

## **Reading Old Documents**

In researching the history of public houses, it is probably that one will eventually visit your local records office or some other archive of old documents. One then has the problem of reading any relevant documents that you find. Victorian printed documents are not a problem but hand written ones can be problematic, particularly when they are legal papers. However, one can usually make sense of them even if a few words are somewhat strange. As one moves back into 18<sup>th</sup> C. documents, one will find increasing difficulty with strange spellings, abbreviations and unusual fonts. By the time one is looking at 17<sup>th</sup> C documents, one is presented with hand-written script that looks more like foreign language than English. In fact, I have known people assume they are written in Latin and give up at that point.

In fact, most documents from the 16<sup>th</sup> & 17<sup>th</sup> C. that one will find in archives are written in English – it is just the fonts used and some of the spellings that give one problems. Given correct transcription of the text into modern fonts, the documents are usually eminently readable and provide a valuable source on the history of pubs.

But, first a word of warning. One has to recognise that most old documents were written by professional clerks who had no or little interest in the contents of the papers. What is more, the most common documents you will find are deeds and leases of properties or wills describing the property and goods that a person has left to their heirs. These documents follow a fairly rigid format with much of the text being repeated in every document of the same nature. Thus the clerk does not spend time writing in a beautiful script – they are much nearer to having been scribbled with a quill pen. And they were often written on vellum (very thin animal skin) and over the years this will have hardened into a rigid sheet and unfolding an ancient lease can be a difficult task. Although these documents are now stored in ideal conditions in an archive, often they have been stored in very indifferent conditions in the past and they are often water damaged and faded. So even if one can master the script, reading a document can still be difficult.

So how does one tackle these documents? The first step is to get some training. The National Archives has an excellent on-line tutorial on the science of palaeography. This has a set of ten documents that are graded from fairly easy to difficult to transcribe. The tutorial leads one through a description of the document, background information about the persons and places mentioned, notes on the peculiarities of the script of the document and an alphabet of the font used. Then one is presented with a line of the document at a time to transcribe; this line being marked for accuracy as one submits it. One can access hints and tips to lead one through the transcription. Lastly, one can print out the whole tutorial on each document for future reference.

I must quickly state why I have used the word transcription rather than translation. There are two reasons for this. First, as one works through a document one tends to see just one word at a time and one tends not to see the structure and true meaning of sentences. Secondly, where abbreviations, other conventions of a script and ancient spellings are concerned, there is a level of judgement needed which can result in different transcribers coming to different conclusions. Therefore, one should transcribe a document word by word as one sees it, clearly marking where one has added letters or made any other assumption. One can then go back to the transcribed

text and read it as a whole to understand its meaning. One often ends up correcting the transcription at this stage.

Returning to the Palaeography tutorial, the whole website is well constructed and gradually leads one through the complexities of ancient scripts. What is more, many of the documents have been carefully chosen for their general interest. The tutorial can be found at <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/palaeography/>. However, do not make the mistake of thinking these are easy lessons. They can be hard work and somewhat frustrating. But stick with the lessons and the results can be very rewarding.

As an example of the problems and results of transcribing old documents, I have chosen a lease that I found in the Wiltshire & Swindon Records Office. This lease dates from 1638 and records the transaction between the Dean and Chapter of Salisbury Cathedral and William Symons. The lease is for the King's Arms, St John Street in Salisbury plus an adjacent house. The whole document is shown in the Fig 1. I doubt whether it is possible to read much of this given the limitations of our Journal but bear in mind that this was written on a small, single sheet of vellum only about 30 cm long. The script is very small!

This lease is largely written in what is known as Secretarial hand which is the most common style one will encounter. However, the clerk who wrote it also used an Italic hand for some words and a third hand for emphasis of some words. The resultant Mixed hand is fairly typical of many clerk's works and just adds to the fun of transcription. To give a flavour of the problems, I have extracted a few examples of words from this document.

