

Deciphering old handwriting

by Andrew Matheson

Do you curse over cursive script when you're trying to decipher old handwriting? It's great to get hold of copies of historical documents relating to your ancestors, but making sense of them can be a challenge.

AI can help. I tested this with the will of George Matheson of Lawrence, who will feature in a future issue of this newsletter. His 1906 will (available from Archives New Zealand) was written very neatly but in a sloping cursive (joined-up) script that requires some care in reading.

I first tested ChatGPT with a pdf file of the whole will. There was an error uploading the file, so I followed the prompt to upload a jpg file of one page. The results weren't terrible, but got off to a bad start.

This is the last will and Testament of me George Mathews of Laurens in the provincial District of Ninety six in the Colony of the State aforesaid farmer I will all this and Testament dispositions bequeaths by me made and declare this to be my last will and Testament. I nominate and appoint my wife Mary Mathews and my son George Mathews Executors and Trustee of this my Will. I give devise leave and bequeath all my real and personal property of what kind and nature ever including all policies of insurance on my life upon trust to sell and in event cannot not money and part of my said real and personal estate as shall not consist of money and to

Apart from the obvious errors with Matheson and Lawrence, which are easily fixed, the transcription made some significant errors especially in the first few lines.

ChatGPT suggested uploading an image of a close-up section, which I did and obtained a significantly better result.

This is the last Will and Testament of me George Mathew of Laurens in the provincial District of Otago in the Colony of New Zealand farmer I revoke all Wills and Testamentary dispositions heretofore by me made and declare this to be my last Will and Testament I nominate and appoint my wife Mary Mathew and my son George Mathew Executors and Trustees of this my Will I give devise leave and bequeath unto my Executors all my real and personal property of what kind and nature soever including all policies of insurance on my life upon trust to sell call in and convert into money such part of my said real and personal estate as shall not consist of money and to

This all took only a couple of minutes. With some minor editing, I could soon have an accurate transcript of the will without going cross-eyed. You have to be careful to find any inaccuracies, but this type of transcription can be a huge timesaver.

