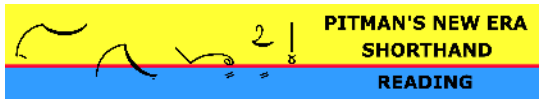

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FACILITY DRILL

Blog - 2015 - October

Daylight Saving

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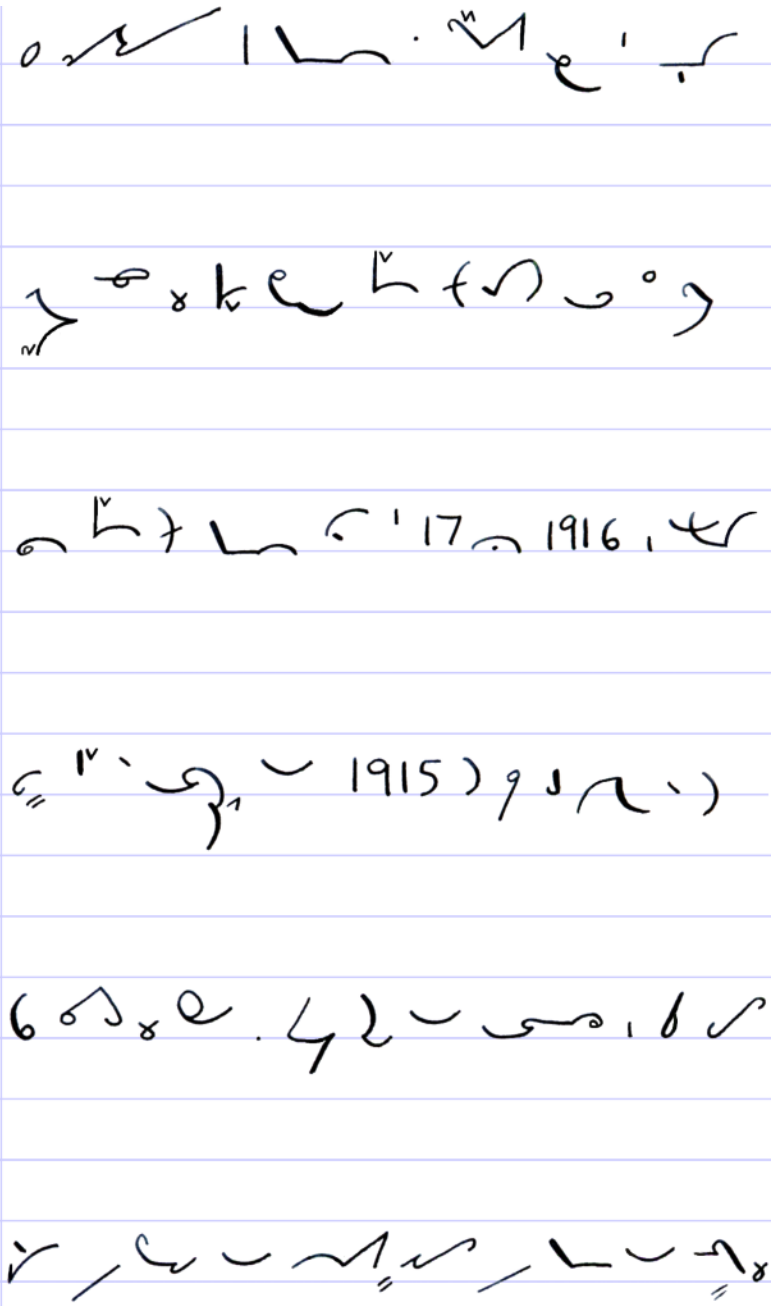
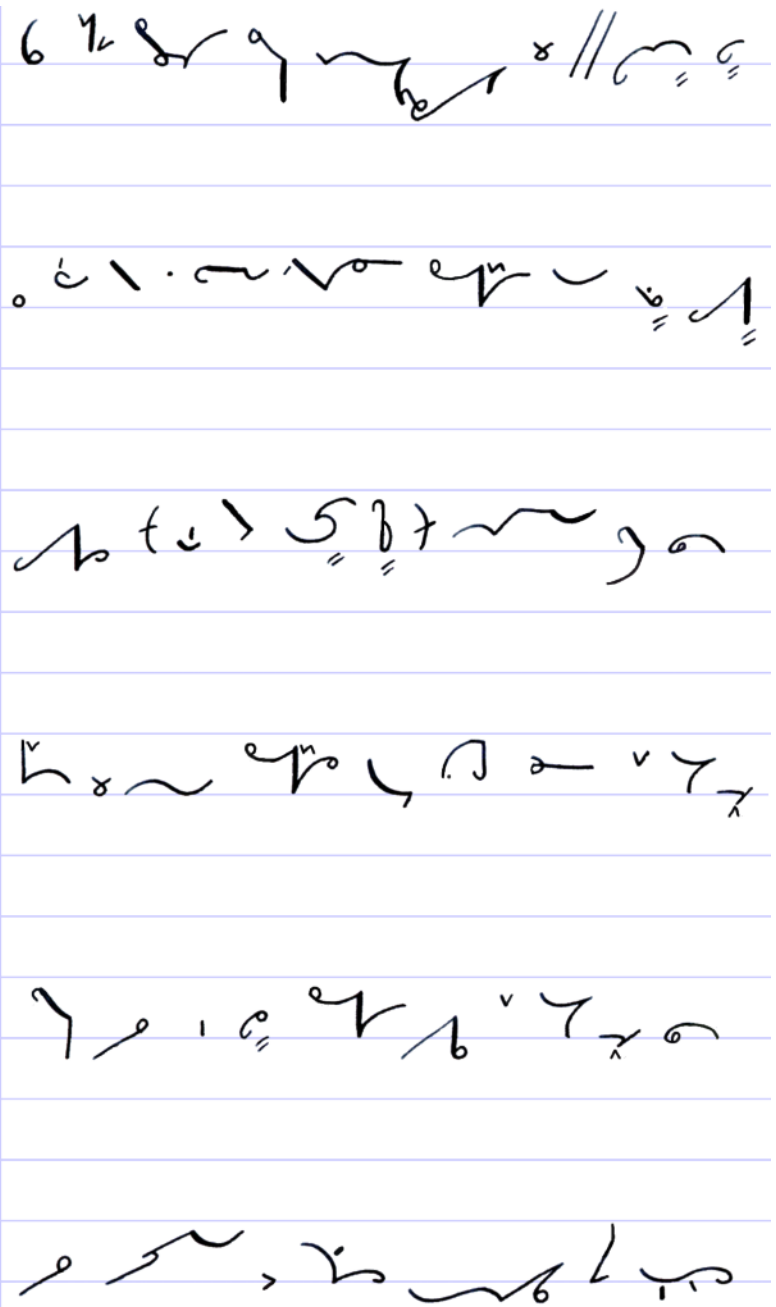
1927
1858





