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CHAPTER V
ENGLISH HANDWRITING
FROM THE CONQUEST TO 1500

1

Hands in Use at the Conquest

The ancestry of the business hands used in England since the Norman Conquest might be traced to the origins of the alphabet, but it will perhaps be a sufficient introduction to the present survey to consider briefly the chief scripts with which the literate Englishman of the 11th century was familiar. In important Latin books of this period the 'displayed' matter, consisting of titles, headings, sub-headings and exordia (the opening words of chapters, etc.), was likely to be shared between 'square' and 'rustic' capitals and uncials, while the body of the text was written in Carolingian minuscules, which had fairly recently displaced half-uncials as the standard Latin-language book hand of the Saxons. For works in English the native insular minuscules were employed. Examples of these six hands are illustrated in Plate I.

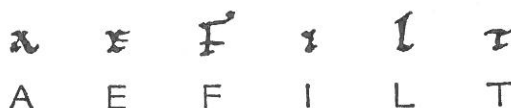
Square capitals, which had been used in the 4th century (and perhaps earlier) for the composition of entire texts, are of essentially the same form as the 'roman' capital alphabet of the modern printer; they simulate in manuscript the carved inscriptional style of which Trajan's Column provides a fine and famous example. The name 'square' (*quadrata*), which is at least as old as Petronius,¹ is due to their proportion, since they are all (at any rate in principle) of one height and almost all either as wide or half as wide as they are high, so that each can be contained fairly exactly within a square or half-square. The posture and pen-hold necessary to execute these characters in manuscript and to reproduce the serifs² of the inscriptional prototype were unnatural and tiring; and the progress of the scribe writing, or rather lettering, in square capitals must have been very slow.

Rustic capitals were conspicuously better suited to the materials and instruments of writing. Modelled originally on the freehand lettering of the painted signboard, they are taller and narrower in proportion than square capitals, of which, nevertheless, they are only a more negligently and economically written form. The dominance of the pen in determining their design is apparent in the angle of shading and in the slight sagging curve imparted to those oblique strokes which in *quadrata* are straight. Serifs, especially foot-serifs, are fairly consistently preserved; and their presence, coupled with the narrowness

¹ *Satyricon*, 29: *canis ingens catena vinctus in pariete erat pictus, superque quadrata littera scriptum CAVE CANEM.*

² The short cross-lines at the extremities of the main strokes. They are sometimes said to have originated through the necessity, for technical reasons, of finishing off in this way letters incised in stone with the V-shaped chisel.

of the characters, creates the need for differentiating between easily confused letters. The narrow *F*, with its foot-serif as long as its arms, could be readily mistaken for *E*, as could *I* for *L*; and to distinguish between these pairs scribes extend *F* and *L* above the headline.¹ Confusion between *I* and *T* is avoided by omitting, or merely suggesting, the head-serif of *I*. Rustic *A* has no crossbar, and the foot-serif of the thinner left-hand stroke curves inwards to meet the heavy right-hand stroke, which projects slightly at the top.



Earmark letters of rustic capitals

What style of calligraphy, if any, St. Jerome had in mind when he wrote in his Preface to Job about *éditions de luxe* executed in *unciales litterae*, must remain uncertain, since in their context the words can refer only to size.² But in modern usage (dating from the 18th century) 'uncial' is the name given to the distinctive book hand which was extensively employed for sacred Christian texts in Latin between the 5th and 8th centuries. In general appearance uncials are open and round: the test-letters *A*, *D*, *E*, *H*, *M* all substitute curves for original angles. Of the other letters, *B*, *C*, *I*, *N*, *O*, *R*, *S*, *T* and *X* retain to a greater or less extent their square-capital form and alignment, and the rest (notably *F*, *G* and *Q*, which have all become descenders) suffer some modification of them.



