

## Introduction

One of the biggest difficulties you are likely to face when using old documents is reading the handwriting and getting used to archaic language and terms we no longer use. This is a huge subject and whole books have been written about it, so this leaflet makes no claims to be all-inclusive. It is meant to be an introduction to the subject and a handy reference guide. There is a list of Latin versions of common Welsh and English first names, a glossary of some of the commonest Latin words found in old documents, a guide to reading Roman numerals, and tables of different letter-forms from various types of old handwriting.

Latin was used throughout the western Roman Empire as the language of commerce and administration, and continued to be used in the church, in law and in education throughout the Middle Ages. It carried on into the Early Modern period as well, and you will find Latin words in a variety of contexts, including some parish registers (some vicars preferred to fill them in in Latin), wills, deeds, manorial records and court records.

## Latin versions of personal names

Throughout medieval times it was common for people's first names to be translated into Latin in official documents. To their friends, they might be known as John or William, but to the authorities they would be Johannes and Gulielmus. This was extended to Welsh personal names as well, but not all of them had an obvious Latin equivalent, so -us was simply added at the end.

Some of these names were routinely abbreviated, so the table below includes the abbreviated forms as well.

Latin version	Abbreviated form	English/Welsh equivalent
Anna		Anne
Carolus	Cha <sup>s</sup>	Charles
Caterina		Catrin, Catherine
Christopherus	Xopher*	Christopher
Davidus	Dd	David
Eduardus	Ed <sup>rus</sup>	Edward
Egidius		Giles
Eleanora		Eleanor
Elizabetha		Elizabeth
Evanus		Evan
Felicia		Phyllis, Ffelis

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\* Xopher sounds like a particularly bizarre abbreviation; however, X was used as an abbreviation for Christ, being the first letter of his name in Greek, so X-mas = Christ-mas, and X-opher = Christ-opher.

Latin version	Abbreviated form	English/Welsh equivalent
Francisca		Frances
Franciscus		Francis
Fredericus		Frederic
Galfridus		Geoffrey
Georgius	Geo.	George
Giraldus		Gerald
Griffinus	Griff.	Griffith/Gruffudd
Gualterius		Walter
Guido		Guy
Gulielmus	W <sup>m</sup>	William, Gwilym
Hannor[ia]		Hannah
Helena		Helen, Ellen
Henricus	Hen.	Henry
Hieronymus		Jeremy
[H]omfridus		Humphrey
Hugo		Hugh, Huw
Isabella		Isabel
Jacobus	Ja <sup>s</sup>	James, Iago
Jana		Jane
Janetta		Jennet, Janet, Sioned
Johanna		Joan, Siân
Johannes	Joh <sup>es</sup> , Jn <sup>o</sup>	John, Sion, Ioan
Juditta		Judith
Leolinus	Llen.	Llewellyn
Letitia		Lettice
Lucia		Lucy
Ludovicus		Lewis
Margaretta	Marg <sup>t</sup>	Margaret
Maria		Mary
Marianna		Marian, Mary Anne
Mathias		Matthew
Matilda		Maud, Mault
Mauritius		Maurice
Nicholaus		Nicholas
Petrus		Peter
Phillipus	Phe.	Phillip
Radolphus		Ralph
Ricardus	Ric., Rich <sup>dus</sup> , Ri <sup>cus</sup>	Richard, Rhydderch
Ricus		Rhys, Rees
Robertus	Rob <sup>tus</sup>	Robert
Rogerus		Roger, Rosser
Rosa		Rose
Sara		Sarah
Thomasina		Tamsin

## Some useful common Latin words

Latin is a complicated language and can only be fully mastered after a good deal of study. However, many documents follow a standard form, and an understanding of the format that is being followed, together with a list of the common words used, can be enough to understand the document. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Latin words were often used here and there in documents written in English, and a knowledge of the common ones helps.

This list contains the words you are most likely to find, especially in a family history context. For more specialised vocabulary, see Charles Trice Martin, *The Record Interpreter* and R. E. Latham, *Revised Medieval Latin Word-List*.

