A Handbook of Dates

A Handbook of Dates is an unrivalled reference book for historians. It provides in clear, user-friendly form, tables which allow the calculation of the dates (and days) on which historical events have fallen or will fall, from AD 400 to 2100. It describes the calendars and other systems used for dating purposes in England from Roman times to the present, including regnal years. Lists of Easter days, saints' days, popes, rulers of England and the Roman calendar are also given. In this updated and expanded edition, edited by Professor Michael Jones, the introductory materials for each set of tables have been revised. New tables for legal chronology, old and new style dates, Celtic Easter, adoption of Gregorian style, and the French Revolutionary calendar have been added, while the existing Anglo-Saxon regnal lists have been significantly revised. A Handbook of Dates is an essential tool for all researchers in British history.

The late C. R. Cheney was Professor of Medieval History at the Universities of Manchester and Cambridge; among his books are From Becket to Langton (Manchester, 1956) and (with Sir Maurice Powick) Councils and Synods and other Documents relating to the English Church, 1205–1313 (Oxford, 1964).

Michael Jones is Professor of Medieval French History at the University of Nottingham. He is a former Literary Director of the Royal Historical Society, and the editor of Nottingham Medieval Studies, and of volume vi of the New Cambridge Medieval History, c. 1300–1415.
A Handbook of Dates

For students of British history

EDITED BY
C.R. CHENEY

NEW EDITION

REVISED BY
MICHAEL JONES
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Preface to the new edition

Christopher Cheney’s *Handbook of Dates for Students of English History* established itself as a minor classic from the moment of its first publication (1945). It has been reprinted at regular intervals ever since, latterly in an increasingly smudgy form, though it continues to sell well to successive generations of students. Although corrected and partially updated, it has never been thoroughly overhauled in the light of new knowledge, nor has its information been checked against that provided in other handbooks of the Royal Historical Society, like the third edition of the *Handbook of British Chronology* (1986). The urgent need to revise some tables as we pass into a new millennium now presents an opportunity not only to review its contents yet again, but also to reflect some changes in the study of English history since 1945. There has, however, been no attempt at such radical revision or enlargement of scope that it would turn Cheney’s original work into something very different.

Originally intended (and admirably fulfilling its purpose) as a short, handy reference tool which could be used daily by practising historians, this new edition is intended to preserve, even enhance, the main features of the *Handbook*, above all its clarity, concision and practicality which so eminently serves to make it a model of its kind. For while it does not pretend to include the mass of information found in some of its continental cousins, it easily surpasses them for ease of use and uncluttered presentation. In resetting or re-ordering tables, these criteria have above all been borne in mind.

Unrepentantly, it remains very much an ‘Anglo-centric’ work, and one perhaps inevitably biased more towards the needs of medievalists than modernists. It is, for instance, the early sections of the table of ‘Rulers of England’ that has undergone the most obvious revision in this edition, both to reflect major advances in the critical study of charter evidence and the now generally accepted standard forms of Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian names. Unfortunately, lack of space has prevented the inclusion of lists of rulers of other parts of the British Isles, for whom some information is available in the *Handbook of British Chronology*, 3rd edn (1986), though this also requires major surgery in the light of modern scholarship.
Preface to the new edition

The provision of more information on the adoption of the Gregorian Calendar by European States and the inclusion of the French Revolutionary Calendar are meant to assist those concerned with English (and later British) diplomatic history, while for legal historians, it has seemed appropriate to provide full tables of law terms. Clarification, new graphics and additional material have been inserted into the introductory remarks for several of the tables, which have now been numbered throughout. General and miscellaneous works and those on Diplomatic are listed immediately after the end of the original preface below (pp. xiv–xvii), whilst other revised bibliographies have been added to the end of the most appropriate sections of the Handbook.

In coordinating this revised edition, I have been particularly helped by colleagues who have written or revised particular sections or contributed new material: Professor J. H. Baker and Dr Paul Brand (legal chronology); Professor Christopher Brooke (dating of episcopal acta); Professor Nicholas Brooks, Professor David Dumville and Dr Simon Keynes (rulers of England); Professor Gordon Campbell (Gregorian calendar); Dr Elizabeth Hallam Smith (law terms); Dr Judith Jesch (rulers of Scandinavian York); Dr Richard Sharp (reckonings of time); Professor Diana Greenway (bibliography), Professor David Smith and Dr David Crook (bibliography; saints’ days); Professor Ronald Hutton (Protestant calendar). Dr Brian Yallop, Superintendent, H. M. Nautical Almanac Office, The Royal Observatories, provided the tables for Easter AD 2001–2100, and Amanda Hill, Rhodes House, Oxford, drew attention to an algorithm or calculating the Gregorian calendar Easter date. Matters of detail have been brought to my attention by Dr Julia Barrow, Leofranc Holford-Strevens, Graham P. Lewis, Omer Rocoux and Dr Derek Spring. Among those who have proffered much valuable advice, I am particularly grateful to Dr Daniel P. McCarthy for suggesting graphics and other ways of re-tabulating information for ‘Reckonings of time’. Elizabeth Howard (and before her, Ruth Parr and Vicky Cuthill) and Richard Fisher at Cambridge University Press have been extremely helpful in advising on presentation.

