THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH PODCAST TRANSCRIPTS

EPISODES 111 - 115

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EPISODE 111: LAYING DOWN THE LAW

Welcome to the History of English Podcast – a podcast about the history of the English language. This is Episode 111: Laying Down the Law. In this episode, we're going to continue our look at the events during the reign of Edward I. We've already seen that one of Edward's most notable accomplishments as king was the conquest of Wales. And his desire to extend that authority to the north of Britain led some to call him "The Hammer of the Scots." But beyond Edward's attempts to rule all of Britain, he is probably most well-known for his legal reforms – including a series of statutes passed in the first decade and half of his reign. Edward's reforms were designed to re-establish royal authority over the justice system. And as king, Edward was the supreme judge of England. There was no appeal from his decisions. In that regard, Edward thought his legal authority extended to Scotland as well. He even used that authority to decide a dispute over the kingship of Scotland. Edward's aggressive policies ultimately led to war with his northern neighbor, and in many respects, that war was rooted in this dispute over legal jurisdiction. This time, we'll explore those events, and we'll see how Edward's legal reforms impacted the English language.

But before we begin, let me remind you that the website for the podcast is historyofenglishpodcast.com. And you can sign up to support the podcast at Patreon.com/historyofenglish. And I haven't mentioned it in a while, but I'm on twitter at englishhistpod.

Now this time, I want to look at Edward's impact on English law. You might remember that the oldest surviving document in the English language is a legal code – the laws of Aethelbert of Kent. And for the entire Anglo-Saxon period, both English and Latin were used in the application of English law. The first event to alter this situation was the conquest of northern and eastern England by the Vikings and the creation of the Danelaw – so-called because Danish or Norse law was applied in those regions. And you might remember that the word ***law*** itself is a Norse word brought to England by the Vikings. We covered the overall Viking influence on English in the earlier episodes of the podcast, and if you want to revisit the Vikings in greater detail, let me recommend the History of the Vikings Podcast by Noah Tetzner. That podcast got under way earlier this year, and if you love the Vikings, be sure to check it out.

Ultimately, the Vikings were defeated and their descendants integrated into English society, and English remained a language of the law together with Latin. But as we know, all of that changed in 1066 with the Norman Conquest of England. Afterwards, English stopped being used in the legal codes and courts of England. For the most part, Latin remained the dominant language of English law from the time of the Conquest to the current point in our story in the late 1200s.

But the arrival of Edward I brought about a noticeable change, and that change was French. French had been used in some legal documents before Edward, but from the time he assumed the throne, French was routinely used beside Latin as the language of English law and the English courts. This reflects the prestige of French at the time. It was the most cultivated language in Europe, and as a living language, it was replacing Latin in many important areas.

But notice the odd linguistic situation in England when it came to the laws and courts. Latin and French jockeyed for position, but English was almost never used. The English people were governed by laws that most couldn't understand, even if the laws were read out loud at a public gathering. And legal disputes touching on all aspects of life were resolved in courts where nary a word of English was spoken.

Ironically, this was the situation at a time when the traditional French-speaking classes at the top of English society had largely adopted English as their first language. Some of them were still bi-lingual, but there is little doubt that English was now the common language of virtually all Englishmen. And the evidence suggests that knowledge of French itself was in decline among the nobles.

Now it may seem like a contradiction that French was becoming the primary language of English law at a time when relatively few people in England spoke French as first language. But French wasn't disappearing from England as much as it was just taking on new and more exclusive roles. It was acquiring specialized uses. It was the language of government and the law. It was the language of advanced cooking and the culinary arts. It was the language of the new fashions and art and architecture that were spreading across Europe. And together with Latin, it was the language of the schools and education.

So French dominated these aspects of society at a time when people otherwise spoke English to each other in casual conversation. We even have evidence that the English king himself spoke English by this point. The first language of Edward I was French. As I noted, some of the highest nobles still spoke French from birth, but most of them were also speaking English. And several sources suggest that Edward also spoke English. If so, he may have been the first English king since the Norman Conquest to speak English fluently. Unfortunately, the little bit of evidence for Edward's knowledge of English is mostly circumstantial. The best account we have comes from a contemporary chronicler named Walter of Hemingburgh. Walter wrote a history of England, and he wrote that Edward spoke English to Turkish ambassadors who were visiting his court. Edward's English was translated into Turkish for the benefit of the diplomats. So if that account was accurate, Edward was probably fluent in English as well as French.

It isn't much of a leap to assume that Edward spoke English. He was born and raised in England, and as I noted, almost everyone in England spoke English as a first language by this point. This was really the culmination of a larger trend that we've seen developing as we've progressed through the 1100s and 1200s. We've already had several references to the fact that knights and nobles were speaking English. And we've seen that manuals were being produced to help the children of English nobles learn to speak French – implying that French was no longer being spoken in the household. So it appears that English had penetrated the highest levels of English society by the late 1200s.

At a time when virtually everyone spoke English, it also appears that knowledge of French was in decline. Nobles still spoke it – at least a rough version of it. And they tried to get their children to learn it because it was still such an important language throughout Europe. But the documents

of this period suggest that fewer and fewer people in England could actually speak French fluently.

A poem from this period called the "Romance of Richard the Lionhearted" gives us some insight. In one passage, the poet tells us that the common men of England could not speak French. Among a hundred of them, barely one could speak French. Here's the passage in the original Middle English: "Lewede men cune Ffrensch non, Among an hondryd unneþis on." (l. 23-24) Literally – "Lewd – or unlearned – men know French none, Among a hundred scarcely one."

We get an even more detailed account of the linguistic situation from another poet of this period. Around the year 1300, an English poet took a French poem about King Arthur and Merlin, and he reworked it into English under the title "Of Arthour and of Merlin." In his introduction, he explained why he chose to translate the poem into English. He wrote that school students were trained in French and Latin and could read and speak it freely. And then he observed the following:

Advantages they have there
French and Latin everywhere
But of French and Latin, I will tell no more
Only in English I will tell therefore
Right it is that English is understood
By whomever is born in England
The gentleman uses French,
But every Englishman knows English.
Many a noble I have seen
Who could not speak French at all.

And for those reasons, the poet says that he composed the poem in English so that the people of England could understand it. By the way, here is that same passage in the original Middle English:

Auauntages þai hauen þare
Freynsche and Latin euerywhare.
Of Freynsche no Latin nil y tel more
Ac on Inglisch ichil tel þerfore:
Riȝt is, þat Inglishche understond,
þat was born in Inglond;

Freynsche uce þis gentilman,
Ac euerich Inglische Inglishe can;
Mani noble ich haue ysieȝe,
þat no Freynsche couþe seye.

By the way, the first line contains one of the very first uses of the word ***advantage*** in the English language.

Now for all the evidence that English was on the rise in England, it still wasn't deemed to be fit for law and justice. As I noted, Latin had been the primary language of law and justice in England since the Norman Conquest. Edward was willing to break from that tradition by using a different language in his legal codes, and that new language was French – not English.

Edward's laws are notable to us because many of them were issued in French, but they're notable to historians and legal scholars because they were part of a series of reforms designed to expand Edward's control over the legal system of England. So let's take a moment and look at Edward the law-giver.

We last looked at the English legal system back in Episode 84 during the reign of Edward's great-grandfather Henry II. Henry had implemented a series of reforms which laid the foundation of what became known as English common law.

