Samuel Pepys, from The Diary

The diary that Samuel Pepys (pronounced “peeps,” 1633-1703) kept from 1660 to 1669 is the most famous diary written in the English language. In part this is because Pepys was writing at a fascinating moment, and, living in London and working for the government, he was in a good position to see important historical events take place in real time. Pepys began writing his diary just weeks before the restoration of the monarchy in 1660, and he was even on the ship that was sent to bring Charles II back to England. He was an eyewitness to Charles’s coronation, to the Great Fire of London in 1666, to a terrible occurrence of the plague, and to the wars that England fought with the Dutch in that decade, wars that turned out to be crucially important to establishing England as the dominant naval power in the north Atlantic. And as an important figure in the administration of the Royal Navy, he became a participant as well in the machinery of the state.
Samuel Pepys, painted by John Hayls in 1666 (National Portrait Gallery, London). Pepys is holding a piece of music that he had composed.

The diary is also rich with the stuff of daily life. Pepys was trained as an accountant, and he brings the thorough documentary habits of a bookkeeper to the task of recording his experience. He made daily records of everything—the money
he spent, the people he visited, the plays he saw, the songs he sang (he was a good amateur musician). Pepys was a man of tremendous energy—he sometimes got up at 4 or 5 in the morning to get started on the day’s work in the office—and reveled openly in the sensual pleasures of good food, entertainment, sex, and his growing wealth and the material goods it enabled him to acquire. Pepys’ diary provides an extraordinary window into both high politics and ordinary experience in a key decade in English history.

During the period of the diary, Pepys was married; his wife Elisabeth was the daughter of French immigrants, and she was not quite fifteen years old when they married in 1655 (Samuel was 22). Most of what we know about what Elisabeth was like comes filtered through Samuel’s diary, which is unfortunate; it would be thrilling to discover her own perspective on the period and on their marriage. By Samuel’s account, the marriage was an affectionate one, but complicated by his jealousy of her friendships with other men and, even moreso, by his own philandering. Samuel pursued sexual relationships with several women, pursuits that he recounted in the diary, most notably, in late 1668, with Deborah Willet, Elisabeth’s own maid. Elisabeth was understandably furious when she discovered Samuel’s unfaithfulness (not to mention what we would now think of as his sexual harassment of a woman who had little power to refuse him). Samuel and Elisabeth did, however, reconcile, and he was heartbroken when she died suddenly of typhoid fever in 1669. They had no children, and he never married again.
Elisabeth Pepys. This is an engraving that was made in the early nineteenth century from an oil painted portrait by John Hayls that was probably done in 1666 as a companion piece to
the painting of Samuel, above. The original painting of Elisabeth is unfortunately lost.

Pepys wrote his diary in shorthand, to ensure that anyone casually picking up one of the volumes could not read it easily. (His accounts of his extramarital sexual exploits are often further encoded by being rendered in a weird combination of English mixed and foreign words, as if to make it even harder to decipher, though it’s not hard to figure out what is going on.)

A small section of the beginning Pepys’s diary, as written in shorthand. You can see that some proper names are spelled out fully, but otherwise, Pepys is using one of the shorthand systems of the period that he would have learned as part of his training for the civil service. (Wikimedia Commons)

Pepys seems to have taken notes throughout the day, and then written up entries in a clean, well-shaped form in the evening; sometimes, he wrote up several days at once when he fell behind (the account of the Fire is clearly one of these times). The manuscript diary was bound in handsome volumes and included as part of the library that Pepys gave to Magdalene College, Cambridge, his alma mater. There it stayed on the shelf for generations, until early in the nineteenth century, a curious (or bored) student pulled it off the shelf and realized that there was something amazing there. The diary was translated in the nineteenth century, but editors expurgated the sexually explicit parts. (Most of the editions you can
find on the web are from these expurgated texts.) It was translated and transcribed in full in the 1970s and 80s, and that edition, *The Diaries of Samuel Pepys*, is an amazing, enormous resource. A fun way to read Pepys today is go to Pepys’ Diary online: [http://www.pepysdiary.com](http://www.pepysdiary.com), which allows you to follow the Diary day by day.

Sample entries:

**The Opening of the Diary and 1 January 1660**

**The Great Fire**