Words that end in -us, -um, -i, -o, -os, -orum refer to men; words ending in -a, -am, -ae, -as, -arum refer to women.

<b>Latin</b>	<b>English</b>
Amita	aunt
Anglia	England
Annus	year (anno 1623 would mean "in the year 1623")
Aprilis/Mens Aprilis	April
Apud	at, with, at the house of
Aqua	water, river
Armiger	squire, esquire
Augustus/Mens Augusti	August
Avo	grandfather
Avunculus	uncle
Baptizatus	baptised
Burgagium	burgage, a plot of land in a borough where a house can be built
Burgenses	burgesses (citizens of a borough)
Carta	charter
Centum	a hundred
Clericus	clergyman
Comitatus	county
Coniunctus, -a	joined
Cum	with; since
Curilegium	courtyard
Datus	given, dated
De	of, from
December/Mens Decembris	December
Decessus, -a	deceased
Decem	ten
Decimus, -a	tenth
Dedi, dedit, dederunt	I gave, (s)he gave, they gave
Denarius (often shortened to d)	pence, penny
Dies	day
Dictus, -a	said, before-mentioned
Dominus	Lord; Mr.

<b>Latin</b>	<b>English</b>
Domina	Lady; Mrs.
Duo	two
Dux	duke
E (ex before a vowel)	from, out of
Ecclesia	church
Episcopus	bishop
Erat/erant	was/were
Est/Sunt	is/are
Et	and, also
Extra	outside
Factus	made
Februarius/Mens Februarii	February
Festus	feast day, festival, saint's day
Fidei Defensor	Defender of the Faith – a royal title
Fidelis	faithful
Filius/filia	son/daughter
Finis	boundary
Fossa	ditch
Francia	France
Frater	brother
Fuit/fuerunt	was/were
Gemini	twins
Generosa	gentlewoman
Generosus	gentleman
Habet, habent	has, have
Habendum et tenendum...	to be had and held...
Hibernia	Ireland
His testibus...	with these witnesses...
Ianuarius/Mens Ianuarii	January
Imprimis	firstly (used for the first item in a list)
In nomine Dei, Amen	in the name of God, amen
In cuius rei testimonio...	in witness whereof...
Infans	infant, child
Infra	within
Insula	island
Inter	between
(Dies) Iovis	Thursday
Item	again (used for separate entries in a schedule or list)
Iulius/Mens Iulii	July
Iunius/Mens Iunii	June
Iure uxoris	by right of his wife (often abbreviated to iur. ux.) – found in rentals where a man holds land that is in his wife's name.
luxta/juxta	beside
Liber (often shortened to L <sup>i</sup> )	pound (£)
Litera	letter, document
(Dies) Lunae	Monday
Maius/Mens Maii	May
Manerium	manor

<b>Latin</b>	<b>English</b>
Mansio	mansion, substantial town house
(Dies) Martis	Tuesday
Martis/Mens Martii	March
Mater	mother
Matrimonia	marriage
Matrimonia coniuncti sunt	were joined in marriage
Mens	month
(Dies) Mercurii	Wednesday
Messuagium	house
Miles	knight
Molendinum	mill
Morgannia	Morgannwg, Glamorgan
Nepos/nepta	nephew/niece
Nonus, -a	ninth
Novem	nine
November/Mens Novembris	November
Nuper	lately, recently
Octavus, -a	eighth
Octo	eight
October/Mens Octobris	October
Omnes	all
Omnibus	to all
Parochia	parish
Pater	father
Per	through, by means of
Post	after
Prae, pre	before
Pratum	meadow
Prefatus/predictus, -a	aforesaid
Primus, -a	first
Pro	on behalf of, for
Propter	because of
Quartus, -a	fourth
Quatuor	four
Quinque	five
Quintus, -a	fifth
Quod	that
Rex, Regina	King, Queen
Salutem	greeting
Sanctus	saint
(Dies) Saturni	Saturday
Scotia	Scotland
Sed	but
Secundus, -a	second
Septem	seven
September/Mens Septembris	September
Septimus, -a	seventh
Sepultus	buried
Sex	six
Sextus, -a	sixth

