A SIT DOWN WITH ANDREW HILL

Honest Truth

What do Cicero's scribe, Charles Dickens and Pippi Longstocking writer Astrid Lindgren have in common? Answer: They all used shorthand. Here the award-winning journalist, writer and public speaker Andrew Hill tells Sally McDonald the Honest Truth about 'the winged art'.

Take note: Shorthand symbols have been getting it write for 2,000 years



What is shorthand?

A 2,000-year-old speech-recording technology. Shorthand usually consists of a set of symbols that stand in for letters, words, syllables or whole phrases. Since Roman times, notetakers have used shorthand, in its many hundreds of variants, to record sermons, trials, parliamentary debates and press conferences, and to store their ideas, diary entries, recipes and scientific formulae.

How did you become interested in it?

As a trainee journalist, I learnt shorthand and I've used it every day of my career. I'm still willing to bet I could read back a key passage from my shorthand notes quicker than someone using a smartphone and an app.

Why did you want to write a book about it?

Rapidly advancing technology, such as AI coupled with voice recognition software, could drive pen shorthand into extinction – and I thought I might be one of the last to write it. I wanted to know what we might lose if this landmark to human ingenuity disappeared and what it would take to save what was once known as "the winged art".

Shorthand note-takers have borne witness to human history for two millennia.

Shorthand's story is also the story of innovation and the workplace.

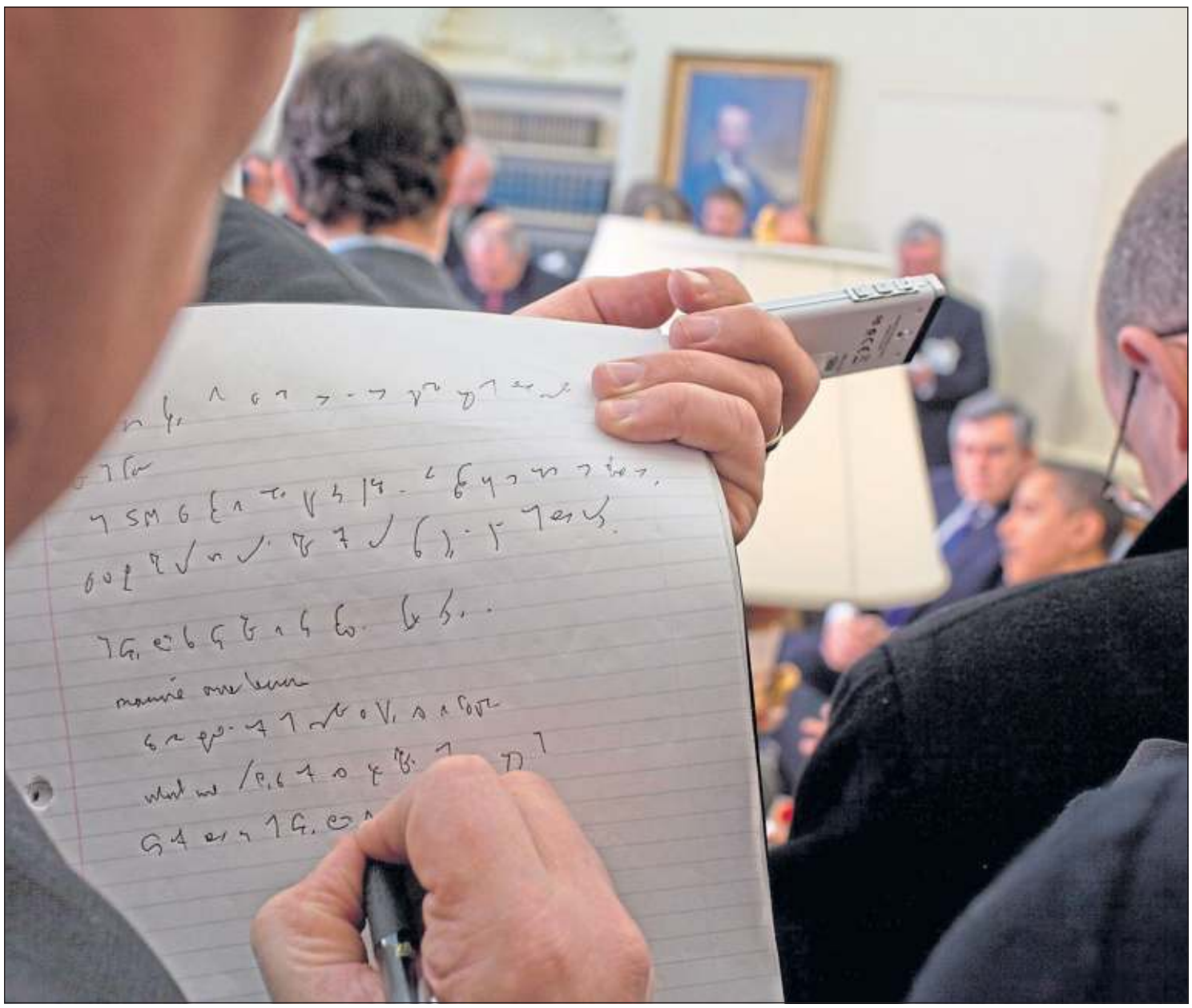
It was a motor for the entry of women into business in the 20th Century, for instance, as companies recruited armies of shorthand-typists.

