

A 15th Century Sign Lexicon Used by Monks and Nuns at Syon.

The *Table of signs used during the hours of silence by the sisters and brothers in the monastery of Syon* was part of a series of 15th century parchments given to the Cathedral Church of St. Paul [?London] by Robert Hare (Bentley, 1833; 414). The list was written by one of the brothers, Thomas Betson (d. 1516) but it appears that there really isn't much information about this sign list available, which is a shame because it is also the most easily accessible for English-speaking people.

The Brigittine Order was founded by St. Brigit of Sweden in the mid-14th century. She founded a 'double monastery' in Vadstena which housed both men and women, ruled over by an abbess. By 1415, the Brigittines had reached England, with the foundation of Syon Abbey by King Henry V. The community was expelled from Syon a century later in the 1530s with the dissolution of the monasteries. Like many other orders at the time, signs were used to communicate during times of silence, when speech was restricted. However, they did speak, as the idea of a 'vow of silence' is a modern one. (Bragg, 1997)

The sign list has been reprinted in a few books, many of which the copyright has expired and they have entered the public domain. This particular version comes from Aungier (1840), and has the thorns (ie. þ) removed. The same signs, although spelled differently are also in Kluge (1885).

- **Abbas:** Make the signe for age and also for a woman.
- **Aftirward:** Meue thy forefynger of thy right hand vndir the litle fynger of thy left hande.
- **Agied:** Draw down thy right hande streight ouere thy heer, and ouere thi right ere.
- **Ale:** Make the signe of drynk and drawe thy hande displaied afore thyn eer dunwarde.
- **Anone:** Close thy ryght and holde up thy litill fynger.
- **Appull:** Pvt thy thumbe in thy fiste, and close thy hand and meue afore the to and fro.
- **Awtere:** Rysse the bak of ihy right hand and make after a blissyng.
- **Basyn or Chargeour:** Tvrne thy forefynger of thy right hand in the palme of thy left hande.
- **Bedde:** Make the signe of an house and put thy right hand vnder thy cheke and close thyne een.
- **Bedes** [rosary]: Fomell with thy right thombe upon the forefynger, in maner of departyng of bedes in praiere.
- **Belles:** Make a sygn with both thy handes closed lifyng vp and down in maner of ryngyng.
- **Blissing:** Make a signe of blissyng as a bisshop doth.
- **Boke:** Wagge and meue thy right hande in manere as thou shulde turne the leues of a boke.
- **Brede:** Make with thy two thombes and two forefingers a rounde compas. And if thou wol haue white, make the sign therof [of white]; and if brown toche thy cowlle sleue.
- **Brome:** Swepe wyth thy open hand to and fro on thy left cowl sleue.
- **Broder:** Joyne to-gidere sidelynges thy two fore fyngers.
- **Buttur** or othere **Fatnes:** Draw thy two right uppere fyngers to and fro on thy left palme.
- **Bisshop:** Holde vp thy right hand streight ouere thy frount and hede.
- **Candel:** Make the sign of buttur with the sign fore day.
- **Candelstyck:** Joyn thy ethere fist and holde the right ouer the lefte.
- **Chalice:** Holde up thy right thombe with thy ffyngers in maner of bering of a cope.
- **Chapterhows:** Make the sign of a hows with the sign of disciptyne.
- **Chaunter:** Make the [signe] of a preste with the sign aftir of syngyng.
- **Chese:** Holde thy right hande flatlynges in the palme of thy left.
- **Chirch:** Make the sign of a hows and after make a benediccioune.

Table of signs used during the hours of silence by the sisters and brothers in the monastery of Syon

- **Chymyng:** Make a sign as if ye smote with a hammere.
- **Closter:** Make a rounde cercle with your right forefinger toward the erthe.
- **Clothe:** Rubbe vp and down the endes of all thy right fingers vpon thy left.
- **Colde:** Make the sign of water tremblyng with thy hand or blowe one thi forefynger.
- **Collectory:** Make the sign of a boke and drawe thy fyngers to the warde in maner of gaderyng.
- **Confessioun:** Make the sign of heryng and aftir ley your hand on youre breste.
- **Corporas:** Make the sign of clothe and after that a blessing.
- **Cuppe:** Holde vp thy thombe and fyngers rounde as beryng a coppe.
- **Day or Light:** Put thy right forefynger streght vpon thyn eghe.
- **Dekane:** Make the sign of a brothyre, and aftir a crosse in youre frount.
- **Dissh or Potyngere:** Make a cercle with thy ri3t forefynger in the myddes of thy left palme.
- **Dortour:** The sign of a hows with the sign for slepyng.
- **Drynk:** Bowe thy right forefyngere and put it on thy nedere lyppe.
- **Egges:** Make a token with thy right forefynger upon thy left thombe lo and fro as though thou shulde pill egges.
- **Etyng:** Pvt thy right tombe with two fore fingers joyned to thy mouthe.
- **Epistolary:** Make the signe of a boke, with a crosse on thy breste.
- **Encense:** Put thy two fingers vnto thy two nose thirles [nostrils].
- **Fader:** Joyne thy right thombe with his forefynger to-gidere openly.
- **Fysshe:** Wagge thy hande displaied sidelynges in manere of a fissh taill.
- **Flesshe:** Reyse vp with thy ri3t fyngers the skyne of thy left hande.
- **Girdell:** Drawe thy forefyngers of thy eithere hande rounde about thi miyddell.
- **Gode:** Putte thy right thomb streght vnder nethe thy chynne.
- **Gospeler:** The sign of a boke, with a Crosse on youre forehede with your thombe.
- **Glasse:** Make the signe of a cuppe with the sign of rede wyne.
- **Grayll:** Make the sign of a boke bending thy fyngers vp and down in maner of gratyng.
- **Hammer:** Make a sign with thyn hand up and down as thou dide knokke.
- **Hard:** Putte thy right fiste ouere thy right ere.
- **Heryng:** Putte thy right forefynger, all the other closed, streght on thine ere.
- **Hote:** Holde the side of thy right forefynger fast vnto thy mouth closed.
- **House:** Close thy fynger ende; to-gider vpward and sprede them abroad downward in maner of sparres.
- **I wrote neuere** [never]: Meue esely thy fyngers of thy right hande, flatlynges and fro the, and it servith for **Nay**.
- **I mysilf:** Put thy right forefyngere ende to thy breste.
- **Inke:** Make a signe with thy thombe and two fyngers closid, as thou shulde write.
- **Inough:** Close thy fist to-gidere and holde vp thy thombe; and this may serve for **I know it well**.
- **Kepyng:** Putte thy right hande vnder thy left armehole.
- **Kerchyf:** Make the signe for clothe with handes ouere thy hede.
- **Kyng:** Put all thy fynger endes closed to-gydere on thy forehede.
- **Knyfe:** Drawe thy right hande sidelynges to and fro thorough thy left hande.
- **Lay Broder:** Make the sign of a brodur and drawe thi thombe and two fyngers downe ouere thy heere and ere.
- **Lessone:** Drawe thy forefyngere on lenght ouere thy brest and serueth also for **Long**.
- **Licence:** Lifte vp thy hande displaied afore thy face in esy manere.
- **Litle:** Bowe all thy fyngers and holde up the lytle fyngere.

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- **Locutory:** Make the sign of a howse and the sign of spech.
- **Man:** Putte and holde thy berde in thy right hand.
- **Masse:** Make the sign of a blyssyng.
- **Masboke:** Make the sign for a boke and of a blyssyng.
- **Milke:** Drawe thy left litle fynger in maner of mylkyng.
- **Musterd:** Holde thy nose in the vpper parte of thy right fiste and rubbe it.
- **Pere:** Joyne all thy fyngers in lenth of thy right hande and wagge downwarde.
- **Potenger:** Make a cercle in the balle of thy lefte hande with the fore fynger of thy right hande.
- **Potage:** Make a cercle with the fore fynger of thy right hande in the palnie of thy lefte hande.
- **Preste:** Make the sign of a broder and put thy fore fynger to thyne ere and breite, or els make a cercle therewith upon thyn hede.
- **Pryury or Reredortour:** Make the signe of a house and stryke downe thy right hand by thy clothes.
- **Procession:** Make a cercle with thyfore right fynger towarde the grounde.
- **Quene:** Make the signe of a woman with the signe of a croun on thi forehede.
- **Rede Colour:** Put thy fore fynger to the rede place of thy cheke.
- **Ryngyng:** Make a token with thy fiste up and downe as thou shulde ryng.
- **Salte:** Philippe with thy ri3t thombe and his forefynger ouere the left thombe.
- **Sawser:** Make a rounde cercle in thy left palme with thy right litle fynger.
- **Sawter:** Make a sign for a boke with the signe for a crowne.
- **Sensyng:** Meue thy right hande to and fro, as thoughe thou shulde cense.
- **Sexteyn:** Make the signe of a brothere with the sign for ryngyng.
- **Silence:** Put thy fore fyngere sidelynges to thy mouthe and drawe it vp and downe.
- **Sight kepyng:** Make the signe of light with the signe for kepyng.
- **Syngyng:** Bowe thy fyngers of thy right hande and meue them to and fro afore thy mouthe.
- **Slepyng:** Pvtte thy right hande vnder thy cheke and therewith close thyn eene.
- **Spekyng:** Pvtte thy two forefynger endes flatlyng vpon thy mouthe.
- **Spone:** Lifte sidelynges vp and down thy thombe, and ij fyngers joyned in forme of takyng of potage.
- **Standyng:** Meue thy hande esely vpwarde.
- **Sudary:** Rvbbe thy fyngere endes of thy right hande vpon the endes of the lefte.
- **Suster:** Make the signe of a woman with the signe of a brodur.
- **Texte, or Pax:** Kisse the bak of thy lefte hande, with a crosse on thy breste with the right thombe.
- **Vergeous:** Drawe thy lefte fyngers joyned with thy right fyngers.
- **Vyneacre:** Make the signe of wyne, and drawe thy forefynger from thyne ere to thy throte.
- **Warme:** Pvtte thy forefynger faste vpon thy mouthe.
- **Wasshyng:** Rvbbe thy right haunde flatlyng vpon the bake of thy lefte hande.
- **Water:** Joyne thy fyngers of thy right hande, and meue them dounwarde droppyngly.
- **White:** Drawe thy two right fyngers by thy cheke dounwarde.
- **Wyne:** Meue thy fore fyngre vp and down vpon the ende of thy thombe afore thy eghe.
- **Woman:** Drawe thy forefyngere on lenth ouere thy both browes.
- **Wrytyng:** Make a signe with your thre right fyngers as though ye wrote.

Deo Gratias. Prey for youre,

thomas betson.

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