

## From the Spoken to the Written Word: An Account of Pre-Twentieth Century Literacy in England

### Abstract

This article looks at literacy in England from Roman times to the close of the nineteenth century. By exploring the changing significance of literacy and its spread among the different social classes, the article is intended to offer a contribution to a better understanding of the impact of literacy on the unfolding of the social history of England.

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### Introduction

This article purports to explore two elements pertaining to literacy (the ability to read and write) in pre-twentieth century England: (1) the changing definition of literacy and (2) its spread among English social sections, both being a reflection of the evolution of the social history of the country. This concern springs from the view that literacy is often thought as a necessary condition for civilisation: *Littera scripta manet*. Historian John Oxham, for one, argues that “the Mesopotamians laid the foundations of mathematics.... The Egyptians were known for their astronomy as well as their astrology.... The Greeks of Iona and the mainland developed logic, scientific thought and philosophy....” He concludes, and this is the point to be stressed: “As far as we know, no illiterate civilisation has matched these achievements (1).” Having said this, the intent of this article is not, however, to numerate and elaborate the landmarks of what could be called English civilisation and their connection to literacy, starting, say, with the recovery of Latin

### ملخص

يتناول هذا المقال واحدا من أهم المقومات الحضارية ألا وهو تحكّم الفرد وقدرته على فعل القراءة والكتابة. وهو يغطي مساحة زمنية ممتدة من أيام التواجد الروماني في إنجلترا إلى نهاية القرن التاسع عشر، وذلك من أجل شرح وتحليل جانب نراه مهما وأساسيا في فهم التاريخ الاجتماعي لإنجلترا، ومساهمة منا في توسيع المفاهيم نركز على التغيرات التي طرأت على معنى قدرة الفرد على القراءة والكتابة، وكذلك انتشارها في عموم الطبقات الاجتماعية.

scholarship, vernacular literature and the visual arts, which some education historians refer to as “the tenth-century renaissance of education;” the foundation of individual liberties and the right of sharing political power with the monarch (the supreme authority of the Medieval Age), expressed in the historic Magna Carta; the development of navigation and the Commercial Revolution; the Agricultural Revolution; and by the same token the Non-Conformist middle classes’ contribution in the Industrial Revolution—each of which could be an inspiring subject matter for future articles. The aim is to bring literacy into relief and set it against the overall historical contexts to reveal its contribution to a possibly better understanding of British history. The period concerned in the present article ends in the nineteenth century and extends as far back in history as the accessible sources allow; and, for the sake of manageability, it is divided into two major eras: pre- and post-Reformation. The hope is that this would not aggravate uncertainties and scepticism inherent in studies of ancient histories.

### **Pre-Reformation**

Sources about literacy in Roman Britain are the most difficult to find. Nevertheless, historians Joan Liversidge, Sheppard Frere and Nicholas Orme offer a set of more or less logical assumptions: that Britain had benefited from similar educational services as in the other large Roman provinces; that there had been state-paid and also private grammarians and rhetors in those British urban centres to provide an influential native minority with a Roman education; and that the purpose of the instruction in Latin was to fit the selected minority for public office, hence the importance of Latin as the official spoken and written language. Knowledge of Latin, it is again assumed, would have been confined to relatively small groups (be they Roman or of Celtic stock); viz tribal notables, officials, some craftsmen and traders in the towns, and a few wealthy villa owners in the countryside. The great majority of country dwellers did not benefit from Roman education and therefore remained illiterate. (2) According to these assumptions, only the selected minority of notables and well-to-do groups in the Roman province of England had a working knowledge of Latin, but the proportion of this literate population to the overall population of the province is not known. (3)

