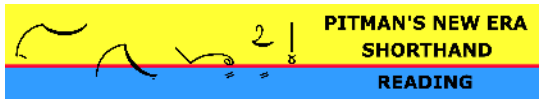

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FACILITY DRILL

Blog - 2016 - April

Perivale Wood

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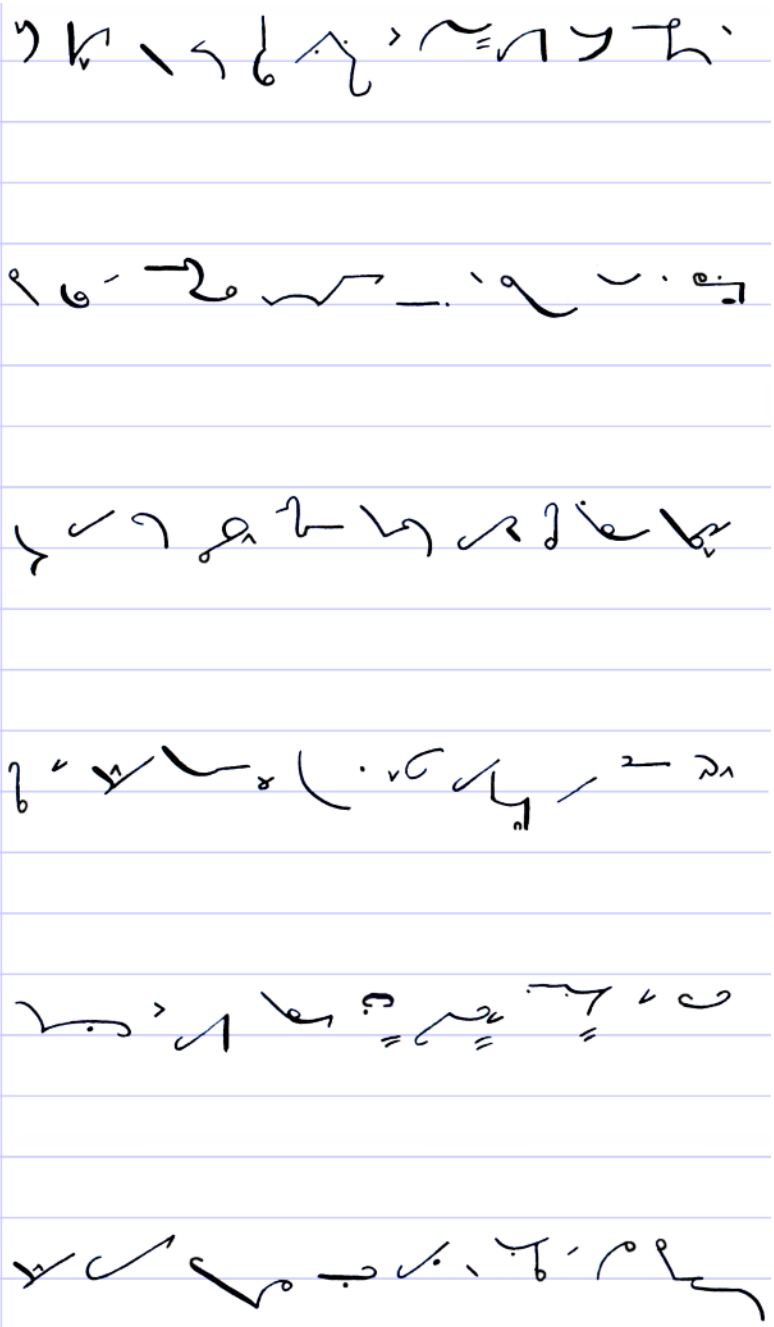