You might remember from that episode that England had lots different court systems that were somewhat independent of each other. There were the royal courts which extended across the country. But the Church also maintained a separate system of ecclesiastical courts to handle dispute among monks and clerics. Private manors also had manorial courts to decide disputes arising on the manor. Many towns and cities also had local courts that were largely independent of the royal courts.

When Edward came to power, he quickly realized that these various local courts were exercising a great deal of power over the justice system in England, and he sought to reign them in. He felt that his royal courts should have supremacy when it came to the application of law and justice. So one of his first actions as king was to send representatives around the country to determine if those various local courts actually had the legal authority to hear cases and dispense justice. This series of inquiries was known as the Quo Warranto proceedings. "Quo Warranto" is Latin for 'by what right.' So when Edward's representatives went out to meet with a lord of a manor, the lord was asked 'by what right' he claimed the authority to have his own court.

Ultimately, the lord had to produce a charter or some other evidence to justify his right to maintain the court. Edward used these proceedings to curb the influence of those local courts, and to make the royal courts the primary place for deciding legal disputes.

During this same time period, legal Year Books started to be maintained. The Year Books were a collection of legal decisions and verdicts in the royal courts at Westminster. Since English common law was based on tradition and precedent, those Year Books were an essential tool to keep track of those precedents. And they were used for that purpose even though they were written in French.

In the same year that the legal Year Books first appeared, Edward also tried to make sure that there were enough lawyers to deal with the increasing number of cases being heard by the royal courts. A committee of judges was designated to select several of the most prominent law students from each shire and to train them as lawyers to plead before the king's judges. And this was a major step in the establishment of the legal profession in England.

But the most notable legal development during Edward's reign was a series of detailed laws enacted by Edward and approved by Parliament. At least twenty major statutes were enacted – most of which were enacted in the first half of his reign. These laws were sweeping and touched on many topics. And since this isn't a podcast about the history of law, I won't bore you with all the details. But these new laws touched on things like the regulation of community policing, rules related to the transfer of property, the correction of various legal abuses, and the levying of taxes.

The interesting thing about Edward's new legislation is that it marked a notable change in the role of Parliament. Traditionally, a king issued new laws by proclamation – in the form of a charter or writ or other legal document. He had a group of advisors like the old Anglo-Saxon witan. The early Norman Kings also had advisory councils. And of course, by this point, Edward had an early form of Parliament. But technically, those assemblies merely advised and counseled the king. Now, Edward called Parliaments to meet so that they could formally approve his new laws. So Parliament actually acquired a formal role in the legislative process.

This was part of an attempt by Edward to give his new laws legitimacy. The legal changes were so far-reaching, and affected so many different elements of society, that Edward thought it was a good idea to invite representatives of the shires and the towns just as Simon de Montfort had done a few years earlier. So his Parliaments tended to included commoners as well as noblemen. And once they had approved his proposed laws, it made it difficult for the barons or anyone else to contest the laws as being illegitimate or an abuse of the king's authority. Now you should keep in mind that Edward had extensive control over his Parliaments, so this approval largely amounted to a rubber stamp. But it still gave a Parliament a role in the legislative process, and it was a role that became more formal over time.

Since these laws were a new kind of legislation, they acquired a new name. Each piece of legislation approved by Parliament became known as a ***statute***. This was a French word ultimately derived from Latin. And the word made its first appearance in an English document around this time during Edward's reign. As you might suspect, the word ***statute*** is related to the word ***statue***, as well as the word ***stand***. Just as a ***statue*** 'stands' in place without moving, a ***statute*** 'stands' in place as the law of the land without changing unless it is amended or revoked by a different statute at some later date.

So unlike a traditional charter or proclamation which could be altered anytime the king wished, a statute was a more permanent law which continued in perpetuity unless changed by another statute.

The word ***statute*** also points to the other reason why these new laws were so important and why they are so important to our story. As I noted, it was a word borrowed from French because French was replacing Latin as the language of the law. So for the first time, many of those new laws were written in French. And French continued to be used in court cases as had been the case for some time.

With English law being enacted and enforced in French, it isn't surprising that English speakers quickly picked up those new legal terms and started using them in English. Around the current

point in our overall story of English in the late 1200s and the early 1300s, we find lots of new legal terms from French like ***plaintiff***, ***defendant***, ***judge***, ***attorney***, ***notary***, ***suspect***, ***crime***, ***felony***, ***indict***, ***plea***, ***verdict***, ***convict***, ***jail/goal***, ***appeal***, ***pardon***, ***innocent***, ***fine***, ***sue***, ***contract***, ***heir*** – H-E-I-R, and ***testament*** – as in a Last Will and Testament. We also find the first use of the word ***condemn*** in the English language. Today, ***condemn*** has a broader sense, but originally it referred to someone being found guilty of a crime. As I noted earlier, we have also have the first uses of the word ***statute***. And speaking of ***statute***, we also have the first use of the word ***code*** – as in a legal code.

Edward new statutes also contained words like ***arson*** and ***fraud*** which were the first known uses of those words in England, even though those specific statutes were written in French. Of course, both of those words passed into English. So as you can see, lots of French legal terms were pouring into English around this time.

Now let me digress for a moment and mention something notable about those words – specifically the way they are pronounced. If you're familiar with French, you probably know that French speakers tend to put the stress on the final syllable of a word. And that has been true since Old French. So when these words came into English, it is generally accepted that the stress was the final syllable. But note how most of those multi-syllable words are pronounced today: ***plaintiff***, ***defendant***, ***attorney***, ***notary***, ***felony***, ***verdict***, ***innocent***, ***testament***, ***statute***, ***arson***. As you can hear, the stress has shifted forward to either the first or middle syllable.

The reason for this shift is due to the fact that English is a Germanic language, and Germanic languages tend to emphasize the first syllable. That was true in Old English, and it was still true in early Middle English. So English speakers tended to Anglicize those French words by shifting the stress forward usually to the first syllable. As a general rule, the longer a French word hangs around in English, the more likely it is that English speakers will shift the emphasis forward.

Consider the words ***artist*** and ***artiste***. They are really the same word which was borrowed from French twice. The first version exists today as ***artist***. It has been in English for about 450 years. The second version exists as ***artiste*** – and it has only been in English about 200 years. As you can hear, the stress has shifted forward in the older version ***artist***, but the stress on the final syllable has been retained in the newer version ***artiste***.

The same thing is true for ***critic*** and ***critique***. Again these words come from the same French word which was borrowed twice. ***Critic*** came in first about 400 years ago, and again the stress has shifted forward to the first syllable. ***Critique*** came in over a century later, and it retains its original stress on the final syllable.

The same thing happened with word pairs like ***human*** and ***humane***, and ***urban*** and ***urbane***.

So when we look at some of the earliest French words borrowed into English, it shouldn't be surprising that the stress has shifted forward over time in most of those words. But a few of the words I listed fall into a special category – where we use them today as both a verb and a noun. And here's the interesting thing. When those words are used as a noun, the stress tends to be on

the first syllable – as we would expect given the passage of time. But when they are used as a verb, they tend to retain their original stress on the final syllable.

Think about that brand new word ***convict*** (/con-VICT/) which I mentioned in the list of legal terms borrowed around the current point in our story. ***Convict*** (/con-VICT/) is the verb form, and that's how the word entered English in the 1300s. A prosecutor ties to ***convict*** someone charged with a crime. And if the prosecutor is successful, that person becomes a ***convict*** (/CON-vict/) with the stress on the first syllable

The same thing happens with another new word that came in around this time – the verb ***suspect*** (/sus-PECT/) and the noun ***suspect*** (/SUS-pect/). The police might suspect (/sus-PECT/) that you did something illegal. That would make you a suspect (/SUS-pect/).