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Daylight Saving

Tonight is the night that the clocks go back. In earlier years it had never occurred to me that there might be a history behind it. I just assumed that "they" decided it would be a good idea if we children had lighter mornings on our journey to school. At that young age I would not have minded dark mornings at all, and would have much preferred to come home earlier with the thought that more minutes of it were left for playing. I did not like the thought that school hours were using up all the best of the daylight available.

The Daylight Saving Time scheme was first suggested by New Zealander George Hudson and his proposal was eventually trialled by his government in 1927. However, the person responsible for bringing about the permanent adoption of this idea in Britain was William Willett. He was born in 1858 and for most of his life was a resident of Chislehurst in Kent. He entered his father's building business, Willett Building Services, which built quality homes in London.

Willett liked to go out horse riding at an early hour and although it was full daylight he noticed that the houses mostly had their curtains and blinds drawn. It occurred to him that they were wasting the daylight hours and therefore spending money and resources on artificial lighting at the end of the day, a good proportion of which could be avoided. In 1909 he began and personally funded a campaign to have daylight saving measures adopted by the Government and published his own leaflet called "The Waste of Daylight". He proposed that the changes should occur in 20 minute increments over four Sundays in April, and likewise reversed in September.

There was much opposition, mainly from farmers, but with the advent of the First World War it became a priority to save on coal and fuel costs. Daylight Saving Time (also known as British Summer Time) became law on 17 May 1916 but unfortunately Willett died of influenza in 1915 so he did not live to see this happen. As we know, the change was not in increments but just one whole hour forward in March and one hour back in October. This idea subsequently spread to many other parts of the world.

William Willett is honoured by a granite obelisk sundial in Petts Wood woodland (owned by the National Trust) marking British Summer Time. Many sundials have the Latin inscription "I only count the bright hours" but Willett's sundial reads "I only count the summer hours" referring to the Roman numerals on which the gnomon shadow falls, with the central lower numeral being a one instead of a twelve. In Petts Wood village centre is a pub called The Daylight Inn, and nearby is Willett Recreation Ground and a road called Willett Way.

Daylight Saving

As a former resident of Greenwich, I always felt an understandable fondness for Greenwich Mean Time, as shown on the clock outside the Royal Observatory in Greenwich Park. Whenever I visited it, I would stand and ponder on the work that went into time measurement and the creation of the magnificent timepieces on display in the museum, all those centuries back when life was so different and knowledge more hard won. Consequently I would always spend half of every year (or at least the first several weeks after changing the clock in the spring) trying to remember what the "real" time was, and with a sigh of relief when the clocks went back to the "correct" time. This did not take into account the fact that I had changed my location by walking home about a mile away, and so the time at my house was slightly ahead of the clock in the park, as I lived a few streets east of the Meridian line.

In winter I feel I am wasting daylight if there is any of it coming through the curtains when I wake up. Even if I start my day at dawn, the day will be short and the evening dark. If the weather is sunny, it has to be made the most of, because gloomier days are coming. On the grey days, the main source of light is the white glow from my computer screen, illuminating my desk and surroundings. Maybe that itself is a saver of energy, as it is more comfortable to use when all the other room lights are off. However, unlike the sun going down, the screen will never go off on its own and so I have to resist the temptation to carry on past a sensible bed time. After all, if I stay up late, then I am likely to wake up late and see sunlight streaming in from behind the curtain and that would not do at all, especially living so close to Mr Willett's home ground. (811 words)

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