The word 'the' is most commonly depicted in a fairly conventional manner (Fig 2) with the 't' and 'e' being normal for this hand but the 'h' is much more typical of an Italic hand. The 'h' one will normally find in these documents is that at the end of 'grannteth' (Fig 3). Note also the rather loose 'r' as the second letter of the word and the fact that one can only tell that there are two 'n' by counting the number of vertical strokes (minims) – it is unlikely to be 'im' and less likely to be 'mi' (this is not helped by the top of the first 'n' being faded!). Particular problems are caused by 's', 'l' and 'f' which can all look the same: 'aforesaid' (fig 4) and 'usuall feast[es]' (fig 5). The spelling of feasts shows a normal abbreviation with the last letter meaning the genitive 'es'.

Conventions of spelling and abbreviations can be awkward. A fairly simple case is 'considerac[i]on' (fig 6) where the third letter from the end is 'c' and the squiggle above means that an 'i' has been omitted. This was, presumably, easier and quicker to write with a quill than the full spelling. Another abbreviation commonly found is to replace 're' with a symbol and similarly 'per' or 'pre' with a single symbol. This is illustrated by the spelling of 'Premisses' (Fig 7). The first letter stands for 'Pre' and the first 's' is fashioned with a large flourish.

This last word warrants a comment about other ways of sorting out the meaning of a document. One will often find that legal documents about a public house are in bundle covering many years. Surprisingly, the wording of these documents is remarkably similar over many years and so one can read later documents (usually in

an easier script) to gain insights into the wording of older ones. In the case of my example of the King's Arms in Salisbury, included in the bundle of leases was an example from 1674 which was far more legible than that of 1638. This helped the transcription a great deal.

It must also be said that it is usually not necessary to sit in a Records Office and complete the transcription on site. Most Records Offices will let you take digital photographs of documents provided you do not use flash illumination. I am afraid this accounts for the rather poor image of the document I have reproduced, as much because of the impossibility of holding the vellum sheet completely flat as because of poor (for photography) lighting. I have always found the staff in the Wiltshire and Swindon Records Office extremely helpful, ensuring that you are able to capture the information you require.

So to the end result. My transcription may not be completely accurate but it is sufficient to confirm the name of the Inn, the owner (landlord), date and other details. I have to say that this type of transcription is a challenge, but with the aid of the National Archives palaeography lessons, the result is very rewarding. I recommend all pub historians to give it a go.