We find the same thing with the verb new contract (/con-TRACT/) and the noun contract (/CON-tract/). You might contract (/con-TRACT/) with another person to perform some service. And then you might sign a written contract (/CON-tract/).

These words fall into a special category of words where the point of stress distinguishes the verb from the noun. This distinction really emerged in the Modern English period when the pronunciations still varied quite a bit. English speakers found a convenient way to distinguish the verb and noun forms by putting the stress in a different location for each.

By the way, this rule is not universal. There are lots of words where the verb and noun forms are pronounced the same way like the word ***pardon*** which I also included in that earlier list of legal terms. It is pronounced the same as both a verb and a noun. The President might pardon you with a pardon. But for words where a distinction does exist, the verb almost always has the stress at the end and the noun has it at the front.

Now I noted that words like ***attorney*** and ***notary*** entered English around the current point in our story. Words like ***malice*** and ***proof*** also came in around this time, and those words often have a legal application. But there is something very interesting about those words. They sometimes appear in English as part of terms where the adjective comes after the noun. We have terms like ***attorney general*** rather than a 'general attorney' – meaning an attorney who represents the general public. We have ***notary public*** rather than a 'public notary.' We have ***malice aforethought*** instead of 'thought before malice.' We have ***proof positive*** rather than 'positive proof.' And we have ***court martial*** rather than a martial or military court. In all of those terms, the adjective follows the noun rather than coming before the noun as is usually the case in English. The reason for that is because French usually puts the adjective after the noun. And since these phrases were common in the legal French of England, English tended to retain that French word order. We still do that with other terms borrowed from French over the centuries – like ***femme fatale***, ***poet laureate***, ***battle royal***, ***treasure trove***, ***sergeant major***, ***prince regent*** and ***cause célèbre***.

Another phrase where we do that is ***heir apparent*** meaning the apparent and intended heir. And that term uses the brand new word ***heir*** which appeared in English around this time. And the

term ***heir apparent*** is a very important term as it relates to the reign of Edward I as the king of England. First of all, Edward's heir apparent was his eldest son Alfonso. Remember that Edward's wife was from Spain, so his eldest son was given that Spanish name. But Alfonso died in the year 1284 about a decade into Edward's reign. And that left Edward's next son as the heir apparent to the throne. The next son was a four-month old baby named after his father. He would later to be known as Edward II.

So England got a new heir apparent in 1284. And even though he was a baby, the younger Edward ensured that there was a clear line of succession. But that wasn't the case up in Scotland. The King of the Scots was named Alexander III, and unfortunately, he didn't have a clear heir apparent. His wife had given birth to two sons and a daughter, but all three had died by this point. Before his daughter died, she had married the King of Norway, and she had given birth to a baby girl named Margaret. That baby girl was now Alexander's only living descendant.

Two years later, Alexander died, and without a capable heir, the Scots nobles feared invasion from England. Edward had already conquered Wales, and it was feared that the lack of clear heir would tempt to Edward to invade Scotland as well. It was the same situation that had occurred in England in 1066 when Edward the Confessor died without a clear heir, and we all know how that tuned out. So the Scots nobles reached out to Edward, and they made an agreement. The young granddaughter Margaret would be brought over from Norway to become the queen. Scotland would be ruled by a group of nobles until she was an adult. Meanwhile, young Margaret would marry Edward's infant son when the two were old enough. That proposed marriage would effectively unify the thrones of England and Scotland and Norway. The Scots nobles thought this deal would keep Edward from trying to invade Scotland while Margaret was still a child. And Edward thought it was a good deal because it created a scenario whereby his son would be the future king of England and Scotland, but this is where the law became an issue.

The Scots nobles could accept the young boy Edward as a future king, but they couldn't accept being ruled by English law. When this agreement with King Edward was formalized in the year 1290 as the Treaty of Birgham, the Scots nobles insisted that a specific provision be included which required that no Scots legal business was to be done in England. In Modern English, the treaty stated "that the kingdom of Scotland shall remain separate and divided from the kingdom of England . . . and that it shall be free from subjection." So young Edward could be the future king, but Scotland would remain a separate country with its own laws and government.

Unfortunately, none of this ever came to pass because young Margaret became very sick on her trip from Norway, and she died before she ever reached Scotland. And that created an even bigger problem for the Scots nobles. Now there was no heir at all – at least no clear heir.

At least thirteen different Scots came forward at this point to claim the throne. As the various claims were sorted out, it came down to two men who had the strongest claims. They were distant relatives through a female line. Their names were John Balloil and Robert Bruce. Now even if you don't know a lot about the history of Scotland, you've probably heard the name Robert Bruce – or Robert the Bruce. Well, the Robert Bruce I'm introducing here is not that Robert Bruce. This is actually his grandfather. So the Scots nobles had to decide between these

two claimants – Balloil and Bruce. And there wasn't a clear procedure to resolve that dispute. Either choice was likely to lead to a civil war by supporters of the losing side.

Ultimately, the Scots nobles decided to take the dispute to court. But which court? And who was to be the judge? Well, as it turned out, King Edward down in England was more than willing to hear the dispute and be the judge.

As we know from prior episodes, most English kings had claimed to be the overlords of Scotland, but those claims never amounted to very much – at least not for any extended period of time. There was the occasional invasion or border dispute, but for the most part, any given King of Scots might swear an oath of fealty or loyalty to the English king, and the English king would back off, and Scotland was left to rule itself as it always had. Edward's great-grandfather Henry II had soundly defeated the Scots during the great inter-family Plantagenet war late in Henry's reign. But Henry died a shot time later, and he was succeeded by Richard the Lionheart who gave Scotland back to the Scots king in return for a substantial payment to fund his massive Crusade. Since then, relations between Scotland and England had been pretty good. But now, Edward was looking to extend his influence into Scotland, and the Scots knew that they were vulnerable if the country devolved into civil war over the selection of a new king. So they were willing to let Edward resolve the competing claims to the Scottish throne in hopes that all sides would accept the decision and peace would be maintained.

Edward agreed to judge the dispute on the condition that the two claimants and all the Scottish nobles recognize him as the feudal overlord of Scotland. Everyone did so, and Edward set up an arbitration court to help him make the decision. English law was applied to determine whether Balliol or Bruce had the better claim based on the traditional rules of inheritance called primogeniture.

Assisted by over a hundred judges, Edward determined that Balliol had the better claim, so Edward recognized Balliol as the new King of the Scots in the year 1292. Theoretically, Balliol became a fellow king, but Edward saw him as nothing more than a vassal. Balliol was even forced to swear his fealty to Edward. But for a very brief period, it looked like the matter of Scotland had been settled.

Now this was the same general time frame in which one of the more infamous events of Edward's reign took place – the expulsion of the Jews from England. This was a period of rising anti-Semitism throughout Europe. Part of it was based on religious differences, but it was also about money. Jewish lenders weren't bound by the Church's restrictions on charging interest. So that allowed them to play a great role in European finance, but it also made them targets. Lots of nobles owed them money, and some had lost money and property to Jewish lenders when they defaulted on loans. The rise of the Italian lenders and financiers meant that the nobles now had another option. So that meant the nobles no longer needed the Jewish lenders. Edward himself dealt almost exclusively with the Italian financiers.