The Handbook has long been the Royal Historical Society’s ‘best seller’ accessible to amateurs and professionals, many historians use it daily; copies of it allegedly disappeared from the Round Room of the old Public Record Office in Chancery Lane more frequently than any other work of reference. Whilst some of its material can now be found in electronic form, there is nevertheless continuing and overwhelming demand for it as a conventional book; I am sure that this new edition, despite its imperfections, will receive a ready welcome and continue to serve students of English history well into the twenty-first century.

Michael Jones
Literary Director, Royal Historical Society, 1990–7
Candlemas 1999

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Preface to the original edition (1945)

The plan of this book is the direct result of a suggestion made in January 1944 by Mr D. L. Evans, of the Public Record Office. Mr Evans observed that the older English handbooks of dates (notably E. A. Fry’s *Almanacks for students of English history*, 1915) were out of print, and that a new volume containing some of the same tables was urgently required. He suggested, moreover, that a new compilation need not follow slavishly the form of the existing books and that it might well include the more strictly chronological parts of Professor F. M. Powicke’s *Handbook of British Chronology* (1939, cf. below, p. xiv). The Council of the Royal Historical Society approved the project and the present volume is the result. In its planning the editor has had the advantage of help and advice from many quarters. The chapters on reckonings of time and saints’ days are essentially the work of Professor Hilda Johnstone and were published in their original form in the *Handbook of British Chronology*; as they now appear, they embody revision and addition by the editor, made with the author’s consent. Professor Johnstone’s list of saints’ days and festivals has been republished practically as it stands in the former handbook. Professor T. F. T. Plucknett has likewise contributed a revised version of the chapter on legal chronology which first appeared in the *Handbook of British Chronology*. The same book has been laid under contribution for the list of rulers of England before AD 1154; here Professor R. R. Darlington has given his advice on the presentation of material which is extracted wholly from this section of the earlier handbook. The editor is deeply obliged to these contributors and also to all those other scholars who have given help; he wishes to thank especially Mr D. Bonner-Smith, Professor V. H. Galbraith, Mr A. V. Judges, Mr I. G. Philip, Mr H. G. Richardson, Professor M. A. Thomson and Dr M. Tyson.

The plan of the book has of necessity been rigorously exclusive, and those who wish to use it deserve to be warned about the things it does not contain. In the first place, one must emphasize the fact that it does not set up to be a systematic treatise on chronology. It is intended, rather, to provide a compact and convenient means of verifying dates, a work of ready reference which is
required as much by the expert as the novice in the daily handling and checking of historical material. But the lists and tables which form the greater part of the book cannot safely be used unless the reader constantly remembers that at different times and in different places and in the minds of different people a single date may mean different things. Thus 28 December 1190 would be reckoned by the English chancery clerk of that day as falling in the second year of King Richard I, but for a clerk of the exchequer the accounts covering this date belonged to the Pipe Roll of 3 Richard I, and a Benedictine chronicler would include the events of that day in the year of grace 1191. Cervantes and Shakespeare did not die on the same day, although each died on 23 April 1616, according to the computation of his country. An English document dated 28 January 1620 would be written on the same day as a document dated in Scotland 28 January 1621 or a document dated in France 7 February 1621. These examples indicate some of the pitfalls. To afford some guidance in the difficult paths of chronology the book provides chapters on reckonings of time, festivals, regnal years, and so forth. But varieties of practice, both in the reckoning of time and in the presentation of chronological data, are innumerable. For further details of a subject far too complex to be completely covered in a volume of this size and character, the reader is referred to the works cited in the select bibliography which follows this preface.

The book is strictly limited to the dating of records which a student of English history will commonly encounter. Even so, it cannot claim to be complete, since the student will sometimes handle documents dated according to a French or German or Russian calendar, or may even be called upon to translate a date from the Jewish or Muhammadan to the Christian era. Moreover, the year of an episcopate, mayoralty, or shrievalty may be introduced into a document to perplex the historian. Any historical fact imaginable may be not only a clue to the date of a record, but an element deliberately introduced by the writer to date it; so, for instance, we have a charter dated ‘in the seventh year of the translation of the blessed Thomas the martyr’, and a mortgage reckoned from ‘the Easter after Henry the son of the king of England espoused the daughter of the king of France’. Clearly, a handbook of this kind can only include the commonest chronological material, together with such general directions as will help the student to use other material for dating.