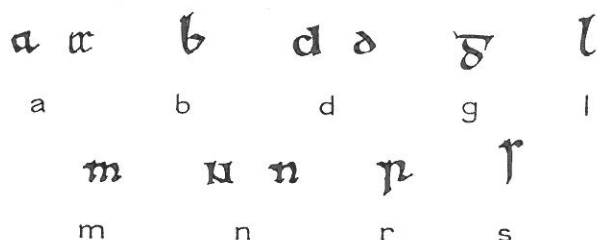
Some characteristic letter-forms of uncial

The three hands so far discussed are known collectively as majuscules. What they have in common is not so much the large size that this name might suggest (indeed, rustic capitals are often written quite small), as the fact that each has few or very few extruding characters, that is, characters which ascend above the upper, or descend beneath the lower, of two horizontal parallels. It is for this reason that half-uncials, in which ascenders and descenders are more numerous, are usually grouped with the minuscules or 'four-line' scripts. In half-uncial, *a* is single-bowled and often looks at first sight like double-*c* (*cc*), the characteristic *b* and *d* ascend perpendicularly (though *d* is also found with the ascender curved backwards, as in uncial), *g* is a descender with a horizontal head and frequently

¹ This practice is admittedly to be found also in square-capital writing, where the need for it is not equally obvious.

² The passage runs: *veteres libros vel in membranis purpureis auro argentoque descriptos vel uncialibus, ut vulgo aiunt, litteris onera magis exarata quam codices*. The natural interpretation of this is 'in inch-high letters, as the saying goes'; but 'letters twelve to the line' has also been suggested. It is difficult to believe that *ut vulgo aiunt* apologises for the use of a technical term.

resembles some later forms of *z*, *l* has a rounded foot, and the uprights of *m* are parallel. The angular 'capital' *N*, its cross-stroke often nearly horizontal, is supplemented by *n*; but in the characteristic *R* of half-uncial the bow is not brought fully round to meet the descending perpendicular, and the vestigial tail is parallel to the base-line. In half-uncial, *s* takes the 'long' form.¹



Some characteristic letter-forms of half-uncial

The distinctively 'insular' type of half-uncial which formed the Saxons' book hand had originated in Ireland, where side by side with it there had been evolved a small, condensed, upright minuscule, used for glosses. Its affinities with the native half-uncial are most conspicuous in the serifs common to both styles. It is these sharp-wedged serifs which confer its distinctive pointed appearance on the insular minuscule (Plate I (b)).

On the continent of Europe experiment and reform carried on for the greater part of the 8th century produced the text hand we now know as Carolingian minuscule (Plate I (a)), with which the name of Alcuin of York is intimately associated. The characters of this minuscule are recognisably the models for the 'lower-case' roman letters used in the printing of this book; only the long *s* and the curved non-ascending *t* qualify the essential 'modernity' of the alphabet. The Danish invasions of the 9th century postponed the date at which this continental reform began powerfully to influence Saxon practice, but during the 10th century the characteristic insular style began to lose ground to Carolingian in literary, liturgical, and documentary use and to be increasingly confined to writing in the vernacular. Yet even in the 11th century, when the orthodox Carolingian hand, written according to the continental rules,² may be said to be fairly established in England, a diploma (or land-charter) whose Latin text is in pure Carolingian will often be found to have the vernacular description of the boundaries in the insular hand. Not only so, but native proper names, whether in English or latinised form, occurring in the middle of the Latin text are also written in the insular alphabet. This appropriation of specific styles to specific languages is a recurring phenomenon in the history of English writing.

¹ Not all these features are to be seen in the 'insular' half-uncial illustrated in Plate I (b), which is thought by some scholars to be classifiable as a majuscule.

² For 'capital' initials needed in the body of the text Alcuin had used uncial forms, but by the 11th century rustic capitals were more usual.

'Book' and Business Hands

The English had never cultivated an official or business hand such as those which, derived ultimately from Roman cursive, were practised on the Continent; and at the Conquest any Latin text written in England, whether literary, liturgical, or legal, was as likely as any other to reflect the pervasiveness of the Carolingian reforms. Thus the text of Domesday Book itself (Plate I (c)) is in a clear Carolingian minuscule and its headings and displayed matter in rustic capitals.

