

Olde English Handwriting: An Online Course

ANYONE WHO HAS DONE any research using historic documents knows the challenges of reading old handwriting. Deciphering handwritten documents is a constant challenge — variations in style, spelling, usage, penmanship and materials can frequently frustrate us in our ability to understand a document that may be significant to our research.

Cambridge University has created an online course titled “English Handwriting, 1500-1700” at <http://www.english.cam.ac.uk/ceres/ehoc/index.html>.

This course is for anyone whose research will involve original English manuscript sources from this period. Drawing on the rich manuscript holdings of some of the older Cambridge colleges, it presents an extensive archive of manuscript images unparalleled in printed guides and introductions.

Additionally, there are a range of pedagogical materials — transcription conventions, tips on dating, a bibliography and list of links — suitable for beginners, but convenient also for continuing reference.

Let’s first talk about the course itself. Note that the lessons are offered in a sequential fashion that build off of any previous lessons. This also means that as you progress through the lesson sequence, subsequent lessons get increasingly difficult.

Let’s look at Lesson 1 and see how a typical lesson is presented and structured.

First: The top panel displays a manuscript (use the scroll bar to view it in its entirety).

Second: In the middle on the left side you are given a transcription workspace where you are invited to supply your own transcription of the visible document.

Third: In the middle on the right side, you are given information about the manuscript.

Fourth: Along the bottom is a

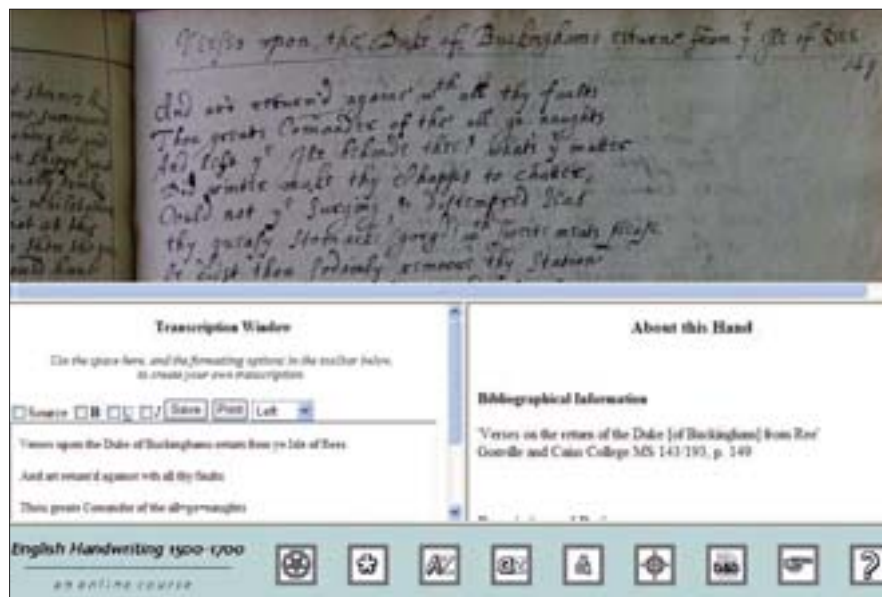
sequence of resources to facilitate your understanding and transcription of the manuscript.

The resources include:

- A model transcription of the piece (if you don’t want to try your hand at it or have done so and want to see an accepted version).

might not have thought it was even in English!

Accurately reading handwritten documents is very challenging. The older the reference document we are examining, the more challenging the deciphering — vagaries of handwriting between individuals, differences in how the



The working area for Lesson One.

- A test on this transcription (typically 10 questions where you are presented with an image, you type in your response and then click on “reveal” to see what is included in the model transcription).
- A look at upper and lower case versions of the alphabet (many examples are shown for both, since as is true today, there is much variety in how letters are formed).
- A table of common brevivgraphs and abbreviations.
- A look at an enlarged version of the manuscript.
- A follow-up to the lesson by looking at other manuscripts in a similar script.

If you are thinking that Lesson 1 wasn’t too challenging, take a look at the manuscript for Lesson 28! If you didn’t know the letter was from Sir Walter Raleigh, you

letters of the alphabet were formed relative to what we are familiar with, conventions of spelling and sentence structure and punctuation different from our own, the use of inks and paper which have altered the text with time, etc. All complicate our ability to transcribe such a document. With this course and the “hands-on” approach of working on real manuscripts which become increasingly challenging, there is a chance that some day, you might confidently approach an old manuscript and be able to transcribe it.

Of course, now you need to deduce what the meaning is of the nicely transcribed document ... a discussion for another day!