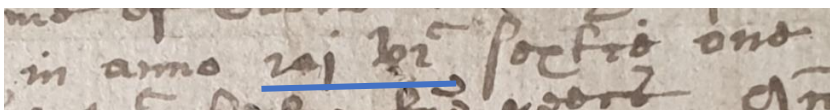


Latin – in the year of the Incarnation of our Lord 1607 month of August day 18 **18 Aug 1607**

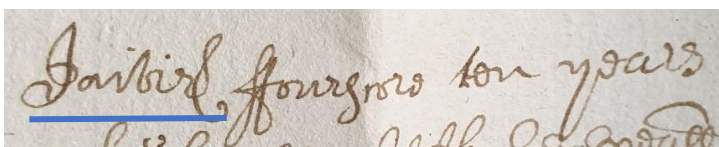
Note: the symbol underlined in blue in the four dates below represents 1600 – jajviC or jaiViC. What comes after it completes the date.



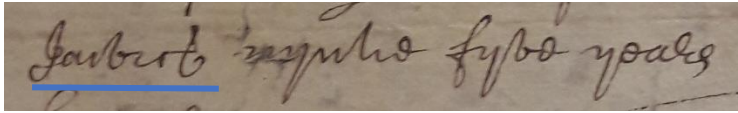
Date the thirteen day of December the year of God 1600 and eleven years **13 Dec 1611**



In anno (Latin for year) 1600 sixty one **1661**



1600 fourscore (i.e. four x 20) ten years **1690**

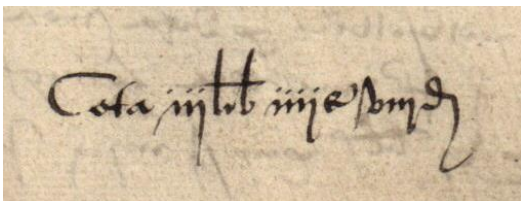


1600 ninety five years

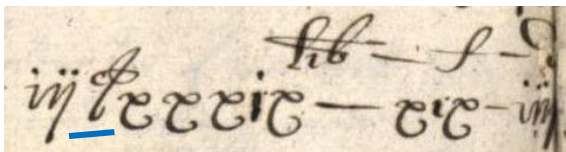
1695

Sums of Money using Roman numerals (found in pre- 19th c. wills and testaments)

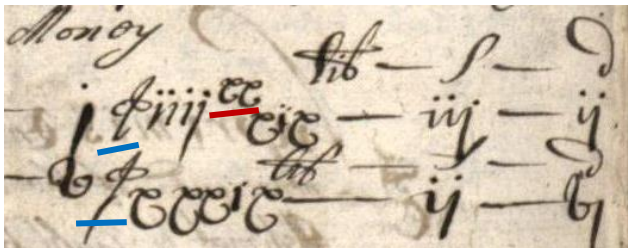
Prior to decimalisation in 1971 British money consisted of pounds, shillings and pence, abbreviated to L S D, from the Latin *librae*, *solidi* and *denarii*. In the examples below we have 'lib' rather than just 'l'. The first word is 'Tota', Latin for total, and the amount is 3 pounds, 4 shillings and 8 pence (£3 4s 8d).



Here are a few more examples:



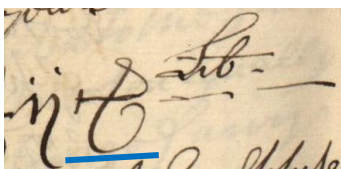
The symbol underlined in blue represents 100. The amount is 339 pounds 19 shillings and 4 pence (£339 19s 4d)



The symbol underlined in red which is xx in Roman numerals, i.e. 20, represents a score, so we have 4 score. The amount is 199 pounds 3 shillings and 2 pence (£199 3s 2d).

The second amount is 539 pounds 2 shillings and 6 pence (£539 2s 6d)

And here's an easy one!



200 pounds (£200)

By the end of my presentation I trust you will have gained an insight into the range of handwriting styles to be found in Scottish documents over the centuries – and, hopefully, gained some confidence to tackle your own documents.

Remember, the more you practise the easier it gets!

Some Useful Resources

Help with Handwriting



<https://www.scottishhandwriting.com/>



<https://scottishrecordsassociation.org/>

Grant G. Simpson – ***Scottish Handwriting 1150 – 1650***

Hilary Marshall – ***Palaeography for Family and Local Historians***

Help with Understanding Old Documents

Bruce Durie – ***Understanding Documents for Genealogy and Local History***

Eileen A. Gooder – ***Latin for Local History: An Introduction***

Peter Goulesbrough – ***A Formulary of Old Scots Legal Documents*** (publ. Stair Society)

Scots Dictionaries

Mairi Robinson (ed.) - ***The Concise Scots Dictionary***

Glossaries

Home | About us | Online Catalogue | Research Tools | Digital Archive | Directory | Forum | Search the

SCOTTISH ARCHIVE NETWORK

Research Tools

A selection of resources to help you with your research

Section Menu ▾

- Knowledge Base >
- Glossary >
- Scots Currency Converter >
- Family History Guide >
- Education Modules >
- Weights & Measures >

The Glossary

The Scottish Archive Network (SCAN) Glossary defines archaic words and phrases, mostly Scots law terminology, commonly found in documents and records in Scotland's archives. If you think a word or phrase should be added to the glossary, or an existing entry could be defined better, please [contact us](#). Since the SCAN project ended, the Dictionary of the Scots Language has gone online at <http://www.dsl.ac.uk/>, and this should be consulted for Scots words and phrases (including legal terms).

A B C D E F G H I J K L M N O P Q R S T U V W X Y Z

A

Abuilyements [of one's body]
clothing, or garments

<https://www.scan.org.uk/>

ScotlandsPeople

| Search our records | Help and guidance | Certificates and copies |

Glossary

Unsure what a word, phrase or abbreviation means in a record you've found by searching or browsing our glossary.

Term type

- Abbreviations
- Agricultural produce and livestock
- Legal terminology
- Medical terms
- Occupations
- Weights, measures and money

<https://www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk/>

Another great website if you are searching for your Scottish ancestors:

Scottish Indexes

Home | Advanced Search | Records

<https://www.scottishindexes.com/>

If you are struggling to decipher old Scottish handwriting I may be able to help you.

Feel free to contact me to discuss: mf6060@gmail.com

© Margaret Fox, 14 January 2023