

If at first you don't succeed...

conantur, convertimini! (The problem with Latin....)

by Michael Maskrey

Introduction

Family historians in the UK know that the easiest part of their research will be the race down the 19th Century to 1837, without exception. It was in this year, on 1st July, when all birth, deaths and marriages had to be registered by law. We know them as B-D-Ms. Before 1837, the recording of Baptisms, Burials and Marriages was left to the Parish Church.

Church records began at about the same time as Henry VIII closed all of the monastic and religious houses across the land. In 1538, Thomas Cromwell, the Vicar General to Henry VIII declared that all baptisms, deaths and marriages should be recorded. Later, in the mid-16th Century, Elizabeth I declared that accurate records should be kept in bound volumes and not just random pieces of parchment. However, some churches did not begin keeping records until much later than this. Eyam in Derbyshire, for example, didn't start recording B-D-Ms until 1600.

Quite often, parish records contain gaps through lost records or neglect of the clergy. However, where gaps occur, these may be covered by the Bishops Transcripts. These were copies of the parish records that were sent to the Diocese every year. In a few instances, these were written in what I consider to be every family historian's nemesis...Latin!

But what about before this date? How can we begin to trace our ancestors further back in time? What records exist before the parish registers?

To find out more about your family's history, you must delve into the ancient documents of your town or city. I will use my home City of Nottingham as an example, since I have used many of the ancient records of the city in the search for my own ancestors.

Mediaeval Records

The first point to remember about the really old records of a city/town/village is that:

- a) They are likely to be written on rolls of parchment (hence the term 'Court Rolls' and the like),
- b) They are likely to be illegible compared with modern records with letters that, for the most part will be unrecognisable, and;
- c) They are likely to be written in Latin.

More than any other point, it is this last one, mentioning the 'L' word that is likely to have any family historian running for the hills! Latin is at best a difficult language to master and at times

it is contradictory beyond belief! This aside, there are ways around this problem and simple programmes that family historians can use to give a half decent translation. More of that later.

So, what kind of records can we expect to find? Well, this really depends on the area of the UK the ancestor you are researching lived. Again I will use Nottingham and the surrounding districts as an example.

- Borough Records – 8 volumes from 1155 to 1835 – These are most probably the most informative documents about day-to-day life in the mediaeval town.
- Nottingham Borough Court Rolls – 1303 to 1475
 - Burgess Pleas
 - Foreign Pleas
- Jeyes Derbyshire Charters

Nationally:

- A survey of mediaeval Winchester
- Canterbury under the Angevin Kings
- Early Assize Rolls for the county of Northumberland
- Publications of the Surtees Society

In all honesty, there are far too many documents to list here and these really have only scratched the surface. It's well worth you getting in touch with your local county archives who will let you know what documents are available, and don't forget the National Archives at <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk>.

However, there are some cool sites that you can try who might just have the documents you're looking for already transcribed. For example:

<https://archive.org>

It was here that I found all 8 volumes of the Borough Records of Nottingham fully transcribed with both Latin and English translations. These are downloadable as text or PDF documents.

Another good site for anyone researching folk from Nottingham is the Nottingham University site:

<https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/research/groups/ucn/online-sources/online-sources.aspx>