The end of the Roman occupation announced the Dark Ages. Yet this is not to infer that the country was left in total illiteracy—nor ignorance! Between 670 and 770, Anglo-Saxon civilization reached a peak and monasteries and noblemen were its patrons. It was the age of the Lindisfarne Gospels, Beowulf and the Bewcastle and Ruthwell crosses.(4) By the year 700, the Roman Christian conversion of the country was complete. Calligraphers, jewellers, metalworkers, stone and ivory carvers produced illuminated religious objects for the Church. Books were copied and illuminated by monks. Craftsmen made weapons, armours and personal ornaments for the aristocratic society, as the poem Beowulf (5) depicts. It is very likely that such skills must have resulted from long training, and could have been transmitted only through some kind of apprenticeship, either within a family of craftsmen, or in permanent craft workshops attached to certain monasteries or noble households. (6) Above all, it must have required some literacy and, on this point, historians are agreed that this was the age of the vernacular.

The Viking raids reduced Anglo-Saxon religious life and learning to a rubble. A cultural renaissance followed King Alfred's victory at Edington in 878. In fact the restoration of Anglo-Saxon culture owes much to Alfred's concerted efforts to order and unite the multiple, fragmented histories of the various English populations which eventually came under his rule. And the writing of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles is probably one good expression of it. With the help of Plegmund, Werferth, Aethelstan, and Werwulf from Mercia, Grimbald and John (the Old Saxon) from the Frankish empire and Asser from Wales, Alfred translated into vernacular the books "most necessary for all men to know," said he, like Gregory the Great's Pastoral Care, Boethius's Consolation of Philosophy, St. Augustine's Soliloquies, the first fifty psalms of the Psalter, Gregory's Dialogues, Orosius's Histories against the Pagans, and Bede's Ecclesiastical History. (7) Such enterprise entails both individuals able to write in the vernacular and an audience able if not to read at least to understand it. The following statement attributed to King Alfred is historic: "all youth of free men now in the English people having the means to apply themselves, should be committed to learning, while they have no strength for other employment, until they are able to read English well." (8) In fact, King Alfred is best remembered for his 'educational reforms'. The spread of literacy among the populations is hard to measure given the lack of statistical sources and archaeological remnants. (9) Yet, available evidence sustains that Latin left room to the vernacular during Anglo-Saxon times.

The development of the vernacular during late Anglo-Saxon England could have contributed to the development of literacy among people had it not been hampered by the Norman restoration of Latin as a language of religion and government. For their part, it is assumed that peasants spoke English in one of its many dialects, and not Latin. Moreover, the rare cases where English was written were sermons and devotional works intended for reading to uneducated audiences. It is worthy of focus at this point that the bulk of peasant education was still pieced up of religious stories and folk customs—transmitted via the spoken, not the written, word. (10) With regard then to people's use of Latin, peasants had substandard skill level: they were illiterate!

Barons and knights were hardly more literate than the peasantry. Historians H. G. Richardson and G. O. Sayles are of the opinion that feudal magnates found little interest for reading and writing and, thus, enrolled clerks in possession of these skills. As a matter of fact, it is widely held, with reference to archival documents and recorded habits dating back to medieval times, that the highborn and well-to-do commonly applied the *seal* as a visual proof of authenticity—not the signature. However, and despite the little knowledge available, Richardson and Sayles argue that an exception should be made of some barons that were literate and had training in letters. (11)

Again, it is difficult to check the nobility's understanding of Latin. Some historians argue with no certainty that the first Norman kings were illiterate, and that Henry II was the most educated king since Alfred. (12) Succeeding kings were probably more or less literate in that they were able to write their names, to understand some spoken Latin and to recognize biblical and liturgical sentences. Yet the good quality of their Latin should raise curiosity. (13)