<b>Latin</b>	<b>English</b>
Solidus (often shortened to s)	shilling
(Dies) Solis	Sunday
Soror	sister
Sub	beneath
Sunt	are
Super, supra	above, over
Tenementum	tenement, land holding, farm
Tenet, tenerunt	hold(s)
Terra	land
Tertius, -a	third
Tres	three
Unus, -a, -um	one
Uxor	wife
(Dies) Veneris	Friday
Via	road
Videlicet (often shortened to Viz. or viz <sup>t</sup> )	that is to say...
Viginti	twenty
Villa	town, village, settlement
Wallia	Wales

## Months, days and numbers

### *Months of the year*

Ianuarus/Mens Ianuarii	January
Februarius/Mens Februarii	February
Martis/Mens Martii	March
Aprilis/Mens Aprilis	April
Maius/Mens Maii	May
Iunius/Mens Iunii	June
Iulius/Mens Iulii	July
Augustus/Mens Augusti	August
September/Mens Septembris	September
October/Mens Octobris	October
November/Mens Novembris	November
December/Mens Decembris	December

N.B. Up until 1751 the year began in March, so September, October, November and December were respectively the 7<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> months of the year. Sometimes you see them abbreviated as follows:

7 <sup>ber</sup> or VII <sup>ber</sup>	September
8 <sup>ber</sup> or VIII <sup>ber</sup>	October
9 <sup>ber</sup> or IX <sup>ber</sup>	November
10 <sup>ber</sup> or X <sup>ber</sup>	December

**Days of the week**

Dies Lunae [or Lune]	Monday
Dies Martis	Tuesday
Dies Mercurii	Wednesday
Dies Iovis [or Jovis]	Thursday
Dies Veneris	Friday
Dies Saturni	Saturday
Dies Solis	Sunday

**Some numbers**

1	Unus	Primus	1 <sup>st</sup>
2	Duo	Secundus	2 <sup>nd</sup>
3	Tres	Tertius	3 <sup>rd</sup>
4	Quatuor	Quartus	4 <sup>th</sup>
5	Quinque	Quintus	5 <sup>th</sup>
6	Sex	Sextus	6 <sup>th</sup>
7	Septem	Septimus	7 <sup>th</sup>
8	Octo	Octavius	8 <sup>th</sup>
9	Novem	Novus	9 <sup>th</sup>
10	Decem	Decimus	10 <sup>th</sup>
20	Viginti	Vicesimus	20 <sup>th</sup>
30	Triginti	Tricesimus	30 <sup>th</sup>

**Roman numerals**

Roman numerals are made up of seven characters as follows:

**I = 1    V = 5    X = 10    L = 50    C = 100    D = 500    M = 1000**

These are put together in a regular way to build up more complex numbers. The numbers 1-10 are as follows:

**I = 1    II = 2    III = 3    IV = 4    V = 5    VI = 6    VII = 7    VIII = 8    IX = 9    X = 10**

The same pattern is used for numbers that are multiples of 10, i.e. 20, 30, 40 etc:

**X = 10    XX = 20    XXX = 30    XL = 40    L = 50  
LX = 60    LXX = 70    LXXX = 80    XC = 90    C = 100**

And likewise for numbers that are multiples of 100, i.e. 200, 300, 400 etc:

**C = 100    CC = 200    CCC = 300    CD = 400    D = 500  
DC = 600    DCC = 700    DCCC = 800    CM = 900    M = 1000**

And compound numbers are made up of a combination of these: for example, 1673 is 1000 + 600 + 70 + 3, which in Roman numerals is M + DC + LXX + III, = MDCLXXII.

## Reading old writing

Most British documents are in one of three common scripts. A brief explanation of the main features of each follows, with more detailed charts of the letter forms of each afterwards.