The usual division of post-Conquest English writing is into 'book' and 'charter' hands, the first characterised by their use in literary and liturgical manuscripts and the second by their use in business documents. But for some time after the Conquest the difference in function induced no significant difference of form. The writers of literary manuscripts were catering for a widely dispersed class of learned readers: they were at the same time more susceptible to influences exerted on the literate world as a whole and more concerned to conserve and standardise their practices than the writers of business documents intended for a limited and local audience. The development of the post-Conquest book hand is therefore to a great extent common to many countries, certainly to those of northern Europe, rather than a purely English phenomenon. The direction of this development can be seen to be due to the desire to save space without sacrifice of dignity. North of the Alps this was achieved by the evolution of a closer-set, narrower minuscule than the Carolingian original, and to it weight and solidity were added by the use of a broader pen. By about 1200 the book-hand minuscule had substantially taken the form which it was to retain (with a steady increase in massiveness) until the 15th century, when it was transferred, just as it was, to the types of the first printers. The resemblance of a page written in this style to a woven pattern (*textus*) is responsible for the name 'text hand' by which many scholars would prefer it to be called. The calligraphers of the Renaissance coined for it the contemptuous epithet 'gothic', which they used in the same sense of 'barbarous' as Sir Christopher Wren describing the Early English, Decorated, and Perpendicular styles of architecture.

A narrow letter executed with a broad pen must inevitably have its curves replaced by angles;¹ and in the statelier of the recognised varieties of text the appearance of angularity is enhanced by the treatment of perpendicular strokes, and especially of minims. In the most elaborate *textura* the perpendicular terminates above and below in a symmetrical lozenge-shaped serif; simpler types confine the seriffing of perpendiculars to the heads and leave their feet tapered or irregularly finished. In one style, reputedly of English origin, the heads of the perpendiculars are seriffed and the feet are neatly squared off level with the base line: the effect of horizontal amputation thus produced explains the alternative names *littera prescissa* and *littera sine pedibus* (Plate XXXIII).

¹ Monsieur J. Boussard sees the angularity of gothic as evidence that it was written with a nib 'biseauté à gauche' (that is, cut obliquely so that the shorter side was on the left of the split) and further suggests that the features that characterise gothic are first seen in British writing. See his article, 'Influences insulaires dans la formation de l'écriture gothique' in *Scriptorium*, Vol. V (1951), which collects references to the copious literature on the origins of gothic.

The additional weight to which the minuscule had been subjected by the broad pen could not be similarly imposed on the slender rustic capitals, which were gradually abandoned during the 12th century in favour of a rounded capital of something like uncial form. Already at the time of Domesday Book an *H* and an *M* of uncial pattern had established themselves in the rustic-capital alphabet, and the four-stroke *E* was being frequently varied by a round quasi-uncial one. By the end of the 12th century these forms were supplemented by uncial *U* with a foot-serif on the right, a cabriole-legged *N*, and a *T* with a curved shank (the last two owing something to the design of their minuscule counterparts); and all were freely used as optional variants even in matter written in *quadrata*.¹ To give them prominence and to bring them into harmony with the text letter, book-scribes built up these rounded capitals with broad and solid strokes and at the same time extended and exaggerated their serifs, so that the arms of *E*, for example, or the feet of *M* are linked by a continuous curved line.

Unable for aesthetic reasons to vary the sizes of his text characters or the length of his lines, the book-scribe approaching the end of a line used other means, besides word-breaking, of exactly filling the space available and keeping his right-hand margin regular. The first was abbreviation, judiciously calculated to leave him with precisely the desired amount of matter; the second was the convention whereby the curve on the right of such letters as *b*, *h*, *p* and backward-bent *d*, might be united at discretion with a contrary curve in an immediately following letter such as *a*, *e* or *o*.²

The relevance of the text hand to the study of manuscript archives does not lie only in the common origin of text and business hands in England and their virtual identity during an important period. Until the Renaissance, text provided for the overwhelming majority of readers the norm or standard by which legibility was judged, and thus influenced the reforms and limited the innovations introduced into business writing.