Only the clergy monopolized Latin. It was universally recognised as the language of both the church services, and ecclesiastical and secular administration. Clerks were to be found anywhere documents had to be written and kept. The rule had it that any man who could read was a clerk—and, consequently, had the advantage of escaping much of the medieval ordinary common law sanctions. (14) On the other hand, the clergy possessiveness was detrimental to the spread of literacy outside the Church. As it is observed, “so long and so far as literacy was identified with the knowledge of Latin, lay society remained illiterate.” (15) Inside the religious orders literacy is noticeably unevenly spread among the clergy, just like wealth, reflecting the prevailing social disparities. The clerical proletariat of stipendiary curates and chaplains could not compare with the clerical aristocracy of bishops, canons and well-to-do rectors. As a matter of fact, many of the clerical proletariat were non-free peasants by birth, and ordination was apparently the sole opportunity for some sort of social ascent. Until 1406, the habit was that a serf could send his son to school on the lord’s permission on payment of compensation with the clear intention of becoming a priest. In case of failure, the child fell back to serfdom. And in view of the rustic surroundings in the countryside, opportunities for self instruction in writing or reading Latin or even vernacular could hardly be possible. (16)

Literacy could also be considered among townsmen; that is, manufacturers and tradesmen. Long before 1300 there were merchants and moneylenders in London who could read and write in the vernacular and possibly even in Latin, and who did not necessarily hire clerks for their writing and accounting. The argument is that large scale financial operations would be incompatible with illiteracy. (17) The thirteenth century also witnessed the emergence of the common lawyers as the earliest learned lay profession, who must have been more or less trilingual. Other small groups of lay craftsmen like book copiers and illuminators, eminent jewellers, metalworkers, tomb makers and master masons must have been literate to some degree. (18)

So far, it might be inferred that literacy was comparatively wide spread, which is not true. Sir Frederick Maurice Powicke, historian, estimates that around 1300, the population of England was some three million. Among them some 30,000 ordained clergy, some 15,000 monks, canons and friars, and 7,000 nuns were recorded. (19) They mounted to some 1.5 per cent of the entire population. This could probably rise to 3 per cent if lay servants, lay judges and common lawyers and some of the magnates, knights and leading burgesses, merchants and craftsmen were added. (20) The vast rural majority, however, must have been under the mercy of their village custom and experience, popularised religion, fear-ridden superstition and mental confinement. Historian A. F. Leach, for his part, based his research on the Poll Tax returns and lavishly presumes that the English population was some two and a quarter of a million in 1377, which, still in his view, would mean 400 schools to forty counties, and one grammar school to every 5.625 people! (21)

Throughout the fifteenth century literacy in English was spreading among the nobility and gentry and among the more prosperous trading class of London, York, Bristol and Norwich, who had long shared much of the gentry’s social and educational

standards. (22) Lower social groups could have been exposed to some larger literacy as a result of the break-up of tenure and labour services and the substitution of leases, rents and wages, which had actually some ‘undesired’ side-effects.

In addition to the Church’s ‘stubborn’ refusal, landlords constituted yet another obstacle to the spread of literacy among the lower orders. If the church was afraid of loosing ecclesiastical authority, the propertied class was much jeopardised by transformations in the medieval economy coupled with some rudimentary education opportunities that promised enterprising peasants possibilities of social ascent. Indeed, any son of a serf who ‘unexpectedly’ succeeded in entering a grammar school could later become a clergy, hence a free man. This meant breaking what Daniel Defoe called the Great Law of Subordination. (23) The governing landlord class was well aware that land tenure would collapse as a result of this cunning but legal emancipation and so the Commons petitioned the King in 1391 “to ordain ... that no serf or villein henceforth put his children to school in order to procure their advancement by clergy.” (24) The King replied in 1406 that: “every man or woman of what state or condition he be, shall be free to set their son or daughter to take learning at any school that pleaseth them within the realm.” (25) Parish clerks, chantry chaplains, scribes and other teachers were encouraging factors in the spread of literacy among the bondsmen as they provided reading and writing schools. In this respect, it is assumed that many fifteenth century stewards, bailiffs and English-writing clerks must have been the sons or grandsons of peasants; and that ordinary skilled artisans like weavers, glaziers, smiths, carpenters and masons must have some degree of literacy. (26)