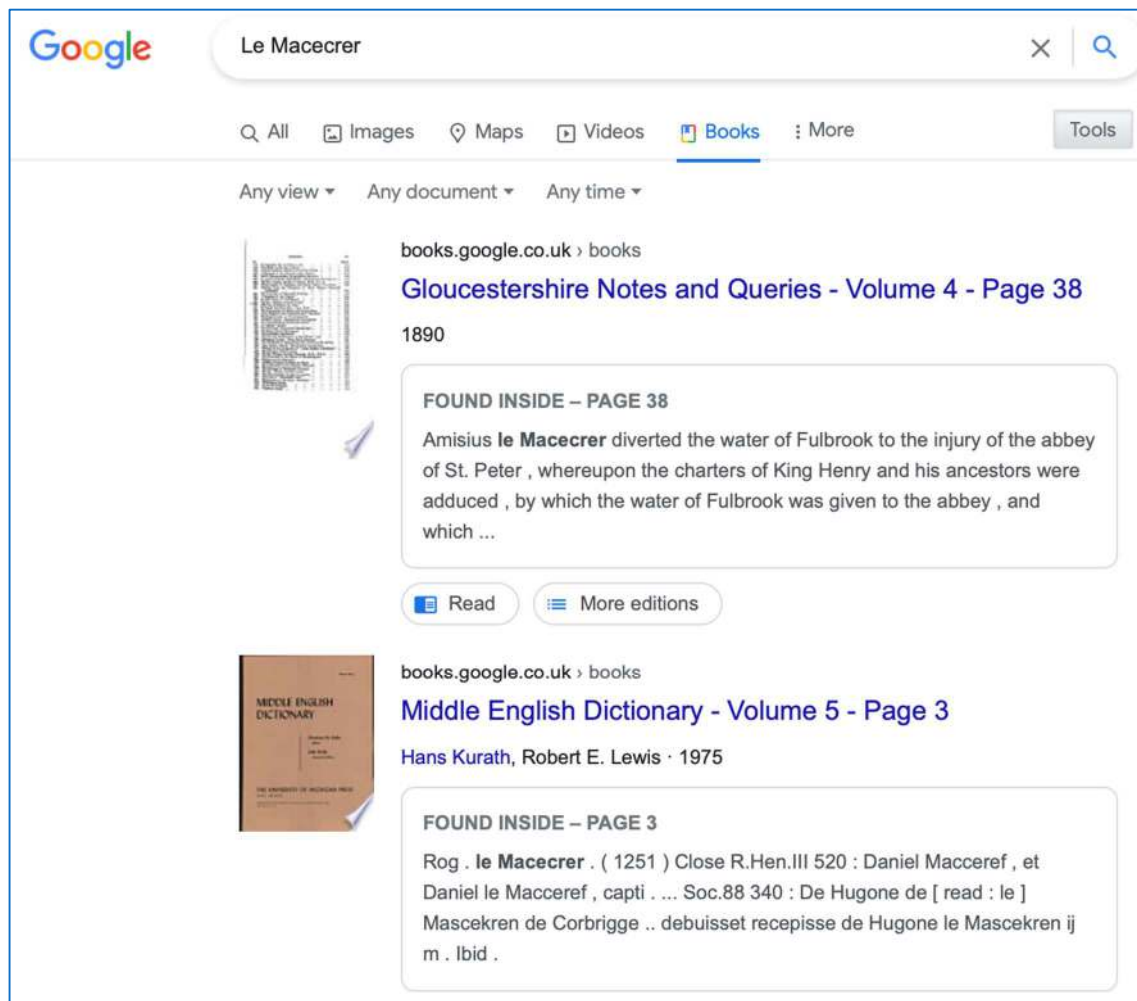
Again, this is a really good site because those kind folk at the University have transcribed 70 of the court rolls and these too are downloadable as PDF documents.

And take a look at Google books too:

<https://books.google.com>

I found many documents just by typing the name I was researching! The image below

illustrates the point. Here I'm searching for references to the earliest known spelling of Maskrey, a Norman derivative, Le Macecrer:



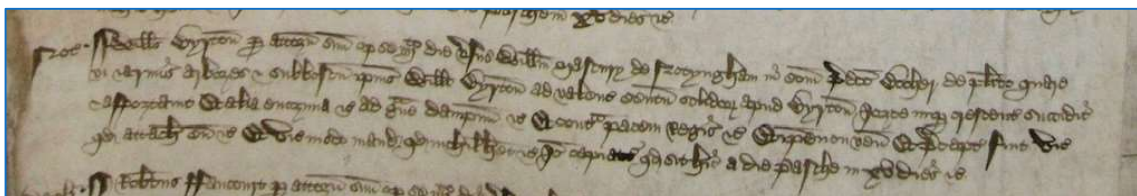
You might also like to try an American site from the University of Houston:

https://waalt.uh.edu/index.php/Main_Page

Again, this is a site I've used and found references to the Mascury family.

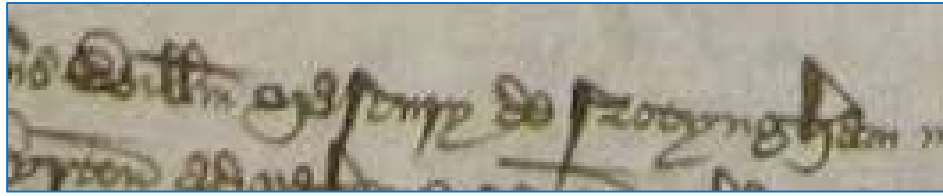
What you can expect...

