

# Deaf Londoners in the 1660s

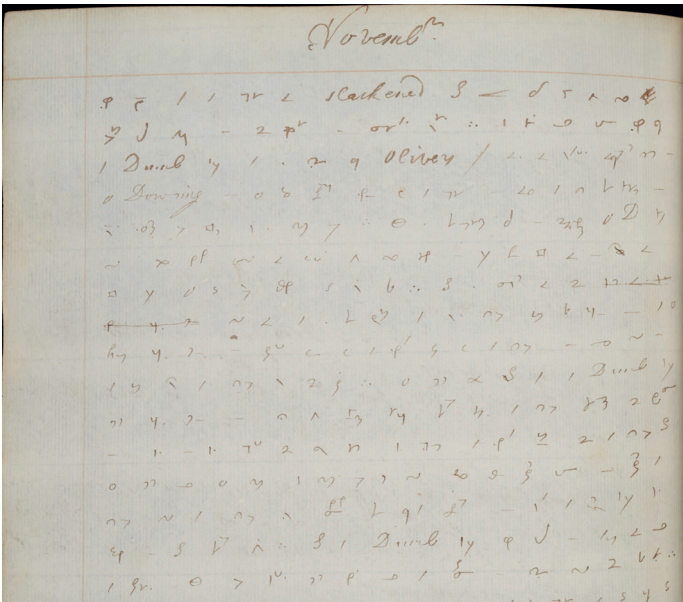
## Image pack



Larger versions of several images are at the end of this document.

### Samuel Pepys' diary, 1666

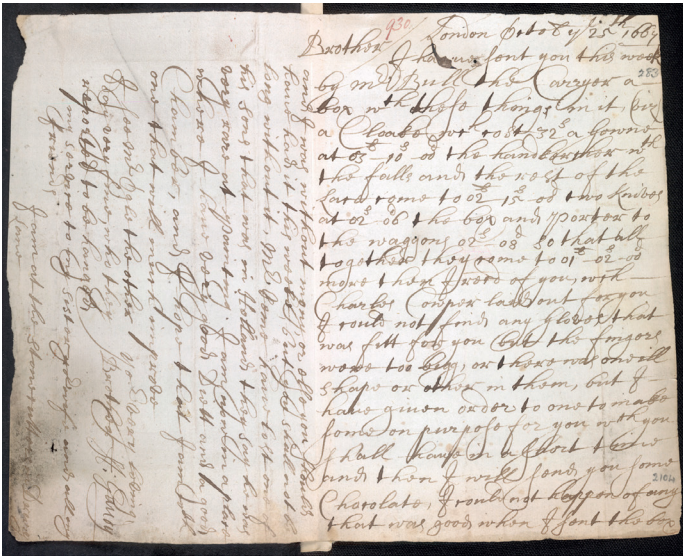
This is part of Pepys's entry for 9 November 1666, showing his encounter with a deaf boy at a party. Pepys wrote in shorthand to keep the diary contents private. A few words are in longhand: the word 'Dumb', meaning 'mute', and names such as 'Olivers'. A transcript of this extract is in the Teachers' Guide.



Samuel Pepys's diary, extract from entry dated 9 November 1666, by permission of the Pepys Library, Magdalene College Cambridge

### Fram Gawdy's letter to John Gawdy, 1667

Fram has sent a box containing 'a Cloake', 'a Gowne', a handkerchief, and lace. 'I could not find any Gloves that was fitt for you but the fingers were too bigg, or there was one ill shape or other in them, but I have given order to one to make some on purpose for you'. 'I will send you some Chocolate, I could not happen of any that was good when I sent the box ... but you shall not be long without it'.



Framlingham Gawdy in London to John Gawdy in Norfolk, 25 October 1667 © British Library Board (Egerton MS 2717 fols. 282v-283r)

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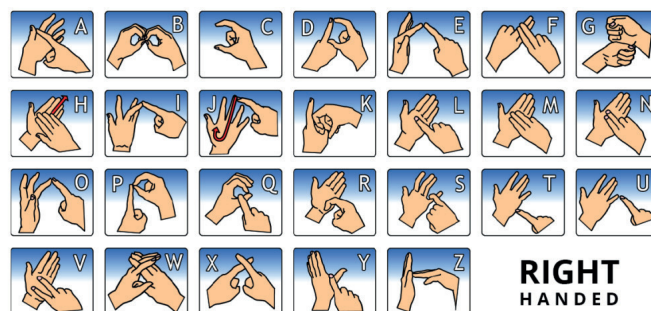
This is a self portrait of John Gawdy, Fram's brother.  
The original is now owned by the British Deaf History Society.



John Gawdy, self portrait. c. 1673. Courtesy of the BDHS.

