Decoding Tablature Using Conversion Charts:

Lute Tabs:

Renaissance lute tabs came in a bewildering array, and practically each separate practitioner used a different system. They mostly amounted to three variants, all called "French" or "Italian".   (The German system is really different, I won't go into it here, and the Spanish is really more of a precursor to the French and Italian.)

Terminology Definitions as I use them:

Tuning: The notes to which you tune the open strings of your lute.

French open tuning=G $^{-1}$,C ^{0} ,F ^{0} ,A ^{0} ,D ^{1} ,G ^{1}

Italian   open tuning=A $^{-1}$,D ^{0} ,G ^{0} ,B ^{0} ,E ^{1} ,A ^{1}

(Low to High strings.)

Italian tuning would effectively just transpose the piece of music up one whole step. This matters when playing with others, otherwise, not so much. Instruments usually were tuned to themselves.

Tab: High strings represented by top lines (French) or bottom lines (Italian) in tablature.

Method: Numbers (Italian) or Letters (French).

Any given writer could (and did) choose French or Italian for any of the three items above, declare that he was right, and the rest of the world was wrong, and prove it by using his variant.

Thus, decisions of 2 possibilities for three items, 2 to the power three is eight possible charts. (See charts file. Eight charts for lute. I only did two for the cittern and one for bandora, but they, too, have 8 possible charts each.)

An example of French tuning, tab, and method may be found in "Fond Wanton Youths", by Robert Jones, the "Nevv Booke of Tabliture," by William Barley, or Dowland's "First Book of Ayres."

In the below charts: the top row is the letter on the staff lines in the tablature.

The left column is to what each string is tuned when not fretted.

For French tuning: G,C,F,A,D,G. Low to high.
For French Method: "a"=open to "g"=6th fret, etc. No j.
For French tab: high pitch up, as if holding lute and rotating it up to look at it. Reverse for Italian tab. (Italian tab is high pitch on bottom, as if watching player from in front of him.)

This is the most common set of choices in English tablature. Here's the conversion:

Chart 8

French Method   French Tuning   French Tab
(Letters for frets)   (GCFADG)   (High notes up)

a	b	c	d	e	f	g	h	i	j
G ^{1}	G# ^{1}	A ^{1}	A# ^{1}	B ^{1}	C ^{2}	C# ^{2}	D ^{2}	D# ^{2}	E ^{2}
D ^{1}	D# ^{1}	E ^{1}	F ^{1}	F# ^{1}	G ^{1}	G# ^{1}	A ^{1}	A# ^{1}	B ^{1}
A ^{0}	A# ^{0}	B ^{0}	C ^{1}	C# ^{1}	D ^{1}	D# ^{1}	E ^{1}	F ^{1}	F# ^{1}
F ^{0}	F# ^{0}	G ^{0}	G# ^{0}	A ^{0}	A# ^{0}	B ^{0}	C ^{1}	C# ^{1}	D ^{1}
C ^{0}	C# ^{0}	D ^{0}	D# ^{0}	E ^{0}	F ^{0}	F# ^{0}	G ^{0}	G# ^{0}	A ^{0}
G $^{-1}$	G# $^{-1}$	A $^{-1}$	A# $^{-1}$	B $^{-1}$	C ^{0}	C# ^{0}	D ^{0}	D# ^{0}	E ^{0}

To construct this kind of chart, open tuning goes on the left, then up a half step for each fret to the right. Example: a "d" on the third line from the top=note C ^{1} , or C one octave above middle C.
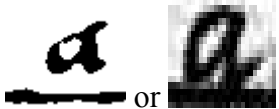
You can convert from the sharps chart, and create your own flats versions. I think a separate chart is easier to use in flat keys, but I got on fine just adjusting as I went from the sharps chart. G#=Ab, A#=Bb, etc.   And yes, for the pedants, I am aware that these are not precisely identical. The Elizabethans split the difference in tuning, and so I do, too.