Ok, first, let's deal with the late mediaeval writing styles. Below is the kind of writing you can expect.



This is from my own family history. It is from record CP40/692 from the annals of Nottingham dated 1434. In the record, William Byrton complains of trespass against William Mascury, butcher of Nottingham.

Let's zoom in on one particular line.



Can you see what it says? It is, as one would expect for the time, written in Latin. It transcribes to:

'Willm Mascury de Notyngham.'

The documents can be found here on the web page of the University of Houston:

https://waalt.uh.edu/index.php/Main_Page

The documents don't just cover Nottingham, but the whole of England, so they may be worth investigating. Remember, there is a chance that the spellings of the names you are used to are not the ones used in the document, so try to be imaginative.

So, how do I begin to transcribe a document you can't even read?

Well, fortunately help again is at hand. The study of old handwriting is called palaeography and there is a brilliant section on the National Archives site that deals with this very subject:

<https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/palaeography/>

It really is worth taking a look. There are many examples and tutorials for you to try and great examples of old writing styles that you can compare your document to. The link is below, so why not give it a go:

<https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/palaeography/tutorial/default.htm>

Ok, you come across a reference, but it's in Latin. What do you do?

Well, let's look at such an entry. Again, this is from my own family history research. It is an excerpt from the Close Rolls of the Reign of Henry III found on Google Books:

De denariis liberandis ad operationes de Freymantel.—Mandatum est vicecomiti Suhamptonie quod denarios illos qui regi debentur de misericordia Henrici le Macecren de Wintonia, et quos rex solvi precepit in warderoba regis, assignet et liberari faciet custodibus operacionum regis de Freitmauntel ad easdem operationes regis inde faciendas. Teste rege apud Merleberg' xxix. die Junii.

De denariis liberandis ad operationes de Freymantel.—Mandatum est vicecomiti Suhamptonie quod denarios illos qui regi debentur de misericordia Henrici le Macecren de Wintonia, et quos rex solvi precepit in warderoba regis, assignet et liberari faciet custodibus operacionum regis

de Freitmauntel ad easdem operationes regis inde faciendas. Teste rege apud Merleberg' xxix. die Junii.

This can be put directly into Google Translate, and this is what you get:

Concerning the release of denarii for the operations of Freymantel. —Command It is the sheriff of Suhampton that those pennies which are due to the king the mercy of Henry le Macecren of Winton, and whom the king commanded by the sun in the king's wardrobe, he will assign and cause to be delivered to the guards of the operations of the king of Freitmauntel to perform the same operations of the king thence. Witness the king at Merleberg' xxix. on the day of June.

Try it. Use this piece of text. It works! It may not be absolutely perfect but it works!

A truer translation is below:

The money's delivery to the operations at Fremantle. Command and is ordered Southampton money and those who are ruled out of Levies by the compassion of Henry le Macecrer of Winchester, and those whom the king gave orders for the force of the sun, in the kings wardrobe he states, will do the same to keepers, and to be freed from thence, which can serve the operations of the king concerning the king's operations at Fremantle. Witness the king at Marlborough, June 29th

As you can see, the two are very close in terms of content.

So, what is the text saying?

Well, the story of Henry le Macecrer is a fascinating one. He was a butcher and Bailiff in Winchester. Henry had been tasked by the King to collect the Taxes of Southampton, but Henry, seeing the plight of some of the Southampton population, simply exempted them from paying tax!

King Henry II was, at the time, making repairs to King Henry II hunting lodge at Freemantle in the parish of Kingsclere near Southampton, and the Southampton taxes had been allocated to these works. By showing 'compassion', Henry le Macecrer's actions brought him into direct conflict with King Henry himself and he was pilloried for it and stripped of his royal position as a Bailiff of the Crown. A further entry states:

Mandatum est vicecomiti Suht' quod illas c. marcas per quas Henricus le Macecrer de Winton' finivit cum rege pro transgressione pillor' venire faciat in garderobam regis cum festinacione quam poterit liberandas P. Chacep', custodi ejusdem garderobe. Teste ut supra.