**his Indenture** made the eight day of September Anno Domini 1638 And in the ffourteenth year of the Reigne of our Soveraign Lord Charles  
 by the Grace of God of England Scotland France and Ireland King Defender of the faith for **Between** the Deane & Chapter of the Cathedrale  
 Church of Sarum in the County of Wilts of the one pt. And William Symons of the City of New Sarum in the County aforesaid of the other  
 part **Witnesseth** that the said Deane & Chapter aforesaid and in consideration of the Surrender of a former lease holden made of the same  
 and other things hereunder specified here to fore demised to Richard Symons of the City of New Sarum aforesaid in holden It agreed, whereof  
 thirty years or more are yet to come, as also for in consideration of the sum of Ten pound of lawfull buy ass<sup>d</sup> money now in hand paid by the said  
 William Symons to the said Deane & Chapter in the name of a fine, with their whole assent consent agreement **have** demised granted and to farme  
 itten and by the said Deane & Chapter their Curtesie doo demise grant and to farme it into the said William Symons All that therein is now  
 commonly called the Kings Arms, situate in the City of New Sarum aforesaid now in the County of Henry the 4<sup>th</sup> of the City aforesaid in holden  
 and a new walled house adjoining thereto now in the tenure of Robert Edmonds of the said City aforesaid in holden  
 being together with the appertinents, then commonly called the Overchalle messuages, and all and singular houses, shops, stalls, Colles, Stables  
 buildings, orchards, gardens, water courses, and all other commodities, advantages, tenements, houses, shops, Colles, Colles, Stables  
 in anywise appertaining or with them or any of them held or enjoyed as pt of or with the tenement of All which demised premises are now in the  
 tenement of Robert Edmonds of William Coopers shop situate lying and being in the City aforesaid in a street there called Rothermond  
 the said Deane & Chapter the Cathedrale Church of Sarum in the County of Wilts, and upon the land now or late John Hussars (decent on the north side) to hold all the said  
 premises new created together with the tenement, being the seven foote tenement, being the seven foote tenement, being the seven foote tenement, being the seven foote tenement  
 his pt admittance & assigne from the day of the date hereof for by and during, & unto the full end & terme of forty years from the next following of fully  
 to be remitted & ended **heir duty** paying therefor yearly during the said terme, unto the said Deane & Chapter their Curtesie, the yearly rent or sum of three pound  
 four shillings & six pence of lawfull eng<sup>l</sup> sh<sup>l</sup> money at the feast of Michaelmas or the next day thereunto coming, or at the feast of St Michael the Archangel  
 of our Lord God, the Annuntiation of the blessed Virgin Mary, or the Octave of St John Baptist or such other equal convenient day the said William Symons for him his assigns  
 admittance & assigne not lawfully transmitted by their Deane & Chapter their Curtesie, that in the said William Symons his assigns & assigne of the  
 assigne of any of them, shall of their own proper cost & charge shall repair, susteine & maintain all the above demised premises with the appertinents, during the terme aforesaid  
 in by & with all manner of needfull & necessary reparations, as often as need shall require. And the said fee sufficiently well repaired, at the end of the said terme, or other  
 determination thereof shall if need shall be paid unto the said Deane & Chapter their Curtesie & assigne, and also if it shall happen the said yearly rent of three  
 pound four shillings & six pence to be behind & unpaid in pt or in all after any of the said feast or terme in which it ought to be paid by the space of one  
 month, or that if any reparations of the premises or any pt thereof, after lawfull warning given to him the said William Symons or his assigns, or the assigne of any of  
 them by the said Deane & Chapter their Curtesie or assigne, or by their lawfull Attornies in that behalf appointed, within the space of one whole year, be not made & done  
 according to the contents of the said indenture, that then & from thence forth the said Deane & Chapter their Curtesie & assigne shall by lawfull means  
 after the said Deane & Chapter their Curtesie & assigne, and things hereunto contrary in any wise notwithstanding, **Witnesseth** whereof the Parties aforesaid  
 in this indenture made intochaugably have set their hands the 8 day of September Anno Domini 1638

Figure 1 Photo of 1638 Lease of the King's Arms, St John Street, Salisbury

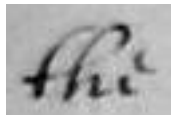


Figure 2 – ‘the’

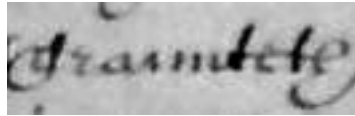


Figure 3 – ‘grannteth’

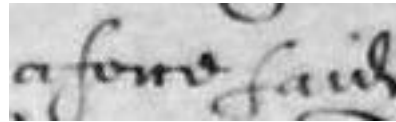


Figure 4 – ‘aforesaid’

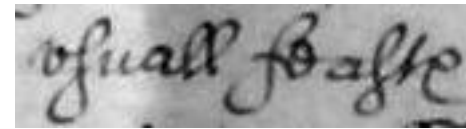


Figure 5 – ‘usuall feastes’

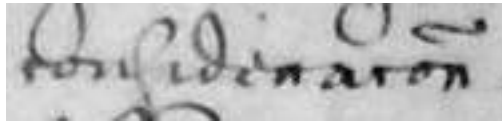


Figure 6 – ‘consideracion’

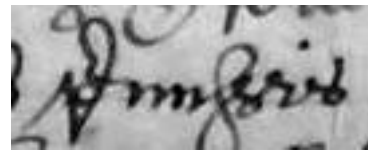


Figure 7 – ‘Premisses’