In the year 1290, Edward had gathered the nobles at a Parliament in Westminster to propose new taxes to raise revenue. The barons agreed to the taxes on one condition – that all the Jews be

expelled from England. Edward agreed to the request, and he signed an Edict of Expulsion which required all Jews to leave England. This was probably about 2000 people in total. The edict stated that they would be put to death if they remained. In exchange, Edward was able to levy the largest single tax of the entire Middle Ages.

Now it might be tempting to put most of the blame on the barons since they were ones who apparently demanded the expulsion. But Edward had no problem going along with it. In fact, he had done the exact same thing on his own in Gascony earlier in his reign.

Gascony was the main region still held by the English crown in France. It was what remained of the old Angevin Empire which had once dominated England and half of France. Gascony was located in the south of France in Aquitaine. And as I noted, Edward had expelled the Jews from there several years earlier. So he didn't have to be prompted by his barons to take such action.

Now even though Gascony was still in English hands, the French king Philip IV wanted to have it for himself. There had been an on-going conflict between traders from Gascony and those from other parts of Fracne. The dispute involved violent attacks on each other and several acts of piracy. This conflict lingered for some time. And since the dispute involved sailors from Gascony, the French king Philip demanded that Edward come to the French court to address the matter in person. Remember that Edward was technically a vassal of the French king when it came to his lands in Gascony. But Edward refused to go to France to answer the claims. When Edward didn't show up, Philip declared that Edward had violated his feudal oath, and thereby had forfeited his rights to Gascony. This was essentially the same thing that happened when Edward's grandfather John refused to appear before the French king about a century earlier, and he had lost Normandy in the process. Now Edward was faced with the prospect of losing Gascony under similar circumstances.

The two sides immediately began to prepare for war over the province. Edward starting making alliances with France's enemies in Europe. Meanwhile, Philip started to stir up a rebellion in Wales, and he encouraged the nobles up in Scotland to do the same. These distractions kept Edward from launching a major campaign to recover Gascony.

Edward was able to subdue the rebellion in Wales, but his heavy-handedness was causing a lot of frustration up in Scotland. And in keeping with the theme of this episode, much of that frustration had to do with the law and the scope of Edward's legal jurisdiction.

John Balliol was now the King of the Scots, and he was theoretically the ultimate judge of legal disputes in Scotland. If a judicial matter was brought before his court, his decision was supposed to be final. But many Scots who were unhappy with Balliol's decisions were now going over his head and appealing the dispute to Edward's court at Westminster in England. Now if you remember that earlier treaty between Edward and Scotland, the Scots were supposed to keep their own judicial system, but Edward said that the treaty became null and void when the young girl Margaret had died thereby preventing the marriage alliance with his son that was envisioned by that treaty. So Edward continued to act as the supreme justice of both England and Scotland.

Then to make matters worse, the Scots king himself was summoned to appear before Edward's Parliament at Westminster. He was called to answer a claim made by one of his own subjects over the succession rights to certain land in Scotland. At first, the Scots king Balliol refused to appear before Edward's court, but he eventually relented. Now you may notice the irony here. At the same time that Edward was demanding the Scots king to appear before his court, Edward himself was refusing to appear before the French king to answer claims there. It was a battle over legal jurisdiction, and Edward always considered himself the ultimate judge. He was a demanding lord when it came to his vassals, but he didn't hold himself to same standard when his lord in France came calling.

By this point, most of the Scots nobles realized that their king was nothing more than Edward's puppet. Edward had effectively claimed the right to apply his laws and his justice to Scotland when he saw fit, and that included jurisdiction over the Scots king himself. Then Edward made the situation even worse by demanding that the Scots join in his war effort to recover Gascony in southern France. Now Edward had a tough enough time convincing the English nobles to fight in southern France, much less the Scots nobles who felt no loyalty to Edward at all.

At this point, a group of Scots nobles had enough. They stepped in and effectively took control of the government of Scotland. Balliol remained king in name, but he was deprived of much of his power and authority. The nobles then made a formal alliance with France – an alliance which became known as the Auld Alliance and which caused a great deal of frustration in England for the next few centuries.

Edward now started to feel boxed in. Scotland was being run by rebellious nobles who were allied with France. And French ships were already raiding the southern coast of England.

A month later, in November of 1295, Edward called representatives from throughout England to a Parliament at Westminster to address the situation. He wanted to get their support to go to war with France. Edward's officials composed a writ demanding that the nobles, the bishops, and the commoners come to the Parliament. Copies of the writ were sent to every shire. The writ included knights as well as representatives of the towns and cities. There were representatives of every major class except the serfs. It was such a broad-based Parliament with so many different groups of people represented that historians call it the Model Parliament. And that writ is notable because, even though it was written in Latin, it appealed to the one thing all of the people called to the Parliament had in common – the English language. Here is an English translation of the relevant portion of the writ:

> "You know sufficiently well, and it is now known through all regions of the world, how the king of France fraudulently and craftily deprives us of our land in Gascony by withholding it from us unjustly. Now, however, not satisfied with said fraud and injustice, he has gathered together for the conquest of our kingdom a great fleet and a multitude of warriors, with which he has made a hostile attack on our kingdom and its inhabitants, and he now proposes to wipe the English language altogether from the face of the earth, if his power should permit such contemplated injustice, which God forbid."

This is the first time since the Norman Conquest that an English king rallied his people to war by explicitly appealing to the language which they all shared. That appeal probably could not have been made until everyone in the country actually spoke English which appears to have been the case by this point. And if the English language was threatened by the French king, then the implication was that it was threatened by the French language. Of course, there was a great irony to Edward's appeal. The same king who ruled his own people with a French-speaking Parliament and lots of brand-new statutes written in French now warned them that a foreign king was trying to force the French language upon them.

The irony notwithstanding, Edward's Model Parliament met at Westminster and granted him the money he needed to go to war with France and presumably to save the English language in the process.

But here's the thing. Edward didn't use that money to invade France. He used it to invade Scotland. Given the deteriorating situation there, and given the new Scottish alliance with France, he felt the need to deal with Scotland first.

In 1296, Edward sent a huge army into Scotland with the intentions of conquering it just as he had conquered Wales a few years earlier. The Scots were no match for Edward's powerful army. They were soundly defeated, and Edward marched his army throughout Scotland killing all who opposed him. His men took government records and even took a sacred stone called the Stone of Scone or Stone of Destiny. Scottish kings had been crowned on the stone for centuries. Edward's men took the stone and brought it to Westminster Abbey where it was incorporated into a special chair that was used for the coronation of English kings going forward.
I should note that the English government did return the stone – 700 years later in 1996. So there's that.

As Edward proceeded through Scotland, he made the Scots nobles swear their allegiance and loyalty to him. Like a good lawyer, he even made them put it in writing. The nobles attached their seals to a document recognizing Edward as their lord. The document became known as the Ragman Roll. Now it appears that the term Ragman Roll was borrowed from the name of a popular game of the period called ragman. The game was played with a parchment roll. Verses were written on the parchment – probably of an adult nature. And strings extended from the verses. When the parchment was rolled up, the strings protruded from the roll. A player would select a string, and the parchment was then unrolled and the selected verse was read to the amusement of all. This type of roll was called a ragman roll. Well apparently, Edward's roll sealed by all those Scots nobles resembled a ragman roll because the strings or ribbons from the various seals stuck out when it was rolled up. So it became known as the Ragman Roll.