When translated, the entry explains why Henry was pilloried:

Command is ordered Hampshire to them c. marks¹, by which Henry le Macecrer de

¹ C. Marks = 100 Marks

Winchester 'by hanging himself with the king because of the transgression pill' to make come to which you will be able to be delivered in the king's wardrobe, P. Chacep with the speed you may, with a keeper of the wardrobe of the same. Witness above.

In reality, Henry le Macecrer was lucky to escape with his life. Transgressions against the King of England usually ended in execution. As it was, Henry went on to live until around the 1270's.

This is a great example of how using the tools at our disposal can open up a whole new era of history that would otherwise be locked away.

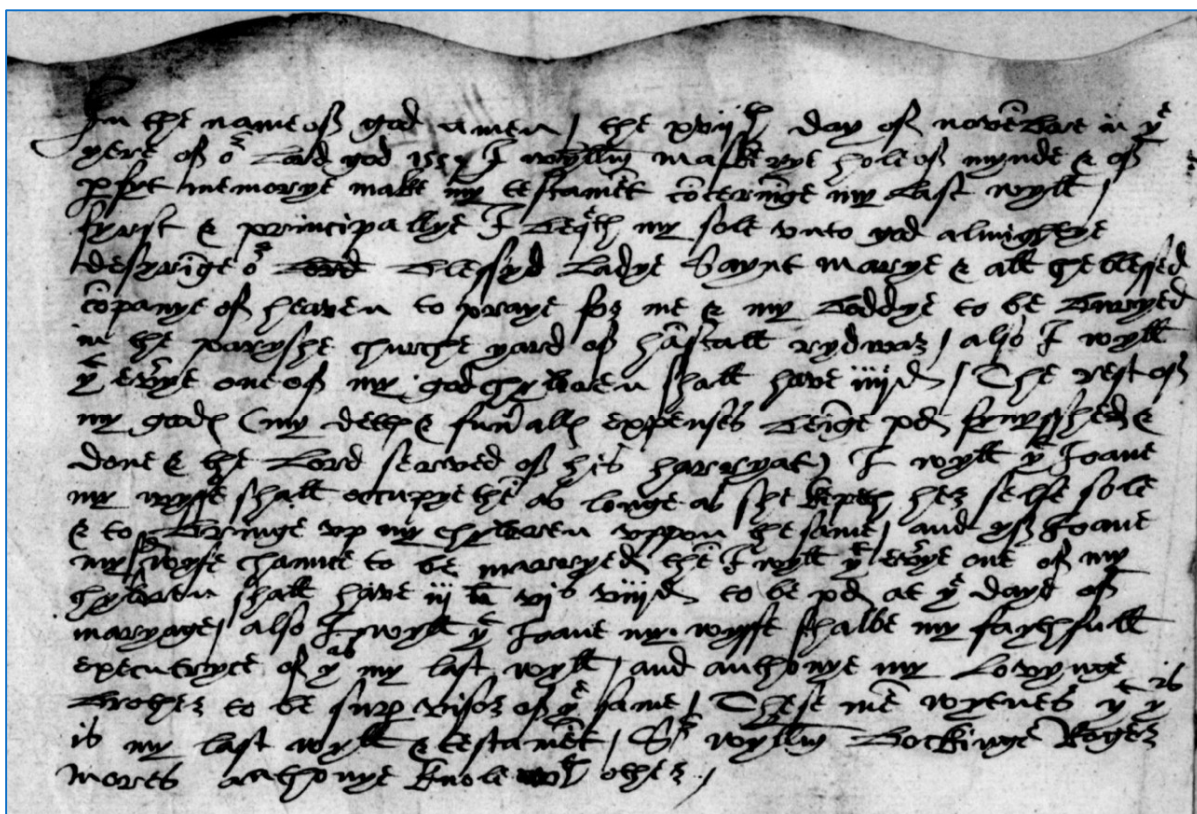
Transcribing Early English Documents

Occasionally we come across documents that look strange and indecipherable. They were often written in the late 16th Century/early 17th Century and appear to be in some kind of broken English and not Latin. Early English was the chosen language towards the end of the 16th Century. With the split from Rome and the Excommunication of Henry VIII, Latin became less and less frequent or important. It is most noticeable in Wills and other family documents.