3

Characteristics of the earlier Business Hands

Almost all the English archives now surviving from the century or so following the Conquest are of a more or less ceremonious character and therefore may not reflect accurately the rate at which business writing as a whole developed away from the literary hand. But by about 1150 at the latest it is possible to say that certain features are common to the work of clerks whose normal employment is on business documents. The perpendicularly ascending *d* of the orthodox text hand has been definitively replaced by the form in which the ascender is bent backwards, and the stem of *r* descends well below the

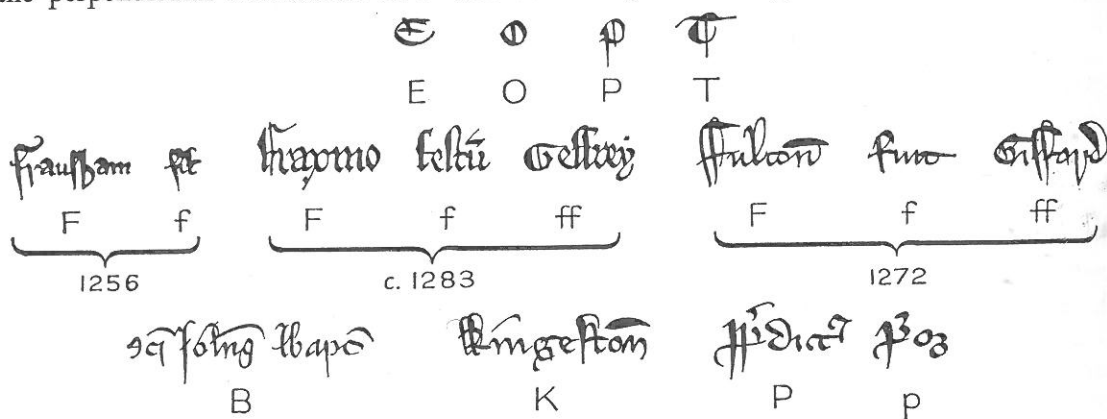
¹ They give its distinctive character to the capital alphabet (sometimes called 'Lombardic') used from about 1175 until the middle of the 14th century for the lettering on English seals.

² Plate XXXIII exhibits several examples. Mr. N. R. Ker uses the term 'biting' to describe this coalescence of opposed curves: see his *English Manuscripts in the Century after the Norman Conquest* (Oxford, 1960), pp. 38, 39, where a document of 1180 is regarded as giving us a date for the appearance of the feature in England. It remained a constant characteristic of the text hand throughout the rest of its history. In archive hands of the 13th century 'biting', especially of backward-bent *d* and following *e*, is fairly common.

base-line. The serifs of the literary minuscule are passing imperceptibly, in business writing, into the 'ties' between strokes or letters which assist speed and fluency. The rounding of capitals offered similar assistance and was quickly taken up (perhaps in some cases, such as *T*, actually introduced) by the writers of archives.

When, at the end of the 12th century, we are able to consult informal business writing—in the earliest Plea Rolls, for example, or in the enrolments, as opposed to the sealed engrossments, of royal charters—we find a style which argues a fairly long tradition of rapid cursive. Engrossments under the Great Seal are still written with a certain deliberation and some regard for the separate formation of individual letters; the enrolments exhibit the same letters, formed in the same way, but present them in a smaller size and with no attempt to disguise the frankly cursive character of the writing. There is, however, as yet no distinction between the *hands* used for business purposes; such difference as can be detected is between the ceremonious and the workaday employment of a single style.

During the 13th century the contrast between text and business hands became more marked. It was still possible for a pure text hand to be used for archives: the Salisbury exemplar of Magna Carta is written in a more than passable book hand; and the hands used for private charters between about 1220 and 1240 often have strong affinities with contemporary text.¹ From about 1180 the broad strokes and fattened curves of calligraphic text-hand capitals had been represented in humbler writing in outline, so to speak, by the addition to the characters of internal lines paralleling the main straight strokes and forming chords to the rounded ones. This treatment, no doubt partly inspired by *horror vacui*, was late in being applied to *F*, which until the middle of the 13th century remained a somewhat insignificant letter, differing only slightly from *f*. But as soon as the perpendicular mainstroke of *F* was doubled (about 1260), scribes found themselves



Thirteenth-century treatment of capitals

writing *ff*; and the Battle Abbey clerk of c. 1283 who distinguished the new *F* from *ff* was both unusually conscientious and unusually skilful. Those writers who late in the 13th

¹ Late examples of the literary hand in non-ceremonious archive contexts include a Lincolnshire jury panel of 1250 (Chancery Files, A.1) and a number of entries in a Channel Islands Eyre Roll of 1323-4 (Assize Rolls, etc., 1165, mm. 13 and 14).

century contrived renderings of *B*, *K* and *P* suggesting respectively ligatures of *bb*, *kk* and *pp* found no imitators; but identical forms for *F* and *ff* remain a constant feature of gothic hands throughout the rest of their history.