### *Anglicana*

This was the usual hand for writing documents in medieval times. Its main characteristics are these: it was not joined up; it was written upright, without a slant. The letter forms were generally rounded and many of them have given their form to printed letters in serif fonts, especially the letters **a** and **g**. The capital letters are often elaborate and are based on the Gothic text capitals used in hand-written books (**A B C D** etc). Anglicana was used for all purposes during the early and middle medieval period, until a new form of writing called Secretary Hand began to take over. Thereafter a kind of hybrid hand appeared. Known as 'bastard Anglicana', it showed some of the features of both hands.

### *Secretary Hand*

This was developed by continental scribes during the early fifteenth century and gradually spread throughout Europe. It was popular for writing vernacular languages (in our case Welsh or English), while Anglicana was often still used for writing Latin. It was a cursive script, that is to say, it was joined up. It was usually written upright, but a slight slant became common. The letter forms appear spiky and angular, and many letters are quite unfamiliar to us, making documents written in Secretary Hand appear much older than perhaps they are. Secretary Hand continued to be used in Britain until the eighteenth century when Italic took over as the dominant script. As time went by it borrowed some of the features of Italic, for example the slope, the capital letters and some of the letter forms, so that late Secretary Hand can look like Italic at first glance.

### *Italic and English Round Hand*

This hand was developed in Italy during the Renaissance by a cultured elite. In its ideal form, and in contrast to Secretary Hand, it is rounded and flowing, and characterised by a distinct right-to-left slant. It was at first the script of the upper classes – my lord might sign his name in Italic although his secretary had written the document in Secretary Hand. It gradually came into more general use during the seventeenth century, becoming the dominant writing style by the mid-eighteenth. A cursive (joined-up) version of it evolved, called English Round Hand, which was widely used in the legal profession, and it was the style of writing that schoolchildren were taught from Victorian times onwards. The writing styles of today are based on it, and most of the letter forms are reasonably familiar.

**Letter forms of Anglicana**

Letter	Capital	Lower case	Notes
Aa			Lower-case a was always written with a tail on top.
Bb			
Cc			Lower-case c and t are easily confused. Generally t has a heavier bar on top.
Dd			
Ee			From the fourteenth century, lower case e was generally written backwards.
Ff			There was no separate capital F. Two small letters (ff) were written instead.
Gg			Note that the lower case letter was always written g not g.
Hh			
Ii			Capital I and J were often written the same, and a small i was generally used instead of j.
Jj			
Kk			
Ll			
Mm			Words consisting of combinations of u, m and n can be confusing, as they can end up as a series of up and down strokes. The best way to approach it is to count the strokes and work out the most likely combination of letters.
Nn			
Oo			
Pp			
Qq			Lower-case q can look like a g
Rr			Lower-case r is usually a long letter with a tail that goes below the line.
Ss			
Tt			Lower-case c and t are easily confused. Generally t has a heavier bar on top.
Uu			U and v were often written the same, especially as capitals. Words beginning in u were often spelled with v, e.g. 'vpon' for 'upon'
Vv			
Ww			
Xx			
Yy			
Zz			

**Letter forms of Secretary Hand**

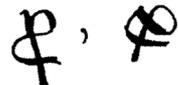
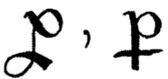
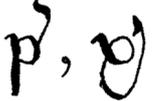
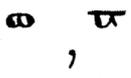
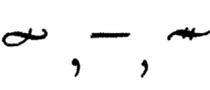
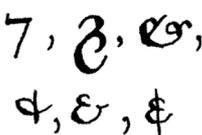
Letter	Capital	Lower case	Notes
Aa	A	a a a	
Bb	B B	b b b	
Cc	C C	r t	A lower-case c often looks like a modern r.
Dd	D D	d d	Lower-case d has a pronounced loop on the top.
Ee	E e	e o t	The lower-case e was effectively written backwards.
Ff	F F	ff	There was no separate capital F. Two small letters (ff) were written instead.
Gg	G G	g g	
Hh	H H	h f z	h can vary greatly from a well-formed h to a loose letter a bit like an f.
Ii	I J	i	Capital I and J were often written the same, and a small i was sometimes used instead of a j.
Jj	J J	j	
Kk	K K	k k	
Ll	L L	l l	
Mm	M M	m	Words consisting of combinations of u, m and n can be confusing, as they can end up as a series of up and down strokes. The best way to approach it is to count the strokes and work out the most likely combination of letters.
Nn	N N	n	
Oo	O O	o	
Pp	P P	p p p	Note that p was joined up from the bottom of the stick, not the loop.
Qq	Q Q	q q q	Note that a lower-case q can look a little like a g.
Rr	R R	r r r	
Ss	S S	s s s	Generally the short s was used at the end of words, while the long f was used elsewhere.
Tt	T T	t t t	
Uu	U U	u	U and v were often written the same. Words beginning in u were often spelled with v, e.g. 'vpon' for 'upon'
Vv	V V	v	
Ww	W W	w w	
Xx	X X	x	
Yy	Y Y	y y y	Note that y was often used instead of i at a time when spelling was not standardised.
Zz	Z Z	z	