Another contributory factor to the general spread of literacy was the introduction of the printing technology into London in 1476 by a mercer, William Caxton. By 1500 the age of the manuscript book-copier had gone. The ‘mass’ production of relatively cheap texts in Latin and in English afforded access to an unprecedented range of knowledge and ideas for an enlarged reading public. (27) Results were portentous. Unorthodox ideas were circulating via printed vernacular books during the 1520s alarming the bishop of London, who in 1536 directed an altogether accusative and warning finger to the “other word of God ... which every souter and cobbler doth read in his mother tongue.” (28) In 1543 a class ridden Act of Parliament was passed to forbid access to the authorized English Great Bible to all men under the degree of labourers, husbandmen and yeomen to safeguard orthodoxy from promiscuous Bible study. (29) This ‘brutal’ reaction is an indication, that literacy no longer implied ability to read and write in Latin but in English, and that education of the destitute (under-class people) was seriously threatening the medieval social organization. The Reformation was under process.

### **Post-Reformation**

The chronicle of the Reformation began in 1534 when Henry VIII severed all legal ties with the papacy and proclaimed himself supreme head of the church in England. This was followed, between 1536 and 1540, by the dissolution of all the religious orders and the confiscation of their property. Between 1547 and 1553, under Edward VI, Protestant rites and the Book of Common Prayer in English supplanted the old

Catholic and Latin religious heritage, and with them were expropriated all chantries, collegiate churches and religious guilds. An interlude of five years under Queen Mary followed during which papal authority was restored. Elizabeth's accession in 1558 brought a religious balance and relief in the Acts of Uniformity and Supremacy of 1559, which created The Church of England. By then, former privileges and powers of the church were remarkably restricted.

Simultaneously, the Renaissance changed the aims of education and the new printing trade enlarged its scope. Books on history, law, science, travel, religion, cyphering, husbandry, navigation, metallurgy and architecture, to name but a few were by then accessible to the reading public. New ideas about matters of government, religion and society were disseminated on an unprecedented scale, shaping differently English people's attitudes and opinions. (30)

On the literacy rate, Original Wills reveal that yeomen were often literate, but labourers were generally not. In one exceptional case, it has been reported that a pen and an inkhorn were found among the possessions of a labourer who died at Yardley in 1614. (31) In another instance, 204 men were sentenced to death between 1612 and 1614 by the Middlesex justices. 95 escaped hanging by pleading the right to read the 51st Psalm (commonly called the 'neck verse'): "Have mercy upon me, O God, according to Thy lovingkindness: according unto the multitude of Thy tender mercies blot out my transgressions." According to Professor Lawrence Stone, education historian, "This implies a literacy rate among the total male population of the City which was at least as great, and probably greater." (32) Professor Stone points to another still significant example. The general male population was asked by Parliament in 1642 to take an oath of loyalty. 1,265 males took the oath in eighteen rural parishes of Reigate and Tandridge: one third *signed* and two thirds made their *mark*. Stone concludes that in about 1640 "the average male literacy rate ... was probably not less than 30 per cent, varying from 15 to 20 per cent in the rural north and west to up to 40 per cent in the countryside near London; and ... in some of the larger towns of the south was as high as 60 per cent." (33) As a rule, educational opportunity and, consequently, literacy depended on a man's social status—the higher the better. Another example might well explain this point. Poor men by birth constituted the infantry privates in the New Model Army of 1645, and the troopers were of a higher social class. If the poor could not write their names, the cavalry men were more literate and more articulate, hence their intervention in religion and politics during The Putney Debates (1647). (34)

Literacy rate in rural areas remained almost unchanged; people had neither necessity nor leisure to read or write, when compelled to sign any document a *cross* was accepted by law. In towns it was relatively higher. Townsmen could have greater need for reading, writing and calculating as more newspapers and books would be available. This, at the end, would encourage opportunities of some informed conversations, characteristic of townsmen. By mid-eighteenth century, parish registers indicated that town adult male literacy (that is, by then, the ability to write one's name which presumes his ability to read any written statement that required signing one's

name in the bottom to indicate approval) was 74 per cent in Oxford and Northampton, 66 per cent in Bristol, 62 per cent in King's Lynn, 61 per cent in Nottingham, and 60 per cent in Halifax. (35)

From nearly 9 million in 1801, the total population of England and Wales reached nearly 14 million in 1831. In these early decades of the nineteenth century, and with reference to the number of names *signed* in the marriage register, the percentage of literacy rose. The East Riding figures show an increase from 64 per cent in 1801-10 to 70 in 1831-40. (36) It should be noted that with the advent of cheaper paper and machinery, printed items became available in the 1820s. William Cobbett's cheap edition (produced in 1816) of his Weekly Political Register is a good case in point. He was defender of the rights of the poor and a leader of the popular reform movement. (37) The movement of cheap popular press was launched; education became gradually part and parcel of it; the motto at the head of the Poor Man's Guardian reads 'knowledge is power.' In the 1820s, the co-operative community movements elaborated educational objectives: schools were organized, publications issued, classes for adults and discussion groups were held. The Co-operator, a co-operative journal produced in Brighton, advised working men in 1828 to "form themselves into classes for mutual instruction", and focused on that "labour must be directed by knowledge, and therefore they will acquire all the useful knowledge they possibly can." (38)

About literacy rate again scanty information could be gathered. On the whole it was still estimated that a person who could sign (his/her name) instead of putting a mark or cross was literate. (39) One inspector of the Committee of Council reported in 1846 from the marriage register figures of 1844 that only 67 in 100 men and 51 in 100 women wrote their names. The inspector notified that the spread of learning was "very slow, and the unapproached mass of ignorance very great." (40)

By the final decades of the century, Literacy rate improved markedly. According to the registrar general, basing its statistics on parish registers, the national literacy rate for males raised from eighty per cent in 1871 to eighty-seven in 1881 to reach ninety-four in 1891, and the record for females was respectively seventy-three, eighty-two, and ninety-three per cent. By the end of the century it was approximately ninety-seven per cent in both cases. (41)

### **Conclusion**

If the unprecedented introduction of Latin to England and the spread of it are attributed to the Romans, the translation of Latin texts into Vernacular English and the royal commitment to generalise instruction in the vernacular are the Anglo-Saxons' merits. Later, Normans provided indigenous people with some form of stability when they introduced continental feudalism into Britain, yet the demerits could not go unseen: knowledge of Latin was deliberately made prominent and definitely confined within the premises of the church to accentuate social hierarchy—upon which the entire subordination system rested. Despite resistance to the spread of English instead of Latin and lay men's knowledge of it by the later Middle Ages, the process of Reformation that Henry VIII launched was irreversible as the social and cultural background had already been prepared. All in all, the ability to read and write whether in Latin (in early middle ages) or in English (in later Middle Ages) was generally the

domain of the noble classes and, gradually, the rising entrepreneurial groups (later to be called middle classes). Moreover this literacy is measured by one's ability to write his name and, in better cases, read and understand biblical verses first in Latin then in English. Numerically, the literate population was noticeably small.

In post-Reformation, and as society grew in complexity, English was firmly established as the language of both the official Church and government. It became accepted that people's use of English, and no longer Latin, was the indication of their literacy. In practice, it was one's ability to sign his/her name the visual proof of his/her ability to read and write. In this the middle and upper sections of the English society were more literate than the lower sections, who were still putting a cross instead of their names. Up to the end of the nineteenth century, it was firmly accepted that signing one's name was the literacy yardstick, hence the socialists' campaigns to enhancing working-class adult literacy, and therefore adult education. The universal free and compulsory education of children is yet another scholarly concern.

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