==French Tab,Tuning, and Method, with Flats = Chart 8.==

a	b	c	d	e	f	g	h	i	j
G ^{1}	Ab ^{1}	A ^{1}	Bb ^{1}	B ^{1}	C ^{2}	Db ^{2}	D ^{2}	Eb ^{2}	E ^{2}
D ^{1}	Eb ^{1}	E ^{1}	F ^{1}	Gb ^{1}	G ^{1}	Ab ^{1}	A ^{1}	Bb ^{1}	B ^{1}
A ^{0}	Bb ^{0}	B ^{0}	C ^{1}	Db ^{1}	D ^{1}	Eb ^{1}	E ^{1}	F ^{1}	Gb ^{1}
F ^{0}	Gb ^{0}	G ^{0}	Ab ^{0}	A ^{0}	Bb ^{0}	B ^{0}	C ^{1}	Db ^{1}	D ^{1}
C ^{0}	Db ^{0}	D ^{0}	Eb ^{0}	E ^{0}	F ^{0}	Gb ^{0}	G ^{0}	Ab ^{0}	A ^{0}
G $^{-1}$	Ab $^{-1}$	A $^{-1}$	Bb $^{-1}$	B $^{-1}$	C ^{0}	Db ^{0}	D ^{0}	Eb ^{0}	E ^{0}

Note: A Gb when in G minor (one flat) is probably an F♯ lead in to the tonic and should be noted as such. Analogous situations probably occur, but this is the one I've noticed.

From the "WTF" file: That stands for <u>W</u>eird <u>T</u>ablature <u>F</u>un.

or   are A. Compare the second to E.

,   ,   ,   , and   are all the letter B. See F.
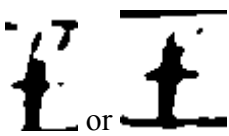
The letter C looks like: ,   , or   . It may look like an 'e', 't', or 'f ', especially when formed as three pen strokes.

,   ,   ,   , or   are the letter D. To differ from a B when the ink runs, it is tilted to the left, where B is vertical, or cursive. On examples 3 and 4, the ink ran. I at first took this for a horizontal with a hook and a slanted line.

The letter E sometimes looks like: , or   when the sheets were stored vertically to dry and the ink ran down, as it could. Printing was a new art and paper sizing sometimes sucked, so the ink didn't immediately sink in. If the letter C is rocked back on it's back, like this:

, then it's really an E. That's to distinguish it from the C when the ink runs. This is what they

were trying for: See A.   was also a letter 'e' where the ink ran. The chord was a D in the key of D, so the resulting F# from the French Method, French Tuning, French Tab chart (chart 8) made sense.

or   on the other hand, is an F. So is this: The difference on these from B can be subtle when the ink hasn't stuck on. See B.

is a G. So is this:

 is an H. Very similar to a cursive B.   is NOT an H. It is a B where the ink ran. If you think you have G, H, I, or K, check your chords and the notes very carefully. They are probably B, or stray marks on the paper. Possible as frets to be played, they are uncommon. Their frequency is also sometimes higher with specific writers. (Francis Cutting comes to mind.) Look for a note suddenly jumping up.

 are I and K. <u>There IS no 'J'</u>. Rome was ruled by Iulius Caesar. So only one fret from 'i' to 'k.' They are frets 8 and 9. Here are some more examples, b to i. Notice the c. Like a t or f?

<mark>An important note:</mark> For some reason, almost all tabs have half or quarter the time value of actual. Where another instrument uses a quarter note, the lute tab says eighth note, or sixteenth, where the rhythm is obviously meant to correspond. I have no idea why this is, I just double or, more usually, quadruple the time value of all tab time notes. Sixteenths become eighths or quarter, eighths become quarter or half notes, etc., to make it match.

The following example is <mark>French Tab, Method, and Tuning. Chart 8.</mark> Example on first chord. It's a half note. (eighth x 4) Measures are only sometimes marked. Sometimes barlines don't line up between parts. Morley is particularly bad about this. The ink ran, but the cut time signature is there. This is four cut time measures. (Notice the 'e' like 'c' letters.)
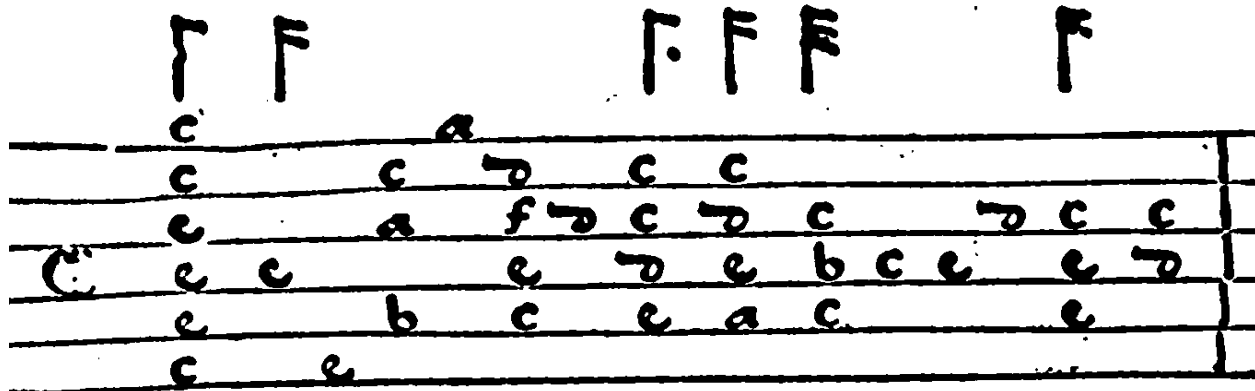
Consult the appropriate Chart. (#8) The first chord is, top to bottom:

```
Fret c on top string =A
    (Go to top row, find the c column.)
Fret c on 2nd string =E
    (Go to 2nd row, find the c column.)
Fret e on 3rd string =C#
    (Go to 3rd row, find the e column.)
Fret e on 4th string =A
    (Go to 4th row, find the e column.)
Fret e on 5th string =E
    (Go to 5th row, find the e column.)
Fret c on 6th string =A
    (Go to 6th row, find the c column.)
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[Note the fourth line up, an 'e', the ink ran...but it is rocked back, not a 'c'.]
Obviously, this is an A Major chord, half note. (eighth note x 4 = half note)
      The next note is played on the 4th string, fret e...and it's a quarter note. (16th x 4) Consult the chart, 4th string, fret e, and...It's an...A natural, quarter note.
      Take the rest for an exercise for the student. This is *four measures* of music, which seems a lot of work transcribing, but every single note is placed, specified, and fingerings noted. Useful? You bet. Practice makes it go faster.
      In Italy, the usual practice was Low note on top, as if looking at the strings from in front of the player. This is Italian Tab. In Italian Tuning, the notes were A-D-G-b-e-a, low to high. These become the left-hand column. The top row is the numbers shown on the tab lines, Italian Method.

Chart 7

Italian Method   Italian Tuning   Italian Tab
(Numbers for frets)   (ADGBEA)   (High notes down)

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
A^{-1}	$A\#^{-1}$	B^{-1}	C^{0}	$C\#^{0}$	D^{0}	$D\#^{0}$	E^{0}	F^{0}	$F\#^{0}$
D^{0}	$D\#^{0}$	E^{0}	F^{0}	$F\#^{0}$	G^{0}	$G\#^{0}$	A^{0}	$A\#^{0}$	B^{0}
G^{0}	$G\#^{0}$	A^{0}	$A\#^{0}$	B^{0}	C^{1}	$C\#^{1}$	D^{1}	$D\#^{1}$	E^{1}
B^{0}	C^{1}	$C\#^{1}$	D^{1}	$D\#^{1}$	E^{1}	F^{1}	$F\#^{1}$	G^{1}	$G\#^{1}$
E^{1}	F^{1}	$F\#^{1}$	G^{1}	$G\#^{1}$	A^{1}	$A\#^{1}$	B^{1}	C^{2}	$C\#^{2}$
A^{1}	$A\#^{1}$	B^{1}	C^{2}	$C\#^{2}$	D^{2}	$D\#^{2}$	E^{2}	F^{2}	$F\#^{2}$

Low note on top, these are the open tuning notes on the strings. Zero=open. The number nine is the ninth fret. The top line of the tab is equal to the bottom string on the instrument.

If you replace the numbers with letters, the same exact chart becomes:

Chart 4

French Method   Italian Tuning   Italian Tab
(Letters for frets)   (ADGBEA)   (High notes down)

a	b	c	d	e	f	g	h	i	k
A^{-1}	$A\#^{-1}$	B^{-1}	C^{0}	$C\#^{0}$	D^{0}	$D\#^{0}$	E^{0}	F^{0}	$F\#^{0}$
D^{0}	$D\#^{0}$	E^{0}	F^{0}	$F\#^{0}$	G^{0}	$G\#^{0}$	A^{0}	$A\#^{0}$	B^{0}
G^{0}	$G\#^{0}$	A^{0}	$A\#^{0}$	B^{0}	C^{1}	$C\#^{1}$	D^{1}	$D\#^{1}$	E^{1}
B^{0}	C^{1}	$C\#^{1}$	D^{1}	$D\#^{1}$	E^{1}	F^{1}	$F\#^{1}$	G^{1}	$G\#^{1}$
E^{1}	F^{1}	$F\#^{1}$	G^{1}	$G\#^{1}$	A^{1}	$A\#^{1}$	B^{1}	C^{2}	$C\#^{2}$
A^{1}	$A\#^{1}$	B^{1}	C^{2}	$C\#^{2}$	D^{2}	$D\#^{2}$	E^{2}	F^{2}	$F\#^{2}$

Bottom string represented by top line. (Italian Tab)
Flip the chart upside-down, it's French Tab.
Make the starting notes: G,C,F,A,D,G, it's French tuning. (Each note to the right goes up a half step.)

Decisions to make:

1. What instrument? If 6 lines, probably a lute, opharion, or a bandora (pandora). If four, it's a cittern, or a mandore. Some 5 string instruments used 4 line tabs, and put the bottom string notation below the bottom line on the tab. In this case the low string is called a diapason, usually tuned lower than the string above by a fourth. Just take the equivalent fret for the string above, and knock the note down a fourth. For tabs with even more strings indicated, just add fourths for each slash. a// below the lines would be equivalent to three fourth intervals below the bottom line, unfretted (a). This would be an instrument with three "diapason" or "established interval" strings in addition to the usual ones. (The term comes from organ music, where the "established interval" is an octave, tablature started there.)

2. Method?
       French=small letters represent frets (a-k), no j.
       Ital. =small numbers represent frets (0-9)
3. Tab?
       French=low string is bottom line
       Ital. =low string is top line
4. Tuning?
       Starting open strings. Low to high.
       French=G,C,F,A,D,G
       Ital. =A,D,G,B,E,A

If you are lucky enough to have other instruments or music with which the tab is to be played, like a vocal line, a bass, or other consort instruments, you can use the chordings to check the notes you arrive at. D chord? Bass is a D and Superius (Soprano) is an F#? Probably correct.

Sometimes the numbers, or, less often, letters, are on the lines instead of above them. A bit rare for our sources. More usual for Italian ones.

Chart 2

French Method	Italian Tuning	French Tab
(Letters for frets)	(ADGBEA)	(High notes up)

a	b	c	d	e	f	g	h	i	j
A^1	$A\#^1$	B^1	C^2	$C\#^2$	D^2	$D\#^2$	E^2	F^2	$F\#^2$
E^1	F^1	$F\#^1$	G^1	$G\#^1$	A^1	$A\#^1$	B^1	C^2	$C\#^2$
B^0	C^1	$C\#^1$	D^1	$D\#^1$	E^1	F^1	$F\#^1$	G^1	$G\#^1$
G^0	$G\#^0$	A^0	$A\#^0$	B^0	C^1	$C\#^1$	D^1	$D\#^1$	E^1
D^0	$D\#^0$	E^0	F^0	$F\#^0$	G^0	$G\#^0$	A^0	$A\#^0$	B^0
A^{-1}	$A\#^{-1}$	B^{-1}	C^0	$C\#^0$	D^0	$D\#^0$	E^0	F^0	$F\#^0$

Method? Uses letters for frets. French Method.

Low Note down. French Tab.

Open tuning notes? ADGBEA. Italian Tuning.

This is used for the 1615 lute tablature for "Mal Simmes" in the Vallet Lute Book, Les Secret des Muses: 1

You can really only tell if it's French or Italian tuning when the lute is played in a score with other instruments. When played by itself, it will sound fine, but if it's off a whole step from the other parts, it will sound wrong.

Four String Renaissance Citthara/Cittern Charts for Tablature

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An example of the Italian Tuning for Cittern may be found in "La Volto" from 1st Book of Consort Lessons by Morley. Morley uses French Method, but Italian tuning, for the Cittern in 1st Book of Consort Lessons.

Also the highest string is A on the French tuning, and B on the Italian tuning for Cittern.

Left column is string's open pitch (a=open), top row is fret designation. (b=1, c=2, etc.)

Both these Charts are "French Method" (letters for frets)

French tuning version tuned to: EDGA

Citthern Chart 1

(Uses re-entrant tuning-bottom E string is higher then D String.)

French Method   French Tuning   French Tab
(Uses letters)   (EDGA)   (High notes up)

a	b	c	d	e	f
A ¹	A# ¹	B ¹	C ²	C# ²	D ²
G ¹	G# ¹	A ¹	A# ¹	B ¹	C ²
D ¹	D# ¹	E ¹	F ¹	F# ¹	G ¹
E ¹	F ¹	F# ¹	G ¹	G# ¹	A ¹

Italian tuning version tuned to: EDGB

Cittharn Chart 2

(Uses re-entrant tuning-bottom E string is higher then D String.)
French Method   Italian Tuning   Italian Tab
(Uses Letters)   (EDGB)   (High pitch on bottom)

a	b	c	d	e	f
E ¹	F ¹	F# ¹	G ¹	G# ¹	A ¹
D ¹	D# ¹	E ¹	F ¹	F# ¹	G ¹
G ¹	G# ¹	A ¹	A# ¹	B ¹	C ²
B ¹	C ²	C# ²	D ²	D# ²	E ²

(Examples are Morley, Consort Lessons, and Holborne, Cittharn School.)

As a side-note: Morley uses the Italian tuning in his 1st book of consort lessons for cithern, but the French tuning for Bandora. If the tuning looks hinky, the other tuning is probably correct. I just try different charts until it fits.

Chart for a Bandora tuned to: C^{-2} D^{-2} G^{-2} C^{-1} E^{-1} A^{-1}

Definitely a bass instrument. An example of the French Method, French Tuning, may be found in the 1st Book of Consort Lessons by Morley, #17 - "La Volto." for the Bandora part.

Left column is strings, (a=open) top row is fret designation. (b=1, c=2, etc.) and notes go up a half step with each fret.

Chart 1 for the Bandora

French Method   French Tuning   French Tab
(Letters for frets)   (CDGCEA)   (High notes up)

a	b	c	d	e	f	g
A^{-1}	$A\#^{-1}$	B^{-1}	C^{0}	$C\#^{0}$	D^{0}	$D\#^{0}$
E^{-1}	F^{-1}	$F\#^{-1}$	G^{-1}	$G\#^{-1}$	A^{-1}	$A\#^{-1}$
C^{-1}	$C\#^{-1}$	D^{-1}	$D\#^{-1}$	E^{-1}	F^{-1}	$F\#^{-1}$
G^{-2}	$G\#^{-2}$	A^{-2}	$A\#^{-2}$	B^{-2}	C^{-1}	$C\#^{-1}$
D^{-2}	$D\#^{-2}$	E^{-2}	F^{-2}	$F\#^{-2}$	G^{-2}	$G\#^{-2}$
C^{-2}	$C\#^{-2}$	D^{-2}	$D\#^{-2}$	E^{-2}	F^{-2}	$F\#^{-2}$

Another set of pictures from the "WTF" file: <u>W</u>eird <u>T</u>ablature <u>F</u>un 2
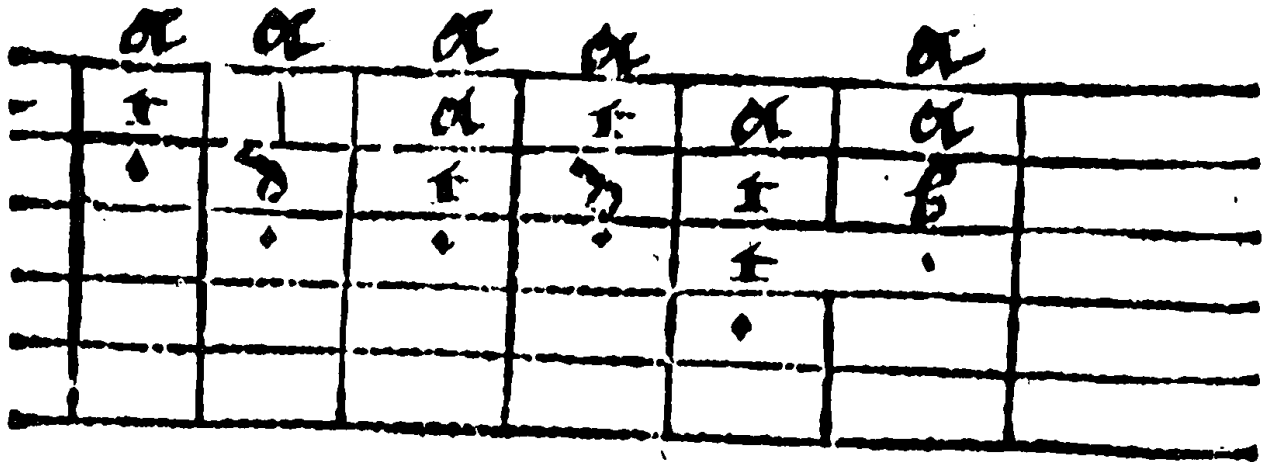
Those dots below the notes mean play these notes striking upward with your hand.

When you see slanted lines on the tab, like:
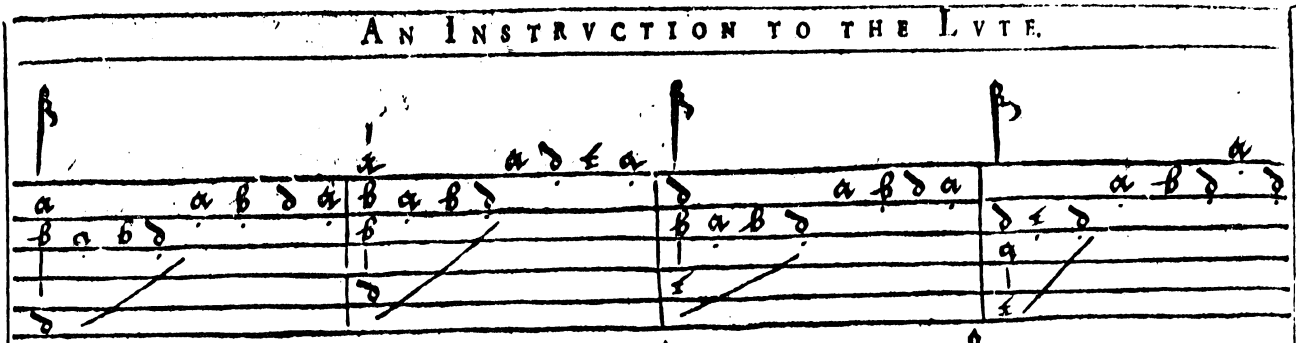
Where the slant is, the previous notes are continued, in the example above, the bottom notes are sustained, while the eighth notes (x4) above it vary. This allows varied time notation between bottom and top notes. A horizontal line would be to continue just that note.

I've very often seen lute transcriptions with NO slant where the transcriber made an assumption that the note was longer, but if they had this means of indicating it and didn't, doesn't that mean it's not held? Or is it just a matter of personal preference, like how you pedal a piano piece?

 This crosshatch means a short trill for the note above it. The blue squiggle above the note in this picture would be the modern equivalent. They called it a "shake." They made the trill by shaking the left hand for that note.

At first I thought the vertical line meant to fret as the letter above the line, but this was an error, as can be seen in the above piece of a chart from "Nevv Booke of Tabliture". Where there are dots, the chart is indicating which finger is used to stop that fret. There are no marks next to the a's, because those are played "open", and not fingered. The vertical line also has no dots. Therefore it does not indicate fingering.   Most transcriptions seem to just ignore the vertical line.

While reviewing a lute article, http://stdionysius.lochac.sca.org/collegeprojects/guitartolute.pdf (accessed Thursday, Jan 22, 2015) I saw where Tristran d'Avingnon says that:

> *The vertical line given beneath some notes in the following example is*
> *an editorial addition for thumbed notes; this is not consistent with the*
> *original tablatures.*

...meaning that the vertical line says to "play the note above with your thumb", but that the lines are not in the period manuscript it's based upon.

The problems with this theory: Does that mean if two spaces are covered play two notes above with your thumb? Still an open question. Ignoring it still works.
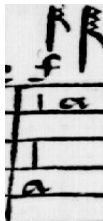
          What would it mean here?   And what would THIS be? (Examples from the "Nevv Booke of Tabliture-1594.") For the first one, my theory is a line from one to another means "grip," or play the high notes with fingers stroking towards bass and low note with thumb, stroking towards the treble strings. If the lines are direction of stroke instructions, then the split line may mean the same thing, and a line above the bottom note means "stroke towards the high strings" with the thumb.

If it's an ornament, like the "shake" previously, then which? Tristan says one of the ornaments used was:

> *A dot or a small vertical line followed by a "sharp"; this is known as a "fall with*
> *a relish", or an appoggiatura* [grace note] *down, followed by a "shake."* [short trill]

...so, since the "sharp" by itself meant a "shake", could the "small vertical line" mean an appoggiatura downward, or "fall"? That line ABOVE a note would seem to indicate not. Perhaps it means, "stroke the bottom note towards the high strings with your thumb, while playing a downward grace note for the top note."

The book is still wide open on this. Perhaps the instructions on stroke direction were lines that filled the gap and lines shorter than this were falling appoggiaturas? If a stroke direction, it only would be for thumbs when ABOVE the note, only for fingers when BELOW the note and a line from one note to another would mean to "grip" the strings. (fingers pull up, thumb strokes down)

???????   I found the following in "Nevv Booke of Tabliture," Rule 22.

> Now we haue briefly taught all thefe thinges, it is neceffarie to let you vnderftande to what purpofe the barres or lines ferue that be drawen by as vnder the letters or paffages, & for the better vnderftanding I haue here fet downe an example at large, and very fit for the purpofe, wherein thou fhalt not finde anye example better ordered or meafured , that thou fhalt neede to remooue anye of thy fingers from the faide meafure, the knowledge of the faid barre is fo neceffarie, that hauing found out and exercifed the fame, thou fhalt not neede but to remooue thofe fingers which thou fhalt be forced, which manner of handling wee call cloffe or couert play

Whatever it is, they called it "close or covert play."   Ignoring them still works.

American Encyclopedic Dictionary
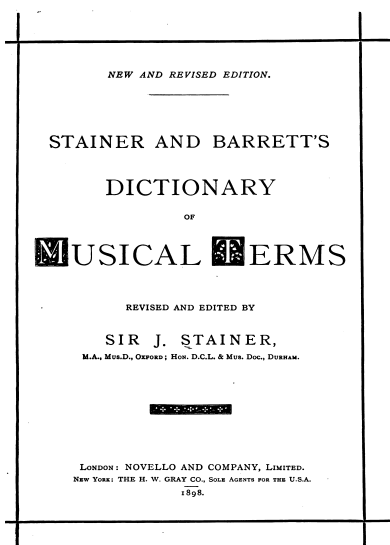By Robert Hunter, John Alfred Williams, Sidney John Hervon.
Herrtage, R.S. Peale and J.A. Hill, 1897
   says,

> *close-play, n.*
>
> *Music: A method of fingering in lute-playing by which no fingers are removed from the instrument excepting those which it is unavoidable to withdraw. It is called also covert play. [Barley, Lute Book; in Stainer & Barrett.]*

Stainer and Barrett, 1898:

NEW AND REVISED EDITION.

STAINER AND BARRETT'S

DICTIONARY

OF

MUSICAL **T**ERMS

REVISED AND EDITED BY

SIR J. STAINER,

M.A., Mus.D., Oxford; Hon. D.C.L. & Mus. Doc., Durham.

LONDON: NOVELLO AND COMPANY, LIMITED.
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1898.

Close play. A direction in lute playing. The following explanation of the term is from Barley's Lute book: " Thou shalt not neede but to remoove those fingers which thou shalt be forced, which manner of handling we call *close* or *covert* play." It would appear to correspond to the *smooth style* sometimes adopted on the organ or other keyed instruments.

So it can be ignored, since it simply is an instruction on how to finger which does not affect note play. "|" means, "Don't move the left finger which is on this fret unless you have to move it."
       All other sources I could find referred to the Barley Lute Book where I found it.

Tristan also says that:

> *In many original tablatures the letter "r" is used in place of "c",*
> *perhaps to avoid confusion with another letter. In modern editions of*
> *tablature, "c" is used as standard.*

...which would explain the 't' and 'e' appearance of so many letter 'c' notes out there. I *still* think it was a three stroke calligraphic 'c' that was being attempted, but with less certainty. In calligraphy you would use two strokes to draw an 'r' and then a third stroke to draw in the bottom of the 'c'. I think that's what the printer was trying to represent. I never thought it looked like an 'r', before, myself. I can see it now.

Note from the author on the ==exponent method of octave specification==:

> To specify exact octaves, I make my charts with the middle C up to the B above
> middle C with a zero exponent, and down an octave with an exponent of -1,
> down two octaves -2, etc. and above with an exponent of 1, 2, etc. Thus C^{-1}
> would be one octave below middle C, B^2 would be two octaves above the B
> above middle C. There are other methods for those who like them. Just redraw
> the conversion charts to suit your own favorite method.

I am primarily interested, not in playing these instruments, but in preserving the music intact. Writing arrangements from the tabs gives us a very period feel, even on keyboard, of the original tunes. It also establishes definitely what chords go with what music, in what rhythm, and in what ranges.

Charric