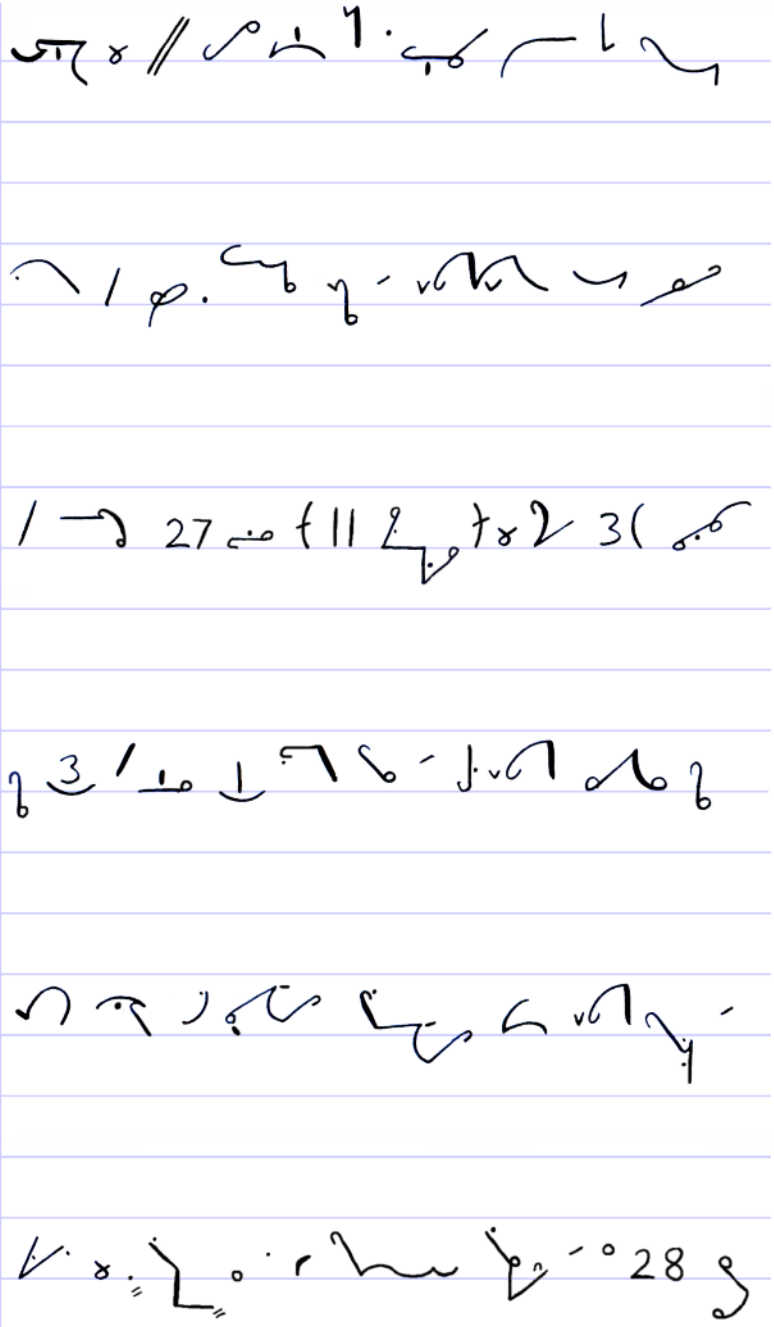

Perivale Wood

Many apologies to the London Marathon, but we found something better to do with that particular Sunday. We had another item of interest and destination in mind. We travelled through London doing our best to avoid the crowds from that event, and yet when we arrived at the place, we found a dense crowd of three million or more all in one enclosed area. All of them were English despite my expectation of seeing a few Spanish ones amongst the throng. The venue for this amazing gathering was Perivale Wood Local Nature Reserve where the Selborne Society were holding their annual opening of the woods to the public, so that everyone can have the opportunity to walk around and admire the three million native English bluebells that fill the wood. We have mostly Spanish bluebells at home, which are larger, lighter blue and slightly stripy, and just a small clump of the true English variety, which are darker blue, with smaller flowers lined up on one side of the arching stem.

The website said, be warned, the paths are muddy. As we boarded the train near my home, I realised that I had forgotten to give my oldish shoes another layer of wax dubbin as added insurance against the wet, so whilst on the train I broke off lumps of soft lip salve from the tube and smeared them over the shoes with a tissue. At last I felt I was properly ready and prepared for everything from loose soil to woodland puddles and gloop. As we left Perivale Station, we noticed people coming towards us with a muddy ring around the edge of their shoes. We knew we were going the right way. We followed our directions which just happened to coincide with the trail of tiny lumps of mud here and there, which increased in density as we neared the entrance.

The event was very well attended by families with children. There were stalls with maps and pencils to mark off the wildlife found en route, craft stalls relating to the woodland and an example of a section of laid hedge. We started the circuit around the woodland, following the arrows. Wildlife information sheets were pinned to the posts and trees. We continued swimming through the sea of blue and followed the winding paths until we had blue left and right, blue at the front and blue at the back. There were people in front of us talking about the bluebells and people behind us talking about the bluebells. This was one of those places that demands your whole attention and does not allow you to think or chat about anything else.

The atmosphere was almost like a party, with everyone invited who wanted to come and appreciate the national treasure of a bluebell wood. Everyone had a permanent smile on their face and I kept hearing the phrase "just look at that!" Of course, looking is not enough, one must take photos, and when the sun comes out, take the same view again in brighter colours and more varied contrast of shadows. I intended taking this bluebell wood home with me for ever, and then coming back next year to capture it all again.

Perivale Wood

We came upon Little Elms Meadow with more stalls scattered around a central clear area. As we entered, the Northfields Morris Dancers started their display of traditional dancing, with bells, white handkerchiefs and clash sticks (made of hazel from these woods), accompanied by music on the violin. The wonderful Mr Stag was standing around and having his photo taken with the children. People were sitting on logs or their picnic blankets eating their sandwiches. The sun came out and lit up the trees which were just showing green buds opening. I was delighted to be here at this repetition of the long-held English custom of special events and gatherings to mark the coming of spring, in a secluded field away from houses and traffic, apart from one or two trains passing behind the trees on the boundary bank. After a while we continued our walk around the remainder of the wood, passing the Grand Union Canal on the northern boundary where the bluebells gave way to nettles and less spectacular undergrowth.

Once home I had a closer look at the printed map, which lists the quantities of trees and wildlife in the reserve which covers 27 acres (11 hectares). There are 3,000 hazel trees, 300 large oaks, 100 crab apples and 10 wild service trees, also maple, ash, hawthorn, blackthorn, elm, wild privet and cherry. The Paddock is an old permanent pasture and has 28 species of grass. There are 23 species of butterfly, including orange tip, speckled wood, purple hairstreak, comma, small copper and peacock and a large variety of moths and beetles, and wild honey bees. Society members have access all year and so they get to see the long list of birds, as they walk and sit in the woodland during the summer and listen for the different songs and flashes of colour. This great diversity can only be found in undisturbed ancient woodland and is the reason why we must preserve those that we have left, as they can be managed but cannot be artificially recreated. (877 words)

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