

Learn more about the handwriting in Bess of Hardwick's wage book

Two styles of handwriting appear in the wage book, which covers the period 1577-80. The majority of its contents are written in Secretary Hand, which developed for business purposes in England in the 16th century. However, Bess of Hardwick herself totalled and signed off each fortnight's payments at the foot of the page in a style known as Italic. This style was brought to England from Italy, also in the 16th century, and became increasingly popular after 1550. While Italic was taught to both men and women, it was considered a more appropriate script for women to write; it was easier to master than Secretary Hand. Bess's own version of Italic isn't necessarily straightforward to read. However, it does look slightly more familiar to us: Italic, with other influences, was the basis of English Round Hand which became standard in the 18th century.

Secretary Hand is challenging to the modern eye if you have never encountered it before: it contains many letter shapes which are unfamiliar to us today.

Key resources

Our Field Guide contains guidance on Secretary Hand and Italic as found in the wage book, illustrated with numerous examples from the book itself. Please familiarise yourself with this before you start transcribing. It can also be found as a PDF on the project page of our website [add link when live].

There are some very useful introductory palaeography tutorials available online. Palaeography is the study of historic handwriting, and the following resources provide extremely useful introductions to Secretary Hand from the same kind of period as our wage book:

- The Rediscovering Rycote website, all about the history of a lost Tudor mansion, includes a [tutorial on reading Tudor and Stuart handwriting](#), one section of which provides examples of every letter in the alphabet – upper and lower case – taken from actual manuscripts of different dates.
- The UK's National Archives provides a tutorial on reading handwriting from 1500-1800.
- Cambridge University has a course called [English Handwriting Online 1500-1700](#), focusing on a selection of manuscripts which you can transcribe yourself.
- The Beinecke Library at Yale University has an [online course on Secretary Hand](#), with examples drawn from manuscripts held at the Library.
- The online edition of Bess of Hardwick's Letters includes a [Tutorial on Reading Early Modern Handwriting](#), which includes examples of both Secretary Hand and Italic drawn from Bess's own correspondence. This is especially useful background for deciphering Bess's handwriting in our wage book.
- The Society of Genealogists also has a guide to [Reading Secretary Hand](#).

- The Folger Library's Encyclopedia includes a summary of different [Secretary Hand letter forms](#) and a very useful list of common abbreviations.