Nor is it within the scope of this work to discuss how undated or imper-

fectly dated documents may be dated accurately by the application of paleo-
graphical or diplomatic tests. Even when the student is not able, by handling
the original, to draw inferences from handwriting, he learns to distinguish
between the royal styles employed by the various Henries of England, to dis-
tinguish between one Pope Innocent and another by reference to their itiner-
aries, and he can date an undated London private charter by finding among
its witnesses the mayor and sheriffs of a particular year. These are but
instances of a principle which applies to all documentary records: that a com-
parison with other records of the same class almost always produces at least
an approximate date. And the student will often find that work of assem-
bling these records and of fitting them into the chronological scheme has
been done for him already; he must simply learn his way about a library. All
this, however, pertains not to chronology but to diplomatic. The reader must
be referred once and for all to the classics of that subject, with the advice that
where these fail to provide infallible tests, he must have recourse to the great
collections of *Regesta*, to cartularies of private charters, and so on. Nor is this
method applicable only to the records of the Middle Ages. In modern times
the undated or incompletely dated letter is as common as it ever was; but, to
quote Professor L. B. Namier, ‘there is hardly an undated document which,
given reasonable care, cannot be dated, at least approximately, from internal
evidence’. The reader may be directed to this scholar’s *Additions and corrections
to Sir John Fortescue’s edition of the correspondence of George III (vol. 1)* (Manchester,
1937) for examples of deficient dating and models of method in the establish-
ing of dates.

It will be observed that this handbook contains no detailed discussion of
the *significance* of dates in official documents. Yet it behoves the historian to
bear this matter well in mind. The fact that a charter of King Henry VI is
dated at a certain place on a certain day does not mean that the king (or,
indeed, any of the witnesses named) was at that place on that day. The date
has a meaning, but not the obvious one, and to understand it we must under-
stand the workings of the royal chancery and the privy seal and signet offices.
So also with the written products of any highly organized government: when
the student (with the help of this book) has translated the dates of the docu-
ments into modern terms, he has still to find out what the dates signify.3

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2. For books on diplomatic, etc., see below, p. xiv–xvii; for the *regesta* of kings and popes, see
pp. 46–7 and 57–8. [In the present edition (2000), bibliographical information has usually
been added at the end of its appropriate section.]

3. The work of Maxwell-Lyte on the great seal (see p. xv) is particularly important for this
question, so far as the English chancery is concerned.
Not only are we able by diplomatic tests to date the undated document and appreciate the significance of dates; it sometimes happens that the dating clause of a document provides an important diplomatic test of authenticity. For the forger can be detected by the use of anachronistic forms of date. He may add a date to a soi-disant writ of William the Conqueror, whose writs were undated, or he may give the year of grace instead of the imperial year in fabricating an early papal bull. But this, after all, is only one among many tests of authenticity and is more fittingly discussed in a treatise on diplomatic than in a handbook of dates.

Finally, to come to an end of warnings, the reader must consider the causes of errors in dating. He will certainly encounter in the course of his work inconsistencies and downright impossibilities in the dates before him. As regards inconsistencies, a word may not be amiss. Where a date is expressed with a wealth of detail, as in the solemn diplomas of the later Anglo-Saxon kings, those elements in the date which are most remote from ordinary usage are the elements most likely to be wrong. Let no one suppose that these errors necessarily bespeak the forger’s work. Even the chancery of Pope Innocent III was at sea in the reckoning of indictions in AD 1206 and AD 1207, whereas it never made a mistake in calculating the year of the pontificate. When we are presented with a date in which the day of the week and the day of the month do not harmonize, it is generally the day of the week which is right. Thus, Lord Halifax dated a letter to George III Friday 3 April 1765, but 3 April 1765 fell on Wednesday and the date of the letter was Friday 3 May. The student must also be prepared to find whole statements of date which for one reason or another are inadmissible. He will make due allowance for human error, remembering how he has occasionally misdated his own correspondence, especially at the beginning of a month or year. But he will do more than this if he wants to make constructive criticism; he will consider the conditions in which the date is transmitted, whether in an original document or in a later copy, whether expressed in word or in roman or arabic numerals, whether written in good faith or with the intention to deceive. Of all these points he must take account; but they do not concern us in this handbook of dates.