In general the hands used for archives during the 13th century were developing along the lines suggested by the early divergence between the ceremonious and the less so.¹ Writers soon evolved cursive forms of the uncialised capitals—forms which encompassed the basic design, the serifs, and the adventitious internal lines in the fewest possible actions of the pen. The long-stemmed *r* had become virtually universal in archives (though both text and business hands used the Arabic-2 form of *r* after round-bodied letters). The minuscules *b*, *h*, *k*, and *l* now begin with a small hook on the right of the ascender; and as the century proceeds this hook approximates more and more, in informal writing, to a loop. On the opposite (left-hand) side of the ascenders of these letters there appears, about midway through the century, a curved, spur-like projection which in the course of the next fifty years is found progressively higher up the vertical stroke, reaching the top (where it duplicates symmetrically the hook on the right) about 1300 and subsequently disappearing. Towards the end of the century long *s* ceases to be written in the final position; and the 'beaver-tailed' capital *S* (so often since that time misread as *M*) enjoys its comparatively brief vogue. While text remains rigidly upright, the business hands of the 13th century will often be found to exhibit a slight backward slope. But by the time of Edward I the archive hand is normally regular and upright, with short extruders² and little space between the lines. The contrast between thick and thin strokes is more marked than at any previous time: the distinctive appearance of the hand is, indeed, largely due to the weight given to the longer perpendiculars and to the diagonal stroke which completes the looped ascender of *d*.

Under Edward II the loss of the left-hand hook from the ascenders of *b*, *h*, *k*, and *l*, and the increasingly frequent appearance of a loop on the left of the descending strokes of *f*, *p*, and long *s*, create an appearance of growing speed and currency in execution; though the typical business hand of this period remains an orderly and eminently legible cursive, which, at its own level, is not without calligraphic pretensions. But from about 1330 there is a steady decline in regularity and architectural quality: even in formal documents the writing is not only strongly cursive but wanting in discipline, and suggests an unsuccessful attempt to reconcile the claims of ceremoniousness and speed.

4

Bastard

It is at this time, with English business handwriting ripe for reform, that we first hear of a body of men called *scriptores litere curialis*, the writers of the 'court letter', or

¹ A 15th-century critic of a charter purporting to speak from the reign of Henry III condemns it as a forgery, among other reasons because 'the writing is a kind of text or set hand (*litera est quasi textus sive sethonde*), and there was no such manner of writing of old time' (Historical MSS. Commission, Eighth Report, 1881 (re-issued 1908), App. 1 (II), No. 265b).

² The exaggerated lengthening and thickening of the ascenders in the top line of a document is a modest form of embellishment which lasted for centuries (cf. Plates VIII and X (a)).

scriveners.¹ (*Litera curialis*, translated by 'court letter' or 'court hand', has the entirely general meaning of handwriting used to record any kind of business transaction, as opposed to the book hand: it embraces, but is by no means restricted to, the hands written in courts of justice.²) It would be natural for a young profession to welcome new technical developments and to seek the means of distinguishing its work from that of the uninitiated; and it may well be that the scriveners played an important part in the reform of English business handwriting which followed upon the introduction of the bastard hand into this country in the second half of the 14th century.

Bastard, as its name³ suggests, is a hybrid: it combines some of the features of the canonical text hand with some of the elements of cursive writing. Whatever the implied shame attaching to its genesis, it rapidly achieved an independent position of its own in the widening gap between the formal text, used for first-class literary and liturgical manuscripts in Latin, and the unambitious archive hands, and in one or another of its forms it was widely written all over Europe. For the vernacular literatures it provided a medium consistent with their increasing dignity; in business documents it had the advantage of being more speedily written than text, and more legible and more professional-looking than any contemporary cursive. By the earliest known English writing masters, who belong to the 16th century, this hand was known as 'bastard secretary'—an unfortunate name in so far as it suggests that it is a form, and not the ancestor, of the secretary hand.

