

Taken from English Writing Masters by Ambrose Heal

John Ayres  
(1680-1705)

John Ayres was the most eminent writing-master of his day. Samuel Pepys in his "Calligraphical Collection", now preserved in the Pepysian Library at Magdalene College, Cambridge, prefaces his fine collection of the works of contemporary penmen by quoting from a dissertation by "our eminent countryman Major Ayres ... touching the different State of English and Forreign Pen-man-ship at, and since, the coming-in of Printing". He then proceeds to quote, more or less word for word, a preface which Ayres had written to an edition of his Tutor to Penmanship. Ayres sets out his view of what effect the invention of printing had upon penmanship, its action and reaction; and attributes the renaissance of the writer's art to the beneficial stimulus given to it by the introduction of copperplate engraving.

Ayres began life in a humble way, as footman in the household of Sir William Ashurst (Lord Mayor, 1693-4) when the latter was living at Homsey. It was to Sir William that Ayres owed his early education and it was to him that Ayres dedicated one of his earliest works-his Arithmetic. He was instructed in the art of writing by Thomas Topham (q.v.) who kept a writing school at the Hand and Pen in Fetter Lane. He married a fellow servant, with whom it is said he had c200, and then began to teach at a chairmaker's house in St Paul's Churchyard.

In 1680 he published his first copy-book, entitled *The A la Mode Secretarie*, and at that time advertised himself "Master of the Writing School at the 'Hand and Pen' near St. Paul's School in St. Paul's Church Yard, where Gentlemen may be furnished with the best sort of Steel Pens". This was followed in 1683 by *The Accomplish't Clerk* from the same address, and three or four minor publications devoted to writing and arithmetic. About 1698 he published his most important work, *The Tutor to Penmanship*. This also is dated from St Paul's Churchyard and in 1701 he put an advertisement in *The Post Man* still giving that as his address. In 1700 he published a small copy-book, entitled *Paul's School Round Hand*, and it is possible that he may have had a post as Writing-Master to St Paul's School. In 1704 he handed over his school to Robert More (q.v.) and in that year he dated his preface to More's *Writing Master's Assistant* from Vauxhall. The date of his death is not known but it must have occurred some time between 1704 and 1709, for in the latter year John Rayner (q.v.) in a preface to the *Paul's Scholars' Copy Book* speaks of his master as dead. He died suddenly from apoplexy while regaling some friends at Vauxhall. Bromley's *Catalogue of Engraved British Portraits* gives the date of his death as 1705. Granger confirms this date and says that he had been "forty years a writing-master".

His contemporaries referred to him as "Colonel" or "Major" Ayres, in allusion apparently to his position in the City Bands. Massey says that at one time his business brought him in "near 800 per annum, a fine income for a writing master". Ayres, no less than others of his calling, was given to criticising unfavourably the work of his colleagues and perhaps he gave better than he received. In his preface to the *A la Mode Secretarie* he made caustic comments on some of his fellow-practitioners whom he charged with tracing and copying the works of others. His expression is, "their best Plats being plowed by a Heifer of another's breaking in", and a little further on he says, "And the great pitty that a collection of famous Copy books should be Castrated and Mangled to serve the Ambition of a Mountebank pretender".

Addison, in the first number of *The Guardian*, speaks of Ayres as "that excellent penman who had taken care to affix his portrait to the title-page of his learned treatise. . .".

At one period (1697) he would seem to have been in partnership with a Thomas Ayres-whether a son or some other relative is not known-and at the end of one copy of *The Tutor to Penmanship* appears the following advertisement: "Writing, Arithmetick, Merchants Accompt's I taught by J. Ayres. I Navigation, Surveying, Dialling, Gauging, Perspective, Gunnery, Algebra, Geometry I and other usefull Parts of the Mathematics Taught by Thomas Ayres". The plate immediately preceding this is a diagrammatic piece of lettering signed "Thos. Ayres fecit".

In a prefatory note to *Thoographia or A New Art of Short-Hand* by Abraham Nicholas (1692) Ayres deprecates the tendency of shorthand masters towards trick-writing in miniature which had become fashionable; for, he says, "The true Art and Design of Shorthand is not to write much in a little room but to write much in a little time ". Robert More stated, and it has often been repeated, that Ayres introduced the Italian Hand into England. This statement, however, must not be taken too literally. In de Beauchesne and Baildon's copy-book (1571) there is a plate of the Italique Hand. Martin Billingsley in his *Pen's Excellencie* (1618) gives examples of the Italian Hand and in his preface speaks of it as "a hand which of late is grown very usual and is much affected by divers". David Browne also, in his work of 1638, gives a specimen of the "new, swift, current or speedy Italian writing". More, therefore, must be taken to be referring only to the later, and more cursive form-the Italian Batarde hand-which came into vogue over here towards the end of the seventeenth century.