Now you're probably saying 'So what?." But it appears that the Ragman Roll ultimately gave us the word ***rigmarole*** – or ***rigamarole***. Some scholars trace the origin of that word to the ragman rolls used in the game of ragman, but others trace it back to Edward's roll of loyalty oaths from Scots nobles – also called the Ragman Roll. According to this latter view, Edward's officials held public assemblies where the list of names in the roll was read out loud. The names were often read out so fast that no one could really understand it. It was just a jumble of words. And

that gave us the English word ***rigmarole***. It's a great story if true, but its more likely that the term evolved from a broad use of the term Ragman Roll for a variety of long-winded documents with a lot of legalese or other nonsensical statements contained in them.

Whether or not Edward's Ragman Roll is the specific origin of ***rigmarole***, there is no doubt that the document served to prove his dominance of Scotland. And with the conquest of Wales and Scotland, Edward now ruled all of Britain, and he was the first king to do so

As we'll soon see, the conquest of Scotland was short-lived, but for now, the region had been subdued. And Edward now turned his attention across the Chanel to France. By this point, the English nobles were getting cold feet and tight wallets. Over a year had passed since the Model Parliament , and the feared French invasion of England had never occurred. And by this point, the rumors of that pending French invasion has passed. Both the barons and the Church refused to give any more money to the war effort.

Despite the lack of support at home, Edward and his forces headed to France anyway, but the invasion quickly fell apart. His allies from Germany backed out, and his allies from Flanders were soundly defeated by the French. Edward soon agreed to a truce with the French king. And to make matters worse, while Edward was in France, he got word that a rebellion had broken out in Scotland. The rebel Scots were being led by a man named William Wallace, and Wallace defeated an English army at a place called Stirling Bridge thereby becoming a folk hero. And if you've seen the movie Braveheart, you probably already knew that. Although William Wallace probably didn't look like Mel Gibson, and he certainly didn't paint his face blue.

So we find ourselves at the end of the 1200s on the verge of a new century. The dispute with France came to an end – at least for now. So the king of France never had the opportunity to wipe the English language from the face of the earth as Edward had warned. And in fact, English continued its comeback, and it was gradually emerging as the language of literature in England, even if French was the language of the law.

In fact, around this time, a new history of England was composed in English. This version was written by a man named Robert who apparently lived in Gloucester, so he is known to modern scholars as Robert of Gloucester. His history included the Norman Conquest and the period afterward, and his manuscript is important to the history of English because he specifically discussed the linguistic situation in England after the Norman Conquest.

In an extended passage, he wrote that the Norman conquerors and their children had only spoken French. And he wrote that knowledge of the French language was still held in high regard in his day. But he also wrote that the low men and commoners held onto their native English language, and that there was no other country in the world where people held onto their native language like the people of England did. I actually read this entire passage back in Episode 69 when I was discussing the Norman Conquest, so I won't read the whole thing again. But I do want to highlight what Robert said about the linguistic situation in England around the time he was writing at the current point in our story. Here is that part in Modern English and then in the original Middle English:

Low men hold to English and to their own speech yet
I think there be not in all the world, countries none,
that hold to their own speech but England alone.
But well men know that to know both - well it is
for the more that a man knows, the more worthy he is.

lowe men holdeþ to engliss. & to hor owe speche ȝute.
ich wene þer ne beþ in al þe world. contreyes none.
þat ne holdeþ to hor owe speche. bote engelond one.
ac wel me wot uor to conne. boþe wel it is.
vor þe more þat a mon can. þe more wurþe he is.

Now Robert's Chronicle is important to our story for another reason. It shows how the English language was developing during this period. For example, we find the first recorded use of the extremely common word ***bad*** in an sentence. It one of those words that seems like it should be an Old English word because it is so short and common, but the history of the word before this point is unclear. It does appear in earlier documents as part of several surnames – surnames like 'Baddecheese' and 'Badinteheved' – literally 'Bad in the Head.' Yes, those were actual surnames. ***Bad*** may be derived from the Old English word ***bæddel*** which was a derogatory term for an effeminate man. Another possibility is the word ***bædan*** which meant 'to defile.' But again, there is no consensus about the ultimate origin of the word.

Robert's Chronicle also contains lots of new loanwords from French. We find the first use of the word ***strange***, as well as word like ***dinner***, ***duty*** and ***chase*** – all from French. But it's another group of words that is of more interest to us, especially given the theme of this episode. Robert's Chronicle shows that the use of legal French was impacting the English language by introducing lots of new legal terms to the language.

I noted earlier that the word ***malice*** was used for the first time in an English document during this period. Well it first appeared in Robert's Chronicle.

The text also gives us one of the very first uses of the word ***pain*** which appeared in a handful of documents from this same period. Now you may be wondering why I am including ***pain*** in a group of legal terms. Well because it was originally a legal term. It meant the penalty or punishment imposed on someone who was found guilty of a crime. In fact, the words ***pain***, ***penalty*** and ***punish*** all come from the same Latin root word which was ***poena***. That Latin word was borrowed directly into English in the word ***subpoena*** which literally means 'under penalty' because the first words of a writ that compelled someone to appear in court were "sub peona" meaning 'under penalty' for failure to comply.

The original sense of the word ***pain*** as punishment still exists in a phrase like "on pain of death." You might assume that the phrase means under the physical pain of death, but it actually means under the penalty or punishment of death. But that helps to explain how the meaning of the word evolved over time. Punishment imposed hardship and sometimes actual physical hardship. So over time, the word pain evolved from legal punishment to physical suffering.

Robert also gave us one of the first uses of the word ***trespass***. ***Tres-*** meant 'beyond,' so to ***trespass*** literally meant to pass beyond. At this point when Robert used it, it simply meant to pass beyond the limits of the law, so it meant a crime or violation of the law. It took a couple of more centuries for the meaning to shift to the modern sense of 'passing beyond the legal boundaries of a piece of property.' And that's how we tend to use it today – at least in common non-legal speech. It means to enter onto someone's property without permission. By the way, within French itself, the meaning also continued to evolve, and it acquired a sense of passing beyond this mortal world into the afterlife. So it meant to pass away or die. And that's how ***trespas*** is used in Modern French today.

Robert's Chronicle also gives us the first use of the word ***verdict*** in an English document. The word ***verdict*** literally meant a 'truthful statement,' and it originally meant the sworn testimony of a witness. By the time the word was borrowed into English, it had come to mean the decision of a judge or jury, like Edward's decision in the dispute over the kingship of Scotland. If we break down the word ***verdict***, we can better discern its original meaning as a 'truthful statement.' ***Ver-*** is a Latin root meaning 'true,' and it is also found in words like ***verify*** and ***veracity***. The second part ***-dict*** meant 'words or a statement.' We also have it in words like ***diction***, ***dictation***, ***dictionary***, and ***predict***. So when you put those two elements together, you get ***verdict*** – a truthful statement.

By the way that second part ***-dict*** is also found in the word ***indict*** which is pronounced a little differently, but still typically spelled D-I-C-T. It meant 'to accuse someone of a crime.' And that word also appeared for the first time in English around the year 1300, even though it wasn't used in Robert's Chronicle.

Robert's manuscript also gives us the first use of the word ***sue*** in the sense of starting a lawsuit. The word came from French and had been recorded in a few other English documents prior to this point in the 1200s, but in those documents it had its original sense which was 'to follow.' We still have that original sense of 'follow' in words like ***pursue*** and ***ensue***. But if you pursue a legal claim by going to court, then you ***sue*** the party on the other side of the dispute. And that's how Robert used the word in his chronicle.

