

Special Collections, Hartley Library, University of Southampton

Writing the past: how our eighteenth-century ancestors wrote

It was a style of writing known as round hand – characterised by its flowing style - that gained universal popularity in the eighteenth century, sweeping across Europe. And its popularity was due to the work of writing masters who published writing manuals promoting its use. Notable amongst the English writing masters of this period were George Bickham, George Shelley and Charles Snell. George Bickham's *The Universal Penman* (1741) provided a collection of writing exemplars which showed how to write in the round hand script. It also promoted the presentation of mathematics, including many exemplars of financial documents.



The writing manuals fitted into the preoccupation of the so-called Age of Reason or Enlightenment, with its emphasis on educational activities and focus on "reason" or science and rules and arithmetical formulas. The Dutch calligrapher Jan Pas, in following this scientific based methodology, created geometric constructions of all letter shapes in his book *Mathematische of wiskundige Behandeling der schryfkonst* (Amsterdam, 1737).

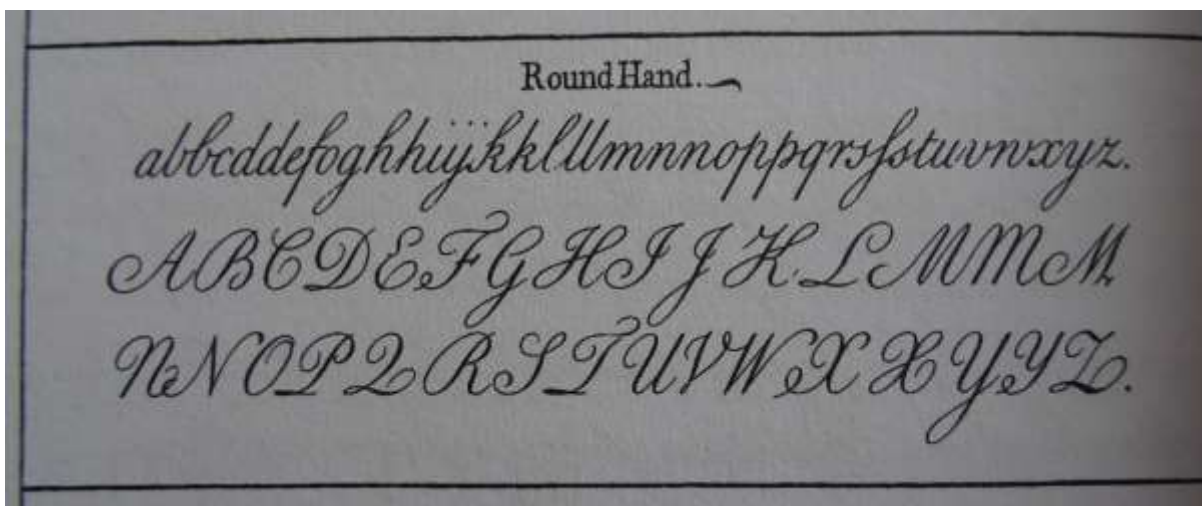
Indeed, the English writing masters owed a great debt to the Dutch calligraphers and writing masters – in particular Ambrosius Perling. The Dutch masters developed the broader and more rounded script that was imitated and developed further by the English into the round hand. Specimens of Perling's writing appeared in various English writing manuals, including that of Bickham.

For information on the development of English handwriting from the twelfth century to more modern times see the [Special Collections blog](#). And why not look at the Special Collections introduction to [palaeography](#) to provide tips on reading old documents on the Special Collections website.

Want to write like an eighteenth-century lady or gentleman?



Get your pens or quills at the ready and join us. And once you have written your letter, see how to fold it up in the manner of the period, before envelopes were commonly used in the [accompanying film](#).



Some of the small letters - b, h, k and l – have more than one form and there is an option to go for the long form of the letter s (a mix of f and j). The w is written mixing n and v together - nv.

Have a go at copying the letter forms a few times to become familiar with them. Then you could either try one of the exemplars from Bickham's book or a letter like that set out below, or something of your own.

READING and WRITING.

By the Arts of Reading and Writing, we can sit at Home and acquaint our selves with what is done in all the distant Parts of the World, & find what our Fathers did long ago in the first Ages of Mankind.



Friendship

*A Friend should always like a Friend indite,
Speak as he thinks, and as he thinks should write,
Searching for Faults, as he would Beauties find,
To Friendship true, but not to Justice blind.*

Two writing exemplars from George Bickham's *The Universal Penman*

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Paris Saturday night July 9 1791

I arrived here after a very pleasant Journey this After
noon about five o'clock which you know is just three
days and four hours from the time I left Park Street
which I think is an expeditious Journey especially
considering I have not been out much after nine any
night nor till after six any morning. So that you
see travelling at least is not rendered worse by the
Revolution. To say the Truth it is rather improved
as the Custom House Officers who used to be troublesome
seem to have entirely vanished and as to the national
Guard who examine ones Passport they give no more
Trouble than you may recollect we met with at L^{ondon}.
Paris looks busy and bustling enough but as yet I have
not seen any of the new things. It is

Sample of a letter in the round hand style in a letter from an archive collection in the Special Collections, Hartley Library.