**THIS INDENTURE** made the Eighth day of September Anno D[omi]ni 1638 And in the fowerteenth yeare of the Raigne of our Sov[er]aigne Lord Charles By the Grace of God of England Scotland France and Ireland King Defendor of the faith etc **Betweene** the Deane & Chaptor of the Cathedrall Church of Sarum in the County of Wiltes of the one p[ar]te, And William Symons of the City of New Sarum in the County aforesaid Gent[leman] of the other part **Witnesseth** that the said Deane & Chapter aswell for and in considerac[i]on of the Surrender of a former Lease heretofore made of the Tenements and other things hereunder Specified heretofore demised to Richard Symons of the City of New Sarum aforesaid Inholder deceased, whereof Thirty yeares & more are yet to come, as also for & in considerac[i]on of the some of Tenn pound[es] of lawfull english mony now in hand paid by the said William Symons to the said Deane & Chapter in the name of assine, with their whole assent consent & agreement **Have** demised grannted and to farme letten, and by these p[re]sent[es] for them and their Successors doe demise grant and to farme lett unto the said William Symons, All that their Inne now comonly called the Kings Armes, situate in the City of New Sarum aforesaid now in the tenure of Henry Hewett, of the Citty aforesaid Inholder and a new erected house adjoining thereunto now in the tenure of Robert Edmonds of the said City gent[leman], being heretofore seven severall tenement[es] lying together with the app[ur]tennce, then commonly called the Seven Deadly Sinnes, and all and singuler houses, edifices, shopps, Cellers Sollers stables buildings Orchard[es] gardens, backsides easem[en]t[es] p[ar]fitted comodityres & advantages to the same Inne, newly erected house & seven tenem[en]t[es] & to each or any of them belonging or in anywise app[er]tayning or with them or any of them held & enjoyed as p[ar]te & p[ar]cell thereof, All which demised P[re]misses are now in sev[er]all occupac[i]ons of the said Henry Hewett & Robert Edmonds & of William Tooker Esq[ui]re situate lying and being in the City aforesaid in a streete there called Katherine Streete & abutting uppon the land[es] of the Vicars Chorall of the Cathedrall Church of Sarum on the South p[ar]te, & uppon the land[es] now or late John Husseyes gent[leman] on the north p[ar]te **To Have & To Hold** all the said Inne & newly erected house thereunto adjoining, being the seven sev[er]all tenem[en]t[es] before demised heretofore called the Seven Deadly Sinnes & all their these premisses with the app[ur]tennces thereunto belonging unto the said William Symons his exec[utor]s administrators & assignes from the day of the date hereof for by and during & unto the full end & terme of forty yeares from the one next following & fully to be compleate & ended **Yielding** & paying therefore yearely during the said terme, unto the said Deane & Chapter their successors & assignes the yearely Rent or some of Three pound[es] fowerteene shillings & eight pence of lawfull english mony at the fower most usuall feast[es] or termes in the yeare, th[at] is to say, at the feast of St Michael the Archangell, the birth of our Lord god, the Annunciac[i]on of the blessed Virgin Mary, & the Nativity of St John Baptist by even & equal porc[i]ons **And** the said William Symons for him his executors

administrators & assignes covenanteth & grannteth by these p[re]sent[es] to & with thesaid Deane & Chapter & their Successors, That he thesaid William Symons his executors & assignes & the assignes of every of them, at his & their owne proper coste & chardg[es] shall repaire susteyne & mainetayne all the aforesaid P[re]misses with the app[ur]tennce, during the terme aforesaid in by & with all manner of needful & necessary reparacons where as often as need shall require, And the same soe sufficiently & well repayred, at the end of the said terme, or other sooner determinac[i]on thereof, shall & will have & yield upp unto the said Deane & Chapter their Successors & assignes **And** alsoe if it shall happen the said yearely rent of Three pound[es] fowerteene shillings & eight pence to be behind & unpaid in p[ar]te or in all after any of the said feast[es] or termes in which it ought to be paid by the space of one moneth, Or that if any reparacons of the P[re]misses or any p[ar]te thereof, after lawfull warning to him the said William Symons or his assignes, or the assignes of any of them by thesaid Deane & Chapter their Successors or assignes, or by their lawfull Attourney in that behalfe appointed, within the space of one whole yeare, be not made & done according to the Content[es] & true meaning of these Indentures, That then & from thence forth this p[re]sent Lease or Indenture & every Article therein conteyned shalbe utterly frustrate voyd & of none effect, anything herein conteyned to the contrary in any wise notwithstanding **In** witnes whereof the Partyes abovesaid to these P[re]sent Indentures interchangeably have sett their seales (?) the day & yeare first above written.

## Figure 8 Transcription of Lease