Of course, if you ***pursue*** someone, you are in ***pursuit***. And if you ***sue*** someone in court, that's called a ***suit***. You might 'file suit' to start a 'lawsuit.' So ***suit*** is really just the noun form of ***sue*** – and ***suit*** is also used for the first time in English in Robert's Chronicle.

By the way, when things follow each other, they tend to create a sequence of things that go together. They '***follow suit***' and are ***suitable*** for a particular purpose. That gave us the other sense of ***suit*** as a group of things that go together like the four suits in a deck of cards. And when several pieces of clothing go together, that's called a 'suit of clothes' or ***suit*** for short.

By the way, there is another aspect to the word ***suit*** when used in reference to clothes. If you are attracted to someone and follow them around looking for a date, you are said to be a ***suitor*** from the same word. Well, the word ***suitor*** originally referred a follower of the king or other prominent noble. So it meant a courtier. And since the courtiers or suitors tended to dress in

fancy clothing that was all very similar, that sense of matching formal clothing also contributed to the modern meaning of the word ***suit***. Again Robert of Gloucester gives us the first use of ***suit*** in its legal sense – as in a lawsuit.

Robert also gave us the first use of the word ***felon*** and one of the first uses of the related word ***felony***.

And remember how those litigants in Scotland appealed their verdicts to Edward's court in England because Edward claimed to have jurisdiction over Scottish law as well? Well the word ***appeal*** was a brand new word in the English language at the time, and its first recorded use was in Robert's Chronicle. The original sense of the word was this specific legal sense of taking a case to a higher court, but notice how broadly we use the word today. You might 'appeal' to someone's sensibilities, or you might find someone 'appealing.' Those are both later developments in the language.

And speaking of an appeal to a higher ***court***, Robert also gave us the first use of the word ***court*** in the sense of a place where legal matters are decided and resolved. Of course the word ***court*** had been used in English for some time. We first saw it in the Peterborough Chronicle in the mid-1100s. But previously, it had always been used in the sense of a 'king's court' meaning the king's household or king's retinue. But since the king was the ultimate administrator of justice, the word ***court*** now started to acquire a specific legal sense which we still use today. And Robert's Chronicle gave us that legal sense.

There's one other legal term that is used for one of the first times in English in Robert's Chronicle, and its important to English for two reasons. Not only was it a brand new legal term in the late 1200s, it is also something that we employ every time we speak. Can you guess what it is? It's a ***sentence***. Robert used it for the first time in its sense as a legal judgment or verdict. It later came to refer to the punishment imposed by a court once judgment was rendered. But ***sentence*** also had a grammatical sense in Latin and French, and that meaning also passed into English in the 1200s. The connection between the legal sense and the grammatical sense can be found in the original meaning of the term which was 'an authoritative statement.' When a statement was made in court to pronounce judgement, it gave us the legal sense of ***sentence***. And when a statement was made in casual conversation, it gave us the grammatical sense of ***sentence***. So that was also a brand new word in English as the 1200s came to an end.

Now before I conclude, let me make one other note. If you think the information I've conveyed in this episode is 'not worth a hill a beans' – to use an old expression – well you should know that that expression can be traced back to Robert's Chronicle. Robert is the first known person to use a version of that phrase. Technically, he said "not worth a bean" because a single bean is something that has little or no value. A "hill of beans" was a later modification that took place in American English.

Robert used the expression in a discussion about King John and the interdict that was imposed on England by the Pope. You might remember that the Pope effectively closed all the churches in England because John would not accept the Pope's choice as Archbishop of Canterbury. Robert

wrote that the king of Germany tried to appeal to John to accept the Pope's choice, but the appeal was 'not worth a bean' because John ignored it. Here's the passage in Modern English:

> The king of Germany sent [a message] especially
> to King John to forget his hurt,
> and receive the archbishop, and let the Holy Church
> have her franchise, clear and clean; altogether not worth a bean.

Now here's the original Middle English passage:

> þe king of alimayne sende specialliche inou
> To king Ion þat he wiþdrowe him of is wou
> & vnderuenge þe erchebissop & holichurche al clene
> Lete abbe ir franchise & al nas wurþ a bene.

So if you ever hear something described as 'not worth a hill of beans,' now you know that it goes back to at least the late 1200s. Next time, we'll move our official time line forward into the 1300s, and we'll turn our attention north to look at the collapse of Edward's rule in Scotland as the Scots rose in rebellion. We'll also look more closely at the English language in the north of Britain. Not only did the Scots speak a unique dialect of English, the people of northern England also spoke a unique dialect. And we have an important text from this region which sheds some light on this northern dialect around the year 1300. So next time, we'll look at both the political and linguistic developments in northern Britain.

Until then, thanks for listening to the History of English Podcast.

EPISODE 112: NORTHERN MESSENGER

Welcome to the History of English Podcast – a podcast about the history of the English language. This is Episode 112: Northern Messenger. In this episode, we're going to officially move our chronological narrative into the 1300s. We'll continue to look at the reign of Edward I, and we'll see how his plans to conquer and subdue Scotland started to fall apart as Scotland rose in rebellion. A fierce independent streak had always existed in the north, so the Scots didn't need much of a motivation to take up arms against Edward's forces. The distinct culture of the north was reflected in the speech of the people. The people of northern England and southern Scotland spoke a similar dialect of English, and that dialect was quite different from the English spoken in the south of England where the English government was located. During this period, we start to get a sense of just how different the dialect of the north was. Around the time that Scotland rose in rebellion, we have the first document composed in the northernmost dialect of Middle English – a document called Cursor Mundi. And for the first time, we can analyze this dialect and see why the people of the south sometimes had difficulty understanding the English spoken in the north. So this time, we'll look at the Northern dialect of Middle English.

But before we begin, let me remind you that the website for the podcast is historyofenglishpodcast.com. And you can sign up to support the podcast at Patreon.com/historyofenglish.

Now this time, I want to turn our attention to the north of Britain and explore the very important developments that were taking place there. These developments were political, literary and linguistic. So there's a lot to cover. Let's begin by picking up with Edward's conquest of Scotland in 1296 which we looked at last time. Following that invasion of Scotland, Edward headed across the Channel to secure his rights to Gascony in the south of France. That French invasion quickly fell apart, and Edward and the French king soon agreed to a truce. Several years of negotiations between the two kings followed which ultimately preserved Edward's claims to the region. The agreement that was reached also stipulated that there would be two marriages.

First, Edward, who was now a widower, agreed to marry the French king's sister Margaret. This was an interesting marriage because Edward was 60 years old, and Margaret was in her late teens. But it was the other arranged marriage that had much more important implications for our story – at least in the long term. It was agreed that Edward's son and heir to the throne would marry the French king's daughter. And the reason why this second marriage between the children of the two kings was so important is because it meant that any children born to that marriage would be the grandchildren of both kings with a theoretical claim to both thrones. And that's important because the French royal line – the Capetians – was about to run out of male heirs. When that happened in the early 1300s, it allowed Edward's grandson, Edward III, to claim the French throne. And that set in motion the long series of conflicts between England and France that become known as the Hundred Years War. And that conflict is important to our story because it led to a rise of pro-English and anti-French sentiment in England, and that sentiment ultimately pushed French into the background and allowed English re-emerge as the undisputed language of English government and society.

So this seemingly obscure marriage between Edward's son and the French king's daughter was destined to have some major long-term consequences, and we'll cover all of those in more detail as we move through the 1300s.