Tip: if you've not already looked, the wills registry in York is a great place to look for other family documents going back to the mediaeval period. Here are just a few of the indexes available. And please do try and search on Google Books. A lot of these documents are available as free e-books. There are many more than the ones mentioned here:

- *Index of Wills in the York Registry, 1389 to 1514*
- *Index of Wills in the York Registry: 1514 to 1553*
- *Index of Wills in the York Registry: 1594 to 1602*

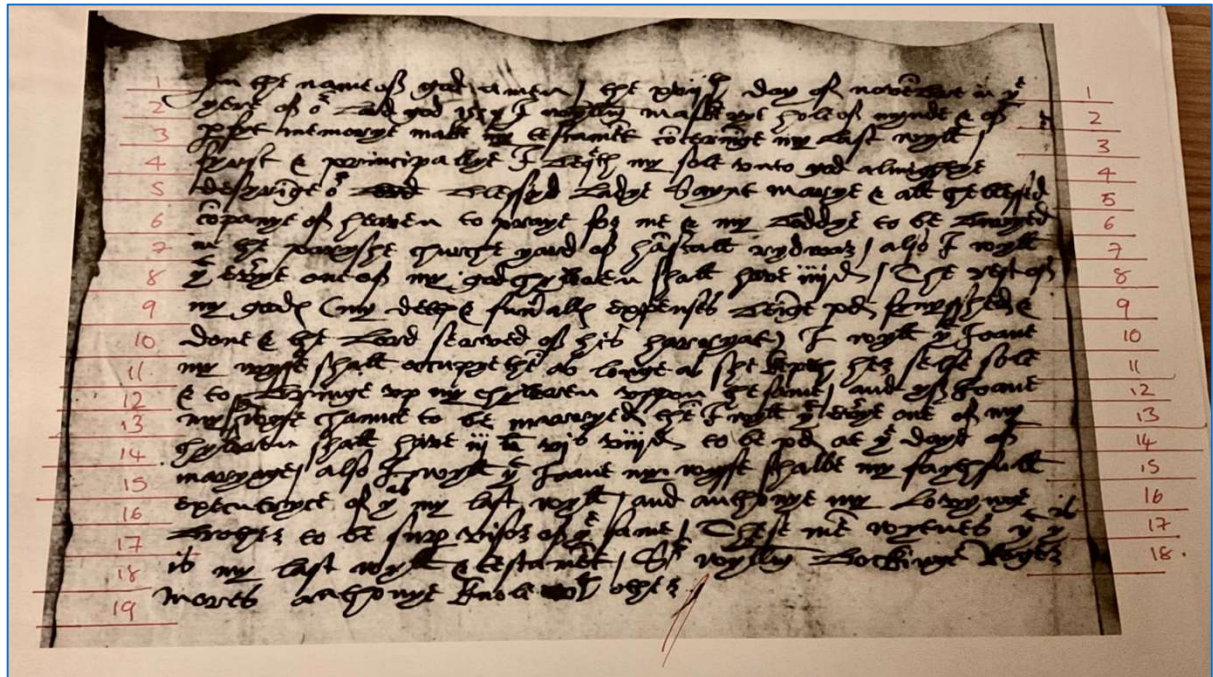
Let's have a look at a Will from my own collection. It is the Will of Anthony Maskerye of Hamstall Ridware in Staffordshire and is dated 1557.



Tip! Always have a notebook and a pencil to hand! You will need it for any words you can't quite make out.

Again, we could use the palaeography tutorials to decipher letters and words but much of the time, they aren't required. Just a little time and patience is all we need to start making head roads into difficult documents.

First, number the lines so that you don't get lost, and take each line at a time. If you get stuck on a word, draw a line and go back later. In some instances completing the words either side give the word away anyway. Take a look below:



Take a look lines 1 and 2. Take a couple of minutes to try and work out what they actually say and write it in the box below:

Have you got it yet?

It says:

In the name of God amen. The 17th day of November in the year of our Lord God 1557, I William Maskerye, sound of the mind and of

the memory etc, etc...

It's not easy, but it is do-able. Just take your time and before you know it, you'll have worked your way through the entire document.

Well, I hope this short article has helped you to think about your own old documents in a new light and remember, with a little practice, you will soon be transcribing your own late mediaeval/Jacobean documents.

Give it a go! It's fun!