

## Old English Masterclass

### Course outline

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<b>Dates</b>	Saturday 30 November AND Sunday 1 December 2024
<b>Times</b>	10.30 – 16.30 both days
<b>Location</b>	Harry M Weinrebe Learning Centre (Lower ground floor), British Library
<b>Level</b>	Beginners
<b>Class size</b>	Maximum 16 participants

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#### Course description

Join our introduction to Old English and encounter the language of the Anglo-Saxons. We'll explore Old English in its cultural context and help you develop skills in analysing and drawing meaning from set texts through accessible exercises and close reading.

Over the weekend you'll gain an understanding of the journey of the English language – from Old English into Middle English and subsequently Modern English – and we'll explore the perils and pleasures of studying a dead language which only survives in a limited number of manuscripts. We will also visit our exhibition *Medieval Women: In Their Own Words*.

We'll study short sections of prose in Old English and, as our confidence grows, transition to verse – in particular short passages from the epic masterpiece *Beowulf*. Rather than attempting to learn tables of grammar, we'll give you a sense of the grammar by using texts which have an attached glossary, allowing you to unpick the dynamics of an inflected language like Old English – that is, to appreciate the musical richness of the original, while also giving you a sense of its meaning.

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## Programme

### Timings

#### **Saturday**

10.15 – registration with tea and coffee

10.30 – course starts

12.30 – lunch (provided, please let us know of your dietary requirements)

13.15 – course resumes

16.30 – day one ends

#### **Sunday**

10.15 – meet outside Gate 5 and enter BL accompanied by a staff member

10.30 – course starts

12.30 – lunch (provided)

13.15 – course resumes

16.30 – course ends

### Content

#### **Saturday**

We'll begin our weekend by looking at early Middle English, and in particular, the 13th-century *Ancrene Wisse* – an advisory text written for three sisters who were anchoresses: women who were walled up inside a cell to live a life of prayer and contemplation. Aside from its appeal as a historical document, the work will help you to think about spelling and inflection as a preparation for the Old English to come.

Later in the day we'll move on to some simple sentences from an Old English translation of the Book of Genesis. We'll also work with some sections from the *Lives of the Saints* by Ælfric of Eynsham (c.950–c.1010), who is often praised for his clear and crisp prose style that uses the rhythms and alliteration of verse, and poetic language. By the end of day one, you'll have learned some of the basics of Old English grammar and be able to recognise the difference between the sentence structure of Old and Modern English.

#### **Sunday**

On day two our focus will be on Old English verse. We'll begin the day with a translation exercise on the haunting *Dream of the Rood*. The morning will conclude with some work with runes, focusing on the famous Franks Casket and its runic inscription. After lunch, we'll work with some of the enigmatic riddles from the Exeter Book. The Masterclass will conclude with some group translation work on the magisterial *Beowulf*.

*The course programme and timings may be subject to change over the weekend.*

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## 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 Member of the English Faculty at the University of Oxford. She has worked in the British Library's department of Ancient, Medieval and Early Modern Manuscripts and also held a Research Affiliateship at the library. Her book, *Hidden Hands: the Lives of Manuscripts and Their Makers* was published in October 2021. It was chosen as one of the history books of the year by both *The Times* and *BBC History Magazine*. Mary is passionate about communicating medieval history to the widest possible audience. Alongside her academic work, she writes widely – her work has appeared in the *Sunday Times*, *The Telegraph*, *The London Review of Books*, *The New York Review of Books* and *The Times Literary Supplement*, amongst others. She is also the co-host of two podcast series made by the *London Review of Books*, 'Encounters with Medieval Women' and 'Medieval Beginnings'. She spent 2017 developing the medieval section of the British Library's *Discovering Literature* online resource, which showcases the Library's medieval English literary collections.

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### **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.

### **Facilities and Refreshments**

On Saturday please gather outside the Harry M Weinrebe Learning Centre, located on the lower ground floor of the Library, from 10.15. The course will begin promptly at 10.30.

On Sunday participants should **gather at Gate 5 on Midland Road from 10.15**. You will be escorted into the building by a staff member at 10.25. Further instructions will be emailed to you ahead of the course.

Tea and coffee is provided on both days in the morning. A vegetarian sandwich lunch is provided on both days. Please email [adultlearning@bl.uk](mailto:adultlearning@bl.uk) to discuss your dietary requirements.

Entry to our current exhibition, *Medieval Women: In Their Own Words*, is included during and as part of the course.

### **Accessibility**

Please email [adultlearning@bl.uk](mailto:adultlearning@bl.uk) to discuss your accessibility requirements.