Written in England over a period of at least two hundred years and by scribes of every degree of competence, bastard naturally varies perceptibly between writer and writer and from date to date (Plates XI (b) to XIII). The general characteristics may be summed up as uprightness and angularity, both inherited from text, and a certain discretion in the use of 'ties', or linking-strokes. The angularity is due to the same causes, and is brought about by the same means, as had formerly produced the characteristic appearance of text: the letters are laterally compressed and what had originally been curves are 'broken'⁴ into angles. With few exceptions the serifs of text are absent from bastard, which achieves a look of pointedness by means of a terminal tapering of the perpendiculars which is particularly noticeable in descenders like *p* and *q*. The earliest English examples of bastard borrow the text forms of *d*, *g*, and *r* (the last with its foot-serif), but by the end of the 14th century the old cursive (looped) *d*, the reversed *e*, and the long-stemmed descending *r* are creeping back into use; and the text-type *r* has assumed a cursive form in which the right of the foot-serif is joined to the top of the main stroke.

Bastard is best regarded as the family name for a number of hands rather than as a precise appellation for one. The 15th-century writing masters of France and Germany confined the name, and its synonym *brevitura*, to a single species, but it is well to remember that they had a professional interest in swelling the number of hands they were prepared

¹ By 1357 the London scriveners were already organised into a gild, whose members were in that year exempted from jury service. See H. T. Riley: *Memorials of London . . . in the XIIIth, XIVth and XVth Centuries* (1868), p. 295.

² Cf. the use on the Continent of *notula curiensis* in the same sense, noticed below, p. 64n.

³ On the historicity of the name see Hilary Jenkinson: *The Later Court Hands in England* (Cambridge, 1927), p. 14.

⁴ Hence the name '*fractura*', given to both bastard and text.

to teach. It was, in any case, impossible that a style in almost universal use would everywhere retain its schoolroom orthodoxy.

5

Fifteenth-century 'Free' Hands

Among the effects exerted on handwriting by the invention of printing mention has already been made of the typographical fixation of text at the stage it had then reached. But the spread of printing inevitably killed the demand for manuscript books; and the talents of calligraphers were diverted into other fields, notably that of teaching. At the same time the hands practised for business purposes found themselves thrust into a position in which they began to set the calligraphic standard instead of conforming, however imperfectly, to it. It is thus no accident that the rise and development of the special set hands associated with the departments of the central government in England are roughly contemporaneous with the emergence of the printer and the writing master. At the beginning of this period bastard was established as the orthodox hand for all ceremonious business purposes; and the departments were evolving, with varying rapidity, the distinctive styles whose matured characteristics are discussed in the next chapter.

Elsewhere bastard was developing in a more haphazard fashion. The number of 'free', highly personalised correspondence hands practised in England during the second half of the 15th century is bewilderingly large. With more or less of bastard, and less or more of the old cursives, in their composition they almost all defy classification (Plate XIV (b)). But one late-15th-century modification of bastard is worthy of attention as the hand upon which the characteristic style of the following century or so was founded. This is the hand described by Sir Hilary Jenkinson as 'splayed', which has certain affinities with the *lettre de minute* taught in France, side by side with bastard, about the middle of the 15th century (Plate XII (b)). The characteristic English form is a small hand with the appearance of vertical compression: the minims composing *i*, *m*, *n*, and *u* have a pronounced backward slope, while the 'ties', or linking strokes, have a fully compensating slope to the right. The effect, especially noticeable in words like *annuum* or *minimum*, is to produce a series of alternate slopes, or baseless isosceles triangles, reminiscent of the teeth of a saw. Descenders, which are generally short, have a progressively more marked slope. The hand has what a modern typographer would call low x-height: that is to say that letters like *a*, *c*, and *o*, which do not ascend or descend, are vertically compressed and 'splayed' by comparison with the original bastard. The appearance of smallness is largely illusory, in that there is no gain in the amount of written matter to the line. Distinctive letter-forms are *e*, *g*, *t* (which is readily distinguishable from *c* through the lengthening of the main stroke above the cross), *x* (which by the end of the century is being written in one continuous stroke of the pen), *p* (also written in one action, virtually the same as that for *x*, with consequent assimilation), and *r* (which is normally of the text type, linking the foot-serif to the head of the main stroke, but may take the Arabic-2 shape in any position).