Throughout this work the terms of Old Style and New Style are used with the primary meanings attached to them by the Oxford English Dictionary; that is to say, by Old Style we mean the Julian calendar and by New Style the Gregorian, irrespective of the date adopted for the beginning of the year.
where these systems are in use. The practice of historians, both in England and on the Continent, has varied in the past, and the result is confusion. To use ‘New Style’, as is often done, to denote simply the historical year, which begins on 1 January is, strictly speaking, incorrect and to be avoided. If the reader will consider the variations in the practice of England, Scotland and France between the years 1600 and 1752, he will realize at once the danger of laxity in this matter.
This list and others added at the end of each section may serve to direct students to further reading on chronological matters, and to indicate where material may be found for the interpretation of dates and the dating of undated documents. Works which are particularly useful are marked with an asterisk (*).

**General and miscellaneous works**


A great repository of detailed information, sometimes inaccurate but not altogether superseded. Mainly of use to the student of continental history.


Vol. iii contains a valuable chapter of nearly 200 pp. on medieval reckonings of time, and a series of detailed tables.


Livre 11 Chronologie technique (pp. 79–314) is an elaborate and valuable study, with lists and tables.


Gregorian reform of the calendar: proceedings of the Vatican conference to commemorate its 400th anniversary, ed. G. V. Coyne, M. A. Hoskin and O. Pedersen (Vatican City, 1983).


An excellent manual, accurate and full, based on Grotefend’s larger *Zeitrechnung des deutschen Mittelalters und der Neuzeit*, 2 vols. in 3 (Hannover, 1891–8).

Select bibliography

This omits the sections on Reckonings of Time and Saints’ Days and Legal Chronology and the Table of Regnal Years all contained in the first edition of 1939 ed. F. M. Powicke. The third edition greatly enlarges the lists of office-holders and gives more bibliographical matter.


A vast work, chiefly of use for French history.


The work of a great mathematician, with admirable tables and the material for calculating phases of the moon.

*Nicolas, Sir Nicholas Harris, Chronology of history* (London, 1833; 2nd edn (quoted in this work) 1838, and later reprints).

A deservedly popular handbook, now somewhat out of date and not always accurate in detail.

*Poole, Reginald Lane, Medieval reckonings of time*, SPCK, ‘Helps for students of history’, no. 3 (London, 1921).

A lucid little guide by a great scholar.

*Schram, Robert, Kalendariographische und Chronologische Tafeln* (Leipzig, 1908) (contains Jewish and Muslim calendars, as well as the Gregorian and Julian calendars, with tables carried forward to 31 December 2399).

*Stamp, A. E., Methods of chronology*. Historical Association pamphlet no. 92 (London, 1933).

Designed as a series of practical hints and warnings for historical students, by a former Deputy Keeper of the Public Records.


For the calendar used by the Society of Friends see Harris Nicolas, *Chronology of history*, pp. 180–1.

For the reckoning by mayoral years in London judicial records of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries see Hugh Bowler in *Publications of the Catholic Record Soc.*, 34 (1934), pp. xix–xx, and P. E. Jones in *Notes and Queries*, 189 (1945), 278.

For eclipses of the sun and moon:

*Schove, D. J. and Fletcher, A., Chronology of eclipses and comets AD–1000* (Woodbridge, 1984).

*Schoeberer, J. Fr., Spezieller Kanon der zentralen Sonnen- und Mondfinsternisse, welche innerhalb des Zeitraums von 600 bis 1800 n. Chr. in Europa sichtbar waren* (Kristiania, 1923).

For storms, droughts and famines:


Select bibliography


Diplomatic, etc.

(a) The following list only gives a few of the most important general works and essays of outstanding value.


de Boüard, A., Manuel de diplomatique française et pontificale, Tomes i and ii, with plates (Paris, 1929–52).


The most solid and trustworthy modern guide.


Out of date in many details, but still the clearest and most elaborate treatise.

Hall, Hubert, A formula book of English official historical documents, 2 parts (Cambridge, 1908–9).

A useful collection, rather confusedly presented and full of hazards!


Keynes, Simon, The diplomas of King Æthelred ‘the unready’, 978–1016: a study in their use as historical evidence (Cambridge, 1980).


*Madox, Thomas, Formulare Anglicanum (London, 1702).

An important collection of documents, preceded by an important introduction.
Select bibliography


Discusses in great detail the significance of dates in documents of the English chancery, etc.


The introduction contains a valuable note on the diplomatic of private charters.


(b) For dating by study of handwriting the following amply illustrated works are recommended:


(c) For the possibilities of dating by tests applied to paper and ink, see:


An admirable demonstration of detecting forgeries by applying dating tests to paper and printers’ founts is to be be found in:


(d) For paper in general, and for watermarks, see:


