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Old Style and New Style Dates and the change to the Gregorian Calendar: A summary for genealogists

by Mike Spathaky

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In your family history researches, if you come across a year written as 1840-45, you rightly interpret that as meaning "in the period from 1840 to 1845," the years being understood to be inclusive.

If you see a date written as 2nd March 1735/6 you might think it means the year is uncertain even though the date is known. Wrong! This way of writing a date has a special meaning which all historians need to know about. This article explains how this apparent vagueness is actually a means of specifying a date with precision and without ambiguity, and why we need, not only to understand the notation used, but also to use it ourselves if we are to avoid being misunderstood.

There are two elements of our modern calendar that were not always the same as they are now. One is the starting day of the year; the other is the rule for working out leap years. In England and her colonies both of these changed to our modern usage in 1752. But in other countries the two elements changed at different times. In England and her colonies (which of course included much of the present USA) the phrases Old Style and New Style were and are used to indicate whether dates were using the Julian calendar and Civil year (Old Style) or the Gregorian calendar and Historical Year (New Style). However the phrases are used with different meanings in different contexts and in different countries.

Happy New Year!

Our modern practice of starting each New Year on 1st January, has indeed a long pedigree. The Roman civil year started on 1st January and its use continued until the seventh century AD. The Christian Church generally wished to move towards using one of its major festivals as the start of the year, and Christmas Day was used from the time of Bede (AD 672 or 673 to 735) until the twelfth century.

The Feast of the Annunciation, 25th March, started to be used in the ninth century in parts of southern Europe, but only became widespread in Europe from the eleventh century and in England from the late twelfth. It then held sway until the sixteenth century. 1st January then started to be used as the start of the year, starting in Venice in 1522. Dates when this change was made in some other countries are:

- o 1544 Germany
- o 1556 Spain, Portugal, Roman Catholic Netherlands
- o 1559 Prussia Denmark, Sweden
- o 1564 France
- o 1579 Lorraine
- o 1583 Protestant Netherlands
- o 1600 Scotland
- o 1725 Russia
- o 1721 Tuscany
- o 1752 England and colonies

Leap Years

The Roman calendar before Julius Caesar was based on a year of 365 days. In his time it was realised that the calendar had got out of step with the seasons because the actual length of time taken for the earth to orbit the sun was nearer to 365.25 days. So an extra day was introduced every four years. Thus was the Julian calendar established. By the seventeenth century the calendar was again out of step, because 365.25 was a slight over-estimate of the true length of a year. The cumulative error then amounted to ten days. So Pope Gregory XIII decreed that the day following 4th October 1582 would be 15th October.

So that the same problem would not recur, the rule for leap years was changed slightly. End of century years would no longer be leap years unless divisible by 400. So, while 1600 and 2000 would still be leap years as in the Julian calendar, the years 1700, 1800 and 1900 would not. Thus was established the Gregorian Calendar which we use today.

The cause of ambiguities - 1. Julian vs. Gregorian

Unfortunately the sixteenth century was a time of severe religious division right across Europe. States still obedient to the Papacy adopted the Gregorian calendar at once, that is in October 1582. These were Spain, Portugal and Italy, with France following in December of that year, and Prussia, the Catholic States of Germany, Holland and Flanders on 1st January 1583. Catholic parts of Switzerland followed in the next two years, Poland went Gregorian in 1586 and Hungary in 1587. In the year 1700 the German and Netherland Protestant States and Denmark adopted the Gregorian calendar. Sweden wavered, keeping the Gregorian non-leap year of 1700 but reverting back in 1712 by having two leap days that year. The Swedes finally settled for the Gregorian calendar in 1753 omitting the eleven days from 18th to the end of February of that year.

In Britain the Gregorian calendar was not adopted until 1752, and the start of year date was changed to 1st January by the same Act of Parliament. The day following 31st December 1751 was decreed to be 1st January 1752, and 2nd September 1752 was followed by 14th September. As England had taken the year 1700 to be a leap year, the difference between the Julian and Gregorian calendars now amounted to eleven days. The changes were to apply to all the Dominions of the British Crown, including of course the North American colonies, and will be the ones most of interest to family historians reading this article.

SEPTEMBER 1752 Great Britain and Dominions							For 170 years, between the Papal Bull of Gregory XIII and the Chesterfield Act of the British parliament, two calendars had been in use side by side in Western Europe. England could not help being influenced by the Gregorian calendar.
Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat	Sun	
	1	2	14	15	16	17	Communication between England and the Continent was thus prone to ambiguities as far as dates were concerned, due firstly to the difference of ten days (eleven after 1700), and secondly to the different start of the year.
18	19	20	21	22	23	24	
25	26	27	28	29	30		

The cause of ambiguities - 2. The Start of the year

Even within England a year starting in 1st January (known as the Historical Year) was in general use for almanacs and various other purposes, and 1st January had always been celebrated as the New Year festival. (Pepys wrote "So ends the old year" on 31st December 1663.) The year starting 25th March was called the Civil or Legal Year. So the ambiguities are not just a problem for historians looking back with hindsight; they were a contemporary problem for which contemporary solutions are evident.

Before 1752 parish registers, in addition to a new year heading after 24th March showing, for example "1733", had another heading at the end of the following December indicating "1733/4". This showed where the Historical Year 1734 started even though the Civil Year 1733 continued until 24th March. An individual date would be shown as, for example, 3rd March 1733/4 so we are left in no doubt that the date intended was in March of the Civil Year 1733 and the Historical Year 1734, that is, the month before April 1734.

An oblique stroke is by far the most usual indicator, but sometimes the alternative final figures of the year are written above and below a horizontal line, as in a fraction (see photograph). Very occasionally a hyphen is used, as 1733-34. The phrase Old Style, abbreviated as OS, was also used as when Lord Chesterfield wrote to his son in Rome on 8th January 1750/51 and used the form "January 8, O.S.



Detail of gravestone from the churchyard of Newtown Linford, Leicestershire, showing the "fractional" format of dual dating (1703/4)

1750." Note that, whatever notation is used for the dual dating, it only has meaning in the period 1st January to 24th March each year (and of course for England and its colonies only before 1752). From 25th March to 31st December the Historical Year is the same as the Civil Year number so no special indication is necessary.

(There is another form of dual dating used by some historians, where a date is given in its original, Julian and Civil Year form, followed by a "mapping" of that date to its Gregorian and Historical Year equivalent, as in "10/22 January, 1705/6." This format is not recommended. There is rarely a need to map a Julian date to its Gregorian equivalent.)

Many writers of course, especially in dating letters, gave no indication of whether they were using the Civil or the Historical Year and we are left to decide using contextual clues or, as Cheney wrote, "according to the nationality and the circumstances of the writer." We as historians have no excuse for creating ambiguity and must keep to the notation described above in one of its forms. It is no good writing simply 20th January 1745, for a reader is left wondering whether we have used the Civil or the Historical Year. The date should either be written 20th January 1745 OS (if indeed it was Old Style) or as 20th January 1745/6. The hyphen (as in 1745-6) is best avoided as it can be interpreted as indicating a period of time.

In transcribing original archives we should of course transcribe all dates exactly as written. However these may be meaningless when, for example a single parish register entry is transcribed and then isolated from the year heading or its position in the sequence of dates. Interpretation should always be clearly separate from transcription. My notes transcribed directly from the Bishops Transcripts for Bolsover parish, Derbyshire, England, read as follows, the square brackets [] also being part of my notes where I indicated my interpretation from the sequencing of the BTs:

<p>1714 March</p> <p>Anne the Daughter of James & Ellen Cree was baptised March yr 6th</p> <p>...</p> <p>1717 December</p> <p>John ye Son of John and Martha Drable was bap y 23d of Dece'ber</p> <p>March</p> <p>James the Son of James and Ellen Cree was bp March ye 9th</p>	<p>[This is clearly 1714/15 as the year heading 1715 occurs after 24th]</p> <p>[i.e. March 1717/18]</p>	<p>It is interesting to note that the</p>
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International Genealogical Index has no facility for showing double dating and therefore, regrettably, leaves ambiguities which were not present in the original documents. Anne Cree's baptism was first entered in the IGI with the date 06 MAR 1716. Clearly someone had got hopelessly confused, entering first a New Style date and then applying a "correction" the wrong way! A second entry for the same event then gives the date 06 MAR 1714, which is correct Old Style, but how are we to know? Her brother James's baptism on 9th March 1717/18 is shown simply as 9 MAR 1717.

Genealogical software that does not permit double dating to be used should be avoided.

Old Style and New Style

To add further to the confusion, the phrases Old Style and New Style have not been used in a consistent way. In eighteenth century usage in the English-speaking world, they referred to the combination of the two changes which occurred in England in 1752, namely the change to the start of the year **and** the change from the Julian to the Gregorian calendar. Later, some historians would convert pre-1752 Julian dates to their Gregorian equivalents and might use the phrase New Style to indicate that they had done this.

We thus have two clearly differentiated concepts, the change of the date of New Year and the change from the Julian to the Gregorian calendar, but no terms which have been consistently used to refer to them.

A Guid Hogmanay to yous all!

Many people in England, North America, Australia, New Zealand and elsewhere can trace ancestral lines back to Scotland. They should note that Scotland made its own change to the start of year date in the year 1600, 152 years before England. The year 1599 lasted from 25th March until 31st December and thereafter the year began on 1st January, so no double dating was needed after that date. Contrary to what has been written in several articles on the subject, Scotland did NOT adopt the Gregorian calendar in 1600 - it was not until 1752, along with England, that Scotland adopted the Gregorian calendar, that is, the new rule for leap years, and made the correction of eleven days.

Ambiguities continued in Eastern Europe until modern times. Russia and Turkey made the change to the Gregorian calendar in 1918, Yugoslavia and Romania in 1919 and Greece in February 1923. Thus the October Revolution was celebrated in Soviet times in November and Christmas is now celebrated in Russia in January, as the church still follows the old calendar in determining the dates of religious festivals, the discrepancy now amounting to thirteen days!

Japan adopted the Gregorian calendar in 1872, but with different year numbers which relate to the era of an Emperor's reign. The year Heisei 6 began on 1st January 1995. January is referred to as First Month and so on, the months having no special names.

China started to use the Gregorian calendar for official and business purposes in 1912, but the traditional Chinese lunar calendar continues to be used for most personal matters, such as the celebration of birthdays and festivals, for agricultural purposes in many rural areas, and for deciding when to celebrate the Chinese New Year.

Easter Day

The calculation of Easter Day is beyond the scope of this article. It is an extremely complex subject.

Cheney (see Sources below) gives a table of Easter Days for the period 500 to 2000 AD, with a separate table for Gregorian dates from 1583 to 1752, since the calculation of Easter Day differed for the Julian and Gregorian calendars. Until I find some easy way of converting this large table to computer format (No I'm not going to type it out) I am happy to look up Easter Day for any year (500-2000) for anyone who cares to e-mail a request to me. I can also give the day of the week for any date in this period but you will need to specify which country the date refers to, and to use the Old Style/New Style notation where necessary. [Note: Brian Pears now has a list of Easter Dates for 1550-2049, with a calendar for each year, at www.genuki.org.uk/big/easter/.

Whitaker is probably a more accessible source than Cheney for most people and it gives Easter Day from 1500 to 2030. Though not stated, the dates are Julian up to and including 1752, thus agreeing with British usage.

Readers should also be aware that even today different religious groups within the Christian Church celebrate Easter on different dates, although my understanding is that there are two main sets of rules: one for the Roman Catholic and main Protestant Churches and the other used by the Eastern Orthodox Churches.

Sources:

Whitaker's Almanack 1994 (126th edition)

"Calendar" in Encyclopaedia Britannica

Cheney C R (ed.) Handbook of Dates for Students of English History, London 1948.

E. Cobham Brewer 1810–1897. Dictionary of Phrase and Fable. 1898.

Postscripts.

(January 1997)

The question has been raised as to whether 29th February occurred in the Historical Year which was divisible by four or in the Civil Year that was divisible by four. Judging by the way the changeover took place in England, with 31st December 1751 being followed by 1st January 1752 and a leap day occurring at the end of that February, it must have been the Historical Year that counted for the purpose of calculating leap years.

(September 1998)

Correspondents have consistently shown confusion over the situation regarding leap years at the ends of centuries. For clarification, the Julian calendar had a leap year every four years regardless. The Gregorian Calendar added to this a rule that century-end years are only leap if divisible by 400.

In England and its Dominions the Gregorian Calendar was introduced in 1752, so in these countries:

1500 was a leap year

1600 was a leap year

1700 was a leap year

1800 was not a leap year

1900 was not a leap year

2000 will be a leap year

2100 will not be a leap year.

(January 2000)

This quotation from 'Cradled in Sweden', by Carl-Erik Johansson, throws more light on the confusion caused by different systems operating in different countries:

"...In November 1699 an agreement was reached to switch over from the old to the new calendar by gradually taking away the eleven days that separated them. By taking away only a day a year, time would be gained for further discussion, as the decision for reform was far from unanimous.

"A beginning was made by leaving out the leap day in 1700. But the reform was not carried any further.

"By January 1711 King Charles XII declared the return to the old way. He stated that the Swedish almanac did not follow that of any other country since the leap day in 1700 was left out. Many mistakes have been made due to this. He also decreed that the month of February should have 30 days in 1712. Sweden was back to the Julian calendar after twelve years of unique dating.

"Not until 1753 was Sweden ready for the adoption of the Gregorian calendar. The problem was solved by letting February 17 be followed by March 1. The reform, however, was not joyfully accepted by all as many held that they had been robbed of 11 days of life!"

(Thanks to Bill Johnson for this gem from The Master Genealogist Mailing List.)

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[Last updated: 13th December 2011]