**Long and short S**

Two versions of the lower-case s developed, but were used in different contexts. A long s, shaped like an f but without the crossbar, i.e. ʃ, was used at the beginning of a word or in the middle, while a short s, like the one in current use, was used at the end. Thus sessions would be written feffions. The short letter grew in popularity, and from about 1810 printed books ceased to use the long ʃ symbol, using the short s instead. It gradually fell out of use in handwriting, surviving longest in a double-s, where the first letter was long and the second, short (i.e. ‘ʃs’), sometimes appearing as β. This could still be found as late as the 1930s.

**Abbreviations**

Written Latin was full of abbreviations, which were developed to make the language quicker to write. They enabled certain common syllables to be shortened to a single character or hooked mark, a little bit like modern shorthand. Some of these were also used when writing English in Secretary Hand, and the table below gives examples of the ones that are most common. They are not used in writing English in *Italic*.

Abbreviation	Meaning	Example	Interpretation
	pro-		proper
	per/par/por-		parish
	pre-		premisses
	a (before n or m)		Jevan
	-es, -is (at the end of a word)		estates
	er		ever
	er/ir (used in conjunction with S)		Sir
	general abbreviation mark, often denoting omission of i, m or n.		uppon
	and		Tenement
		This is a very variable abbreviation which	

**Letter forms of Italic and English Round Hand**

When Secretary Hand was prevalent, few people could write, and writing was the preserve of the professional few. As a result, writing tends to be relatively standard. In the UK, Italic developed into English Round Hand, sometimes called copper-plate, which was taught in schools at a time when everyone was learning to write and writing became a basic skill. True copper-plate can be found in official and legal documents, and while most people's handwriting was based on it, there were huge variations in the precision, legibility and angle of slant. What is given here is an example of the ideal copper plate on which people's handwriting was based.

*The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog*

Letter	Italic	English Round Hand
A	<i>A a</i>	<i>Aa</i>
B	<i>B b</i>	<i>Bb</i>
C	<i>C c</i>	<i>Cc</i>
D	<i>D d</i>	<i>Dd</i>
E	<i>E e</i>	<i>Ee</i>
F	<i>F f</i>	<i>Ff</i>
G	<i>G g</i>	<i>Gg</i>
H	<i>H h</i>	<i>Hh</i>
I	<i>I i</i>	<i>Ii</i>
J	<i>J j</i>	<i>Jj</i>
K	<i>K k</i>	<i>Kk</i>
L	<i>L l</i>	<i>Ll</i>

Letter	Italic	English Round Hand
M	<i>M m</i>	<i>M m</i>
N	<i>N n</i>	<i>N n</i>
O	<i>O o</i>	<i>O o</i>
P	<i>P p</i>	<i>P p</i>
Q	<i>Q q</i>	<i>Q q</i>
R	<i>R r</i>	<i>R r</i>
S	<i>S s</i>	<i>S s</i>
T	<i>T t</i>	<i>T t</i>
U	<i>U u</i>	<i>U u</i>
V	<i>V v</i>	<i>V v</i>
W	<i>W w</i>	<i>W w</i>
X	<i>X x</i>	<i>X x</i>
Y	<i>Y y</i>	<i>Y y</i>
Z	<i>Z z</i>	<i>Z z</i>

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