What was the most surprising find during your research?

Shorthand's not dead after all! It's still taught to journalists in the UK (though in dwindling numbers) and it is still a skill sought after by employers in countries such as the Philippines and India, where – another surprise – there is a shrine in Chennai to Sir Isaac Pitman, English inventor of the original version of the shorthand system I use.

Who invented it, when and why?

The "father of shorthand" is Tiro, slave-scribe to the great Roman orator and statesman Cicero in the first century BC. He produced a system of shorthand to keep up with Cicero's speech-making. The symbols he devised continued to be used by scribes for centuries after he died, popping up in the margins of illuminated manuscripts. The practice went through a "dark age" before re-emerging in the 16th Century and then really taking off in the 19th.



Reporters take shorthand notes during a press conference with US President Barack Obama and UK PM Gordon Brown in 2009.

Who were its most famous proponents?

Samuel Pepys wrote his famous diaries in shorthand, in part to conceal his sexual adventures from his wife and his political observations from his bosses. Charles Dickens' first business cards described him as a "short hand writer" and he used it as a parliamentary reporter. David Copperfield learns shorthand in the novel of the same name, giving us the best description of the suffering involved in mastering the "savage stenographic mystery". Other famous users include Astrid Lindgren, who wrote her Pippi Longstocking children's stories in shorthand, and Fyodor Dostoevsky's wife Anna Snitkina – played by Aimee-Lou Wood in the new film The Idiot(s) – who was the Russian writer's stenographer, then wife and publisher.

Was it ever used clandestinely?

Plenty of users have written in shorthand to hide ideas and thoughts from spouses, enemies or the authorities. But there's a contradiction: shorthand's inventors often marketed it as a sort of universal language that everyone could read or write.

Are there any dramatic anecdotes regarding its use?

Two of Adolf Hitler's stenographers were among the last people to flee his Berlin bunker in 1945, taking with them sheaves of notes. They flew to Berchtesgaden, the Führer's summer retreat, and added the notes to a pyre on which the SS were destroying incriminating records. But, when the American military arrived, the same stenographers switched sides, helping the Allies save the charred notes, transcribe them, and use them to make the case against Nazi war criminals.

What part does Scotland play in its development?

One of shorthand's greatest innovators, John Robert Gregg, born in Ireland in 1867, moved to Glasgow when he was 11. During his formative years there, he taught himself different shorthand systems, before inventing his own when he was only 21. After emigrating to the US, he built Gregg shorthand into one of the dominant scripts used in America, often in direct competition with Isaac Pitman's system. Pitman and Gregg's rivalry was a bit like that of Apple's Steve Jobs and Microsoft's Bill Gates.



Take Note: A Nimble History Of Shorthand by Andrew Hill is published by Profile Books, £14.99, and is available now.