

Online Course: Introduction to Old English Language and Literature

Dates	Wednesdays: 12, 19, 26 February and 5 March 2025
Times	18.00 – 19.30
Level	Beginners
Location	Microsoft Teams (details will be sent ahead of the first session)

Course description

Join us for a four-week online introductory course to Old English language and literature. We will explore Old English in its cultural context and will help you develop skills in analysing and drawing meaning from set texts through accessible exercises and close reading.

Through sessions on the development of medieval English language and the form and structure of Old English poetry, you'll gain a sense of the richness of this earliest of English literature - both its enduring strangeness and its flashes of familiarity. We will read sections of both prose and poetry in the original Old English, using glossaries to unpick the dynamics of this medieval language. We will then turn to the manuscripts in which these texts are preserved. Marvels of survival, each manuscript has a tale to tell, and we will encounter some of the treasures of the Library's collection.

Our course finishes with a session on runes and riddles, inviting you to bring your knowledge of Old English to solving some of the period's most persistent literary mysteries.

This course takes place online on Microsoft Teams. Sessions are recorded and will be available to bookers for a limited time after the session. Live-closed captions are provided. If you have any further access requirements please email adultlearning@bl.uk.

Week 1 – What is Old English?

Tutor: Dr Mary Wellesley

The first session will be a basic introduction to Old English, including a brief overview of the Anglo-Saxon period and some simple introductory grammar. We'll look at some texts which will hopefully seem quite familiar and begin to spot grammatical patterns and similarities between Old English and Modern English. There will also be a chance to learn how Old English is pronounced.

Week 2 – Old English Poetry

Tutor: Dr Victoria Symons

The second session will look at the dynamics of Old English poetry, the relationship between orally transmitted works and the surviving manuscripts, and how the metre, alliteration and rhyme work in the surviving corpus of texts. New grammar and vocabulary will be introduced in this session.

Week 3 —Manuscripts and their Stories

Tutor: Dr Mary Wellesley

The majority of Old English poetry survives in four extraordinary and miraculous physical books. Hear how the greatest Anglo-Saxon epic was nearly consumed by fire and puzzle over how another made its way to Northern Italy in the luggage of an 11th-century traveller. In this session there will be a chance to work with short pieces of Old English poetry, translating and analysing them.

Week 4 – Runes and Riddles!

Tutor: Dr Victoria Symons

The final week will be an encounter with some of the most exciting and enigmatic texts of the Old English period: the riddles of *The Exeter Book* and *The Franks Casket*. You'll also get to work with the runic alphabet and see how it was used in Old English texts.

Tutors

Dr Victoria Symons is a medievalist specialising in Old English literature, medical practices and runic writing. She holds an honorary lectureship at University College London, having taught Old and Middle English language and literature for more than a decade at a variety of institutions. She is the author and editor of books including *The Tale of Beowulf* (2022), *Runes and Roman Letters in Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts* (2017) and *Stasis in the Medieval West* (2017). Her wider publications include numerous articles, chapters, translations and blogposts for both academic and general audiences, with notable ventures ranging from co-editing *The Riddle Ages* blog to working on a *Beowulf*-inspired videogame project. Although her first love will always be runes, her current research centres on childbirth and domestic remedies in both Old and Middle English contexts.

Dr Mary Wellesley is an Associate Fellow of the Institute of Historical Research and an Associate Member of Oxford University's English Faculty. After completing her PhD, she worked in the British Library's department of Ancient, Medieval and Renaissance Manuscripts. Her first book, *Hidden Hands: the Lives of Manuscripts and Their Makers* was published by Quercus in the UK in October 2021, and by Basic Books in the US as *The Gilded Page: The Secret Lives of Manuscripts* at the same time. It was chosen as one of the history books of the year by the *Sunday Times* and *BBC History Magazine*. Alongside her academic publications, Mary writes widely for a general audience and is a regular contributor to the *London Review of Books* and the *New York Review of Books*, amongst others. She is the co-host of three hit podcast series on medieval literature produced by the *London Review of Books*.

Course preparation and materials

Some course materials will be shared in advance of the first session.

Joining the sessions

A joining link will be emailed to you prior to the first session.

Previous knowledge or experience

None required. Our course is designed for anyone who wants to develop a basic awareness of Old English in its cultural and historical context.

Accessibility

Microsoft Teams provides live-closed captions. Please email adultlearning@bl.uk to discuss your access needs.