Now as Edward was negotiating that settlement with France, he was having to deal with a challenge to his rule up in Scotland. It was a popular uprising led by a man named William Wallace. Interestingly, this was not really a rebellion by the nobles of Scotland. Most of the important nobles were actually descended from Anglo-Normans. I mentioned that way back in Episode 77. The Balliols, the Bruces and soon-to-become-important Stuarts all had Norman connections. And many of those nobles held lands in England as well as Scotland. So initially, many of those prominent nobles were reluctant to join a full-scale rebellion against Edward. That meant that the Scottish 'uprising' was literally that – a rising from the bottom up.

William Wallace was the son of a knight from southern Scotland. He wasn't from a baronial family, but he gathered a lot of followers in the southern part of Scotland. While Edward was away in France, Wallace was able to join forces with another rebel leader from northern Scotland named Andrew de Moray, and together they managed to defeat an English army at Stirling Bridge in September of 1297. After the victory, Wallace was knighted and declared the sole guardian of Scotland. He was also designated as the leader of the Scots army in the absence of the deposed king John Balliol who was in exile. So Wallace emerged as the leader of the rebellion.

The English defeat at Stirling Bridge was the first major sign that Edward's rule in Scotland was tenuous and it was going to require an on-going effort if Edward wanted to keep it under control. It started to become apparent that the conquest of Scotland was never going to be as decisive as the conquest of Wales. Scotland was too big and too far away from the center of English government in the south of England.

In fact, once the rebellion was underway, Wallace actually took the battle across the border to England itself. Shortly after the victory at Stirling Bridge, he led a major raid into northern England. That forced Edward to return to England from France and to march his forces to the north to confront Wallace in the summer of 1298.

Wallace avoided a direct confrontation for as long as he could. Without the full support of the Scots nobles, he was at a miliary disadvantage, especially with the lack of a cavalry. Edward eventually discovered that Wallace's forces were camped near the town of Falkirk in cental Scotland. Edward finally forced Wallace into a face-to-face battle on July 22, 1298 at what became known as the Battle of Falkirk. Edward used his archers and crossbowmen to break Wallace's flanks, and the Scots forces were soon defeated. Many men were killed on both sides of the battle. Edward got his victory and re-established his authority in Scotland, but Wallace managed to escape and the rebellion continued.

By this point, Edward's army was tired and running low on resources. So he withdrew back across the border to Carlisle in northern England. From there, the English forces kept a close eye on the situation in Scotland, and over the next five years, Edward launched three more invasions of Scotland, but none of the invasions were decisive. The Scots had learned a hard lesson from Falkirk. They avoided any large-scale battles that might prove decisive. Edward still claimed that he was the king of the Scots, but he was never able to secure his hold on the region.

Now the events in Scotland are important to the story of English because they eroded the traditional role of Gaelic in the government of Scotland. Most of Scotland spoke Gaelic – or /gæ-lick/ as it's pronounced in Scotland. That was the traditional Celtic language of the region. But in the southern part of Scotland, people spoke English. Back in Episode 77, I discussed how a Scottish military victory about three centuries earlier had moved the border between England and Scotland southward. And when that border moved, the northernmost part of Northumbria became part of southern Scotland, and that included the city of Edinburgh. So all of the English speakers in that region came under Scottish rule. Since then, the people in that southern region of Scotland had continued to speak English, but their Old English language had evolved over time, and it would continue to evolve into what became known as Scots.

That southern region of Scotland was also where the Anglo-Norman influence was the greatest. As I noted, many of the noble families from that region had connections to the nobility of England. And when the Scots king Alexander III died without an heir leaving a power vacuum, the center of power soon shifted to those noble families in the south where people spoke English. For now, French was the official language of the Scottish royal court. But by the end of the 1300s, French has been replaced with the Scots dialect of English, and by the early 1400s, Scots was the official language of the Scottish government.

Now I just referred to Scots as an English dialect, and as I've noted before, there are many in Scotland who would take exception to that. They would refer to Scots as a distinct language. I'm not going to resolve that debate here, and I don't really need to because at the current point in our story, Scots wasn't really a distinct manner of speech yet.

Even though the English speakers in Scotland and Northern England were separated by a political border, their respective dialects were still largely the same around the year 1300. In fact, most modern scholars make no distinction between the English of Scotland and the English of northern England during this period. Both regions are usually lumped together as part of a common dialect region known as the 'Northern' dialect of Middle English.

So as Edward's forces went back and forth across the Scottish border, they would have encountered very little difference in the speech on each side. There may have been some minor differences, but the surviving documents from those regions suggest that the speech was largely the same. That's why this is considered one common dialect region in early Middle English.

Now I noted that scholars have reached this conclusion by examining the surviving documents from those northern regions. But here's the thing. Surviving English documents from those regions are virtually non-existent until the current point in our story. Of course, there are Old

English documents from those regions composed before the Norman Conquest, but as we know, English documents largely disappeared in the wake of that Conquest. And when English documents finally started to reappear, they mostly came from the South and the Midlands. We don't really have a significant piece of literature from the North until the current point in our story around the year 1300.

That document is called Cursor Mundi, and it was composed in the north of England – probably in or around the city of Durham. It provides modern scholars with the first real opportunity to examine the speech of northern England in the post-Conquest period. Now since this document was composed in northern England, you may be wondering how scholars know that the speech was essentially the same across the border in Scotland. Well, the first English documents from Scotland appear in the later part of the 1300s, and those documents show very little, if any, difference in dialect. It's not until the 1400s that Scots really started to become a distinct dialect. We'll look at some of those early Scots documents in a future episode, but for now, let's focus on that document that appeared around the year 1300 called Cursor Mundi.

It's a long poem that recounts much of the world's history as described in the Bible. It begins with an account of the creation and then covers many of the major events of Biblical history. It also pulls in legends and stories from other sources. It survives in many different manuscripts, so it was apparently very popular at the time.

The title comes from a later copy, and even though the poem itself was written in English, the title is Latin. Cursor Mundi literally means the 'Runner of the World' or the 'Messenger of the World.' ***Cursor*** meant 'runner' or 'something that moves,' and it's related to other Latin-derived word like ***course*** and ***current***. In the modern era, English has actually borrowed the word ***cursor*** in its original form for use in computer technology. The cursor on the computer screen is the thing that moves around and lets you modify the content on the screen. We also have it almost in its original form in the word ***cursory*** which means 'quick,' as in a 'cursory review of a document.' And we also have it in the related Latin and French word ***courier*** meaning 'a person who runs errands or delivers messages.' And that word ***courier*** actually captures more of the original sense of the word ***cursor***. Again, it meant a runner or messenger. And in this poem, the word is used in that context because the poem is delivering a message about the world.

The second word ***Mundi*** meant 'world.' We also have the same Latin root in the word ***mundane*** which originally meant 'of this world' or 'belonging to this world,' as opposed to something spiritual. And today, ***mundane*** has more of a sense of something common or routine. So ***mundi*** meant 'world,' and Cursor Mundi meant the 'runner or messenger of the world.'

Now the original manuscript composed in the north of England has been lost, but that original manuscript was copied many times, and several of those copies have survived the centuries. The poet identifies himself as a cleric, but he doesn't specifically state where the poem was composed. As I noted, some scholars think the original version was composed around Durham, but regardless of the exact town or city, there is no doubt that it was the product of northern England. The language itself is a giveaway, but we don't even have to rely upon the dialect of

the poem to reach that conclusion because the poet actually tells us that he wrote it in the dialect of northern England so that the people of the north could better read it and understand it. And in telling us that, he draws a sharp contrast between the language of the north and the language of the south.

He does this in a passage where he explains why he translated a particular text that had been written in a dialect of southern England. The text was a story about the Assumption of the Virgin Mary into heaven upon her death. As I said, the text was composed in the south of England in a dialect that was understandable in the south. But the poet says that he had to translate the story into the dialect of northern England so that it could be understood by the people of the North. Here's that passage about the translated story – first in Modern English and then in the original Middle English:

In southern English it was drawn,
and I have turned it into our own
language of the northern people,
who can read no other English.

In suthrin englijs was it drawn
And I haue turnd it till vr aun
Langage of þe norþren lede
þat can nan oþer englijs rede

Now the notion that northern English was very different from southern English should not be a surprise. We've seen references to it before. Nearly two centuries earlier, the great historian William of Malmesbury had written in Latin that "The whole language of the Northumbrians, especially in York, is so grating and uncouth that we Southerners cannot understand a word of it." I mentioned that quote way back in Episode 72, so this was not a new development. But the Cursor Mundi poem gives us our first real opportunity to compare and examine those differences.

But before we start analyzing some of those differences, let me make a few general comments about this north-south linguistic divide. We know that even in the Anglo-Saxon period, the English spoken in the north was different from that spoken in the south. The northernmost dialect of Old English is known as the Northumbrian dialect. Then the Vikings arrived, and this same northern region became part of the Danelaw. And the Norse influence in that region contributed to an even greater linguistic divide. Then in 1066, the Normans arrived from France, and French influences became more common. Through all of this, the Northern dialect continued to evolve – as did all of the other regional dialects. Modern scholars refer to this northernmost dialect as the 'Northern' dialect of Middle English. So the Old English 'Northumbrian' dialect evolved into Middle English 'Northern' dialect.

To this very day, there is still a north-south linguistic divide in England. And I thought it might be a good idea to give you a modern example of northern speech if you're not familiar with the differences. Of course, there is no generic Northern dialect today. Over the past seven centuries, the Northern dialect has fractured into many different regional dialects that sometimes vary from

county to county and city to city. But since many scholars think the Cursor Mundi poet lived in or around Durham, I thought it would be interesting to listen to an actual speaker from that region.

This sample comes from the British Library archives. The British Library maintains a large collection of dialect samples from throughout Britain, and many of them were recorded many years ago, so they sometimes reflect an older form of speech that may be gradually disappearing. This particular clip was recorded in 1954, and the man speaking was a farmer from the Durham region named John Peart. He was born in 1872, so his dialect reflects the speech of the region over a century ago. In this clip, he talks about his life as a farmer. And to help you out a bit as you listen, he describes the process of mowing grass by hand before tractors arrived. He refers to a scythe and a snead. A scythe is a stick with a curved blade at the end, and the snead is the stick or handle of the tool. And you'll notice that when he refers to the blade, he pronounces it /bleed/. So here's the clip:

[JOHN PEART VOICE SAMPLE]

So that's an example of a northern dialect from the county of Durham. Let me give you another quick sample of modern speech in the north of England. This is a voice sample contributed by listener Paul from Yorkshire. Paul gives us a sentence in a Yorkshire dialect, and then in a more standard English dialect:

[VOICE SAMPLE – PAUL FROM YORKSHIRE]

The word ***lake*** meaning 'to play' is indeed a Norse word. And this points to another key feature of northern English dialects. They tend to retain a higher portion of Norse words since the region was once part of the Danelaw. This fact is very apparent in the Cursor Mundi.

The poem survives in its original Northern version, but it soon spread to the south of England where it was copied by a scribe who re-wrote the poem in his southern English dialect. So this southern version allows us to compare the northern and southern dialects, and the comparison can be done line by line. Scholars who have compared the two versions have determined about 9% of the words in the northern version are from Old Norse, compared to only about 4.5% in the southern version. So there are twice as many Norse words in the northern manuscript. *[From "Old English to Standard English," Freeborn, p. 168.]*

The Norse influence in the north is represented by several key features which I have mentioned in earlier episodes. First of all, the Cursor Mundi uses the Norse pronouns ***they***, ***them*** and ***their***, where the southern text uses the more traditional English pronouns ***he***, ***hem*** and ***here***. As we know, those modern 'TH' pronoun forms came from Old Norse, and they came in via the Northern dialect of Middle English. At this point, around the year 1300, they were still largely confined to the north of England.

Another common Norse feature in the Cursor Mundi is the pronunciation of many words with traditional Norse sounds rather than Old English sounds. As we know, Old Norse and Old English were closely-related languages with a very similar vocabulary, but Old English developed certain sound changes that didn't occur in Old Norse. As we saw in the earlier episodes, the hard 'K' sound found in many Germanic words was softened into a 'CH' sound in many Old English words. And the Germanic 'SK' sound was softened to an 'SH' sound . But Old Norse retained those original Germanic sounds, and thanks to that Norse influence, the Northern dialect tended to retain those harder 'K' and 'SK' sounds. So we find ***kirk*** in the north and ***church*** in the south. In Middle English documents, we find northern texts using the word ***skirt*** for the same piece of clothing described as a ***shirt*** in the south. And we'll see more examples of this as we go through a few passages of the Cursor Mundi.

The Northern dialect also gave us a couple of grammatical features that didn't exist in the south. For example, when we make a noun plural, we usually add an 'S' or 'ES' to the end of the word. From ***cat*** to ***cats*** and from ***house*** to ***houses***. Well, that was originally a feature of the Northern dialect. In the south of England, nouns were usually made plural by adding an 'EN' to the end. A few of those southern forms are still hanging around. We have plural words like ***children***, ***brethren*** and ***oxen***. But for the most part, the southern 'EN' ending has lost out to the northern 'S' and 'ES' endings. At the current point in our story around the year 1300, those northern 'S' and 'ES' endings were starting to be used in the south, but they had not become fully accepted yet. Even as late as Shakespeare in the early Modern English period, this was still not a fully settled issue in the south. Shakespeare used ***eyen*** for ***eyes***, ***shoon*** for ***shoes***, and ***housen*** for ***houses***. Again, as we go through portions of the Cursor Mundi, we'll see that the northern poet routinely used the 'S' and 'ES' endings, where the southern translator used the 'EN' ending.

Another northern grammatical feature that eventually spread south also involved an 'S' and 'ES' ending, but in this case, it was the 'S' and 'ES' used for verbs in third person singular. So "he watches" or "she loves." Again, even though this is standard in Modern English, it was once limited to the north of England. The southern forms were different. In the Midlands, people used an 'EN' ending. So instead of "she loves," people would say "she loven." In the far south of England, people would use another verb ending – '-eth' – E-T-H. So they would say "she loveth." So as you traveled from north to south, you would hear the verb form change from ***loves*** to ***loven*** to ***loveth***. Once again, the northern 'S' form spread southward during the Middle English period and became standard over time, but again, the issue still wasn't completely settled in the time of Shakespeare. As most of you probably know, he used both the 'S' ending and the 'ETH' ending in his various works.

By the way, it isn't entirely clear where the northern 'S' ending came from. It may have developed from an 'SK' verb ending that was common in Old Norse, but modern scholars are not entirely sure about that.

There was one other important feature of the Northern dialect which I've mentioned