

Reflections on Dr Caroline Adams' Paleography' course for the LHG, 20th September 2019

The very name "Palaeography" boded well, so I thought I'd sign out for what I thought might be a very 'friendly' course-and so it turned out to be. I also learned a lot about old handwriting.

Dr Caroline welcomed us and gave us some information about her background with archive departments in Yorkshire and, latterly, in West Sussex. She has done what must have been a fascinating PhD on the transcription of documents relating to Elizabeth I's progress in the West Sussex area. Her many years of experience make her a very knowledgeable teacher. She was also very patient with some of our pretty random transcriptions on occasions, especially at the beginning.

She started the morning session by telling us that we would focus mainly on 16th and 17th century scripts. It is her opinion that if you can 'get your head around' these, you will be able to cope with most of the things palaeography can throw at you. I now think I can agree, at least, to some extent.

The course kicked off with a key document illustrating some of the myriad forms each letter of the alphabet can take. However obvious it might sound, I was particularly struck by the fact that the practicalities of the use of the quill were highly influential on the way letters were written, and when we were shown a second sheet of abbreviations, it linked perfectly with the reminder that the price of parchment in past times made spaces in any document expensive.

I have to say the first 75 minutes were undoubtedly the worst. A huge amount of information was thrown at us but this was necessary in order to have any chance of progressing throughout the day. When it got coffee time I wondered how my brain would survive. However, a hot drink and a short break in the morning's sunshine made the world of difference, and, suddenly, the clouds lifted, and with Dr Caroline's encouragement, and her "Viking ship 'W'" and "Easter egg 'E'" visual cues, we began to see patterns and have some way of deciphering at least some of the words.

Dr Caroline's insisted that we stick to decoding the actual writing and to avoid dependence on looking at whole words, or leaning on the context for meaning. She was right to do so. It is easy to make quite serious mistakes, especially with Roman numerals I realised, unless you look meticulously at the quill strokes. We looked at wills, royal accounts, parish records and even at checklist of attributes kept by a magistrate that could help to label any woman who came before him as a witch- which was rather unnerving. However, this was just one of several examples throughout the day that served to highlight how palaeography can help to bring history alive.

Again, I am enormously grateful to everyone involved for the opportunity to attend this course, and I am hoping it will help me decipher census documents and other written material pertaining to the histories of Albion Street and East Street.

Sarah Earl 21.9.19.