Calligraphy

As a schoolboy, Ewan Clayton was scolded for his poor handwriting. Today he is a master of communication – from monks to Steve Jobs. Sam Knight meets him, while overleaf calligrapher the master...
There were times in the four years that Ewan Clayton worked on his history of writing that the project threatened to overwhelm him. His flat in Brighton was overrun, physically, by the ideas that he wanted to convey: the Post-it notes marching down the mirror; the handwritten arguments arranged on the floor; the felt-tips, pencils and laptop; his own calligraphy materials, the quill knife and 18th-century sharpening stone. "Nobody will be able to understand what the hell is going on inside my head at the moment," he thought. Even now, with the book done, the story feels unfinished. "It’s like this vast engine inside of me."

Clayton has lived a life surrounded by the act of writing. Like many schoolchildren, he experienced the indignity of being told off for his poor handwriting, but unlike many schoolchildren, Clayton was encouraged to work on his letters by men and women who had studied under Edward Johnston and Eric Gill, two of the 20th century’s greatest calligraphers. They had both had workshops in Chichester, the East Sussex village where Clayton spent a lot of time in his childhood. In his twenties, he spent four years in a monastery, writing and illuminating. Then he went to Silicon Valley and advised computer companies on what to do with type.

Over the years, two convictions have grown in Clayton. The first is that in the west we have badly under-conceived
My life in writing by Euan Clayton

We are at one of those turning points for the written word, that come only rarely in human history. We are witnessing the introduction of new writing tools and media. It has only happened twice before, as far as the Roman alphabet is concerned - once in a process that was several centuries long when papyrus scrolls gave way to vellum books in late antiquity, and again when Gutenberg invented printing using movable type and change swept over Europe in the course of just one generation, during the late 15th century.

Changing times now mean that, for a brief period, many of the conventions that surround the written word appear fluid; we are free to reimagine the quality of the relationship we will make with reading, and shape new technologies. How will our choices be informed - how much do we know about the medium's past? What work does writing do for us? What writing tools do we need?

Perhaps the first step towards answering these questions is to learn something about how writing got to be the way it is. My own involvement with these questions began when I was 12 years old and I was put back into the more junior class of the school to learn how to write. I had been taught three different styles of handwriting in my first four years of schooling and as a result I was hopelessly confused about what shapes letters ought to be. I can still remember bursting into tears aged six when I was told my print script "F" was "wrong". In this class I had lots of knots, and I simply could not understand why. Being back in the bottom class was ignominious. But my family and family friends gave me books on writing well. My mother gave me a calligraphy pen set. My maternal grandmother lent me a biography to read: a life of Edward Johnston, a man who lived in the village where I lived. He was the person who had revived an interest in the lost art of calligraphy in the English-speaking world at the beginning of the 20th century.

It turned out that my grandmother had known him: she used to go Scottish country dancing with Miss Johnson, and my godmother, Joyce Johnson, had been one of Mr Johnston's nurses. "Tell me," she had said to her in the dark watches of one night, "in your slow, deliberate, sonorous voice, "what would happen if you planted a row in a desert?" I try it and see," Johnston had developed the technique that London Transport uses to this day. I was soon hooked on pens and ink and letter shapes and so began a lifelong quest to discover more about writing. Several other experiences enriched this quest.

My grandparents lived in a community of craftpeople near Dunkirk in France. As a boy I was introduced to my grandfather's weaving skills. I was taught the trade by Euan Cribb, who had been Euan's first apprentice.

On days off from school I was allowed to go into Joseph Cribb's workshop, where he showed me how to use a chisel and sharp, to cut the V's and other letters, and make the edges straight. I was taught to cut a quire and a quire of vellum for a stack of smooth and thread.

In my twenties I decided to enter the world of publishing. In my twenties I decided to enter the world of publishing, and I had a chance to work in a small print shop. I was able to see the whole process of making books, from the design and typesetting to the printing and binding. It was a thrilling experience, and I felt privileged to be able to work with such skilled craftsmen. I continued to learn from them, and I began to develop my own style of calligraphy.

In recent years I have been involved in teaching calligraphy, and I have been able to pass on my knowledge to a new generation of students. It is a great privilege to be able to share this wonderful craft with others, and I hope that my students will find as much pleasure and satisfaction in it as I have.

There is no substitute for the tactile experience of holding a pen and writing with it, and the feeling of the ink on the paper. It is a direct and immediate connection with the artist who wrote the word. I am grateful to be able to share this with others, and I hope that our society will continue to value the written word and the art of calligraphy.
I wanted to piece together a history of writing using the Roman alphabet that draws together all the various disciplines surrounding it, though fundamentally my perspective is that of a calligrapher. Knowledge of writing is held in so many different places by students of epigraphy (writing in stone) and palaeography (the study of ancient writing). Calligraphers, typographers, lawyers, artists, designers, letter-carvers, signwriters, forensic scientists, biographers, and many more besides.

Indeed, writing my book felt at times like an impossible task: it seemed that every decade and topic had its experts, and how could one possibly matter 5,000 years worth of this? I have had to accept that I cannot, and instead offer a broad sweep that might lead you to explore further aspects of the story for yourselves.

In some sense, I have studied the history of calligraphy in relation to the written word. It seems perhaps an old-fashioned concept. But as I was writing, in October 2011, Steve Jobs, the co-founder of Apple, sadly died. All the writers reviewing jobs’ life and work agreed on one thing: he had a passion for craftsmanship and design, and it was this that had made all the difference for Apple and for Jobs himself.

Two perspectives seem to have been complementary to his sense of design. “You have got to start with the customer experience and work back to the technology.” And that great products are the result of taste. Jobs said, “by exposing yourself to the best things humans have done and then trying to be doing the same things into what you are doing.”

One of the significant experiences in confirming Jobs’ viewpoint, it turned out, had been his exposure to the history and practice of “writing” while dropping out of a degree course at Reed College in Portland, Oregon. Reed was one of the few colleges in North America to hold calligraphy classes. When Jobs followed his heart and took up calligraphy he was introduced to a broad sweep of cultural history and fine craftsmanship in handwriting and typography that was a revelation to him. He complemented the perspective he learnt from his adoptive father, who was a mechanical engineer, that craftsmanship mattered.

Steve Jobs was a technologist who got it, he knew that the look and feel of things mattered, that the way we interact with them was not just value added, it was part of their soul, it carried meaning; it enabled us to relate to and live with them, to bring as much of our humanity to communicating as possible. The truth is that there are many people like Steve Jobs stretching back through this history, each of whom has struggled to make communication between people a more enriching and fulfilling experience.

This is their story, and because we are the heirs to the tools they made, this story is ours also. One of the perspectives that my work has made me aware of is how young we all are in our relationship with the written word. It was only in the last century that writing became a common experience, and only in the past few decades that young people began to develop their own distinctive graphic culture.

Writing has an exciting future. Can we continue to re-imagine how the world of the written word can speak to the fullness of our humanity? I say yes... try it and see.

"The Golden Thread: The Story of Writing" is published by Atlantic Books (£23)