This is the modern BSL fingerspelling alphabet.  
It is available for download at  
[www.british-sign.co.uk](http://www.british-sign.co.uk)

### BRITISH SIGN LANGUAGE - FINGERSPELLING



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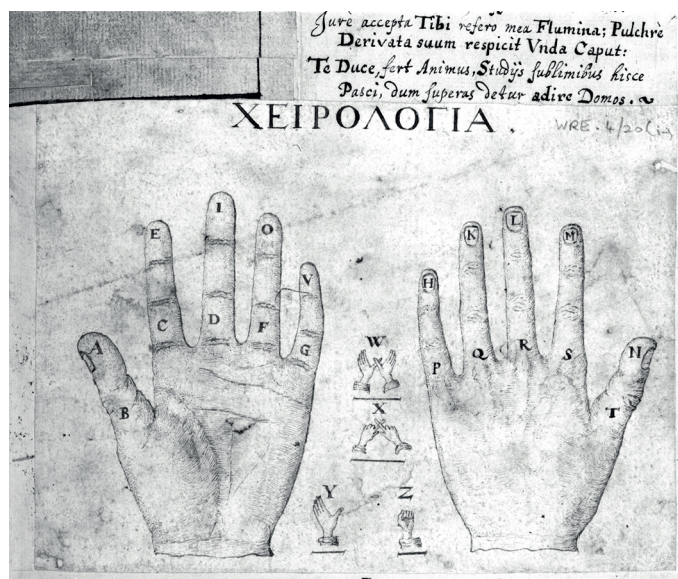
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### Christopher Wren's alphabet (1650)

There is no 'j' in this alphabet as in 17th-century English 'i' and 'j' were interchangeable.

As a teenager, Christopher Wren, the future architect of St Paul's Cathedral, was taught by William Holder (1616-1698). Holder was a natural philosopher (a scientist) who taught Alexander Popham, a deaf young man, to speak in 1660. Holder went on to publish a book called *The Elements of Speech* (1669) which had an appendix on teaching deaf people. He recommended using a combination of writing, lip-reading, and 'Finger Language' (pointing at the front and back of the hand) to do this. Wren clearly shared some of his teacher's enthusiasm for fingerspelling.



Christopher Wren. *Parentalia* (London, 1745), 'Heirloom copy', interleaved between pp. 194 and 195, RIBA Library © RIBA (ref. RIBA80305)

### Charles de la Fin, *Sermo Mirabilis* or *The Silent Language* (1692)

For this alphabet you signal letters by pointing to body parts that begin with those letters:

B = Brow, C = Cheek, D = Deaf ear, F = Forehead, G = Gullet, H = Hair, K = Knuckle, L = Lip, M = Mouth, N = Nose, P = Pap (breast), Q = Quick motion with any finger, R = Rib, S = Shoulder, T = Temple, V = Vein in arm, W = Wrist, X = Two fingers in a cross, Z = Lower part of the chest.

This alphabet was advertised to anyone wanting to impart a 'deep and dangerous Secret without the least Noise'. The Latin title means 'wonderful speech', and the author thought it was wonderful for chatting up women in secret too. It was reissued in 1693 and 1696.



Charles de la Fin, *Sermo Mirabilis*, or *The Silent Language* (1692)  
© British Library Board (1043.a.81, plate opposite p.4)

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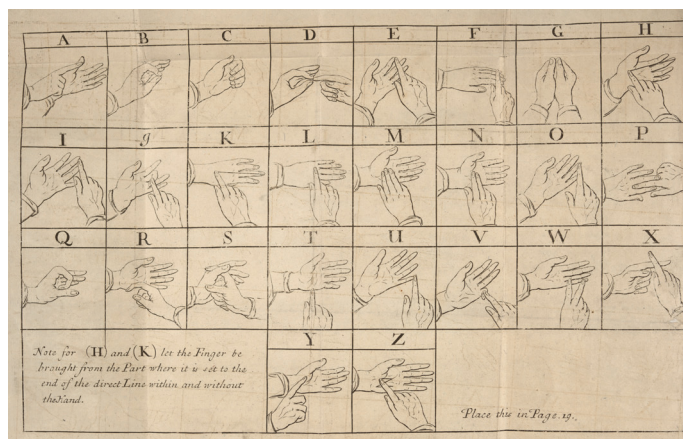
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### **Digiti-Lingua or The Most Compendious, Copious, Facile and Secret Way of Silent Converse Every Yet Discovered (1698)**

'Digiti-Lingua' means 'finger language'. This alphabet has multiple signs in common with modern BSL: A, E, I, O, U and M, N, R, T, X. Some are very similar (eg 'L' is on the back of the hand, rather than on the palm). The anonymous author says they have 'an unfortunate impediment' which means they have used this way of talking for almost 10 years: so presumably they had become deaf or unable to speak. They attacked the practicality of the method given in *Sermo Mirabilis*, arguing that it required you to be able to see most of a signer's body, rather than the hands only, and that it would be obvious to others that communication was going on, rather than being discreet.

Fingerspelling alphabets continued to be developed. In 1720 a biography of the deaf fortune-teller Duncan Campbell contained an alphabet in which almost all the letters were either identical or very similar to modern BSL. The author of the biography was probably William Bond, who was drawing on the ideas of the 17th century natural philosopher John Wallis about teaching deaf children.

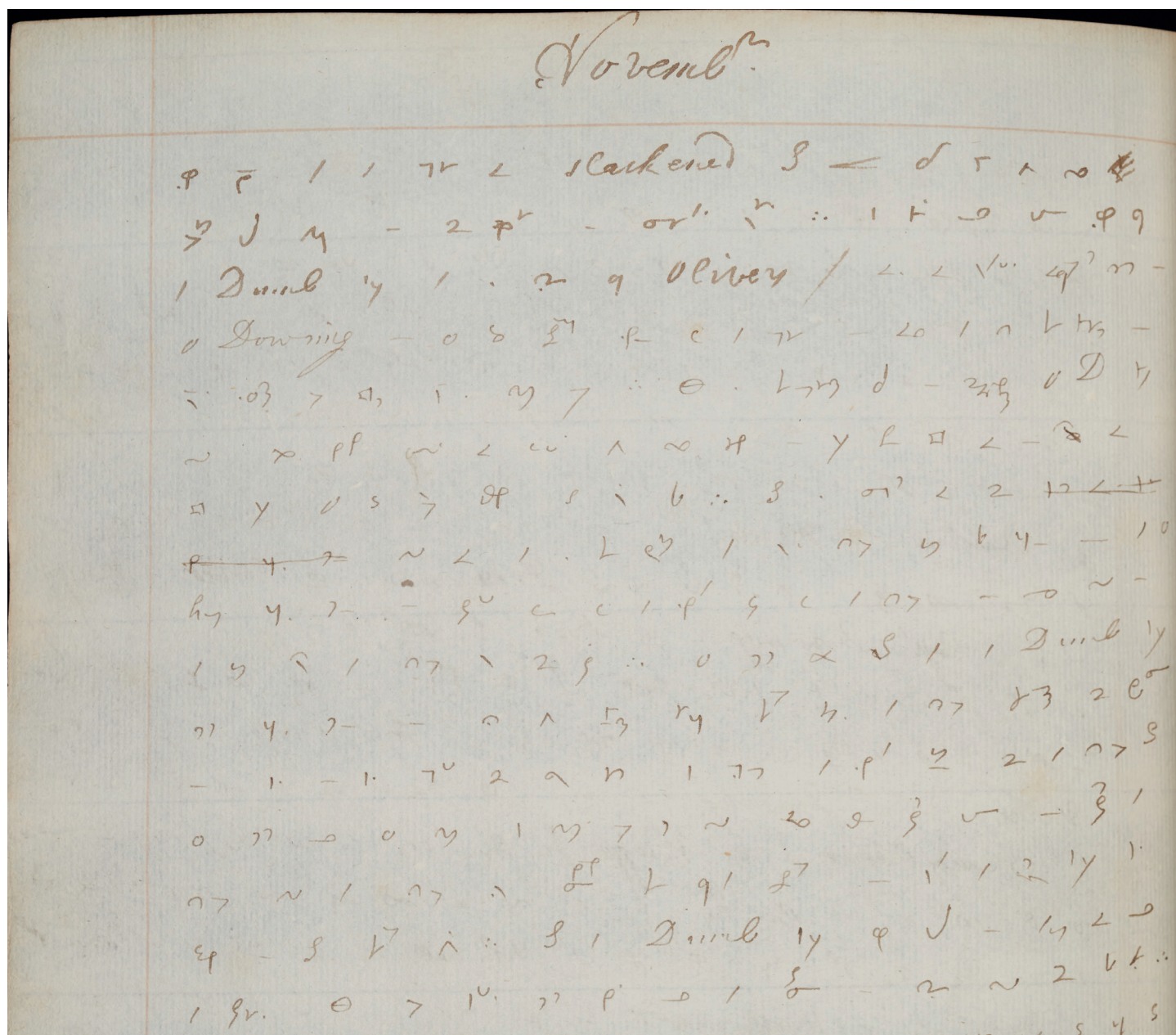


*Digiti-Lingua, or The Most Compendious, Copious, Facile and Secret Way of Silent Converse Ever Yet Discovered (1698) © British Library Board (70Lt3.b.7Lt, plate between pp.78-19)*



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Samuel Pepys's Diary, a signed conversation, 9 November 1666, by permission of the Pepys Library, Magdalene College, Cambridge



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Framlingham Gawdy in London to John Gawdy in Norfolk, 25 October 1667, © British Library Board (Egerton MS 2717 fols. 282u-283r)



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Christopher Wren, fingerspelling alphabet inserted into *Parentalia* (London, 1745). © RIBA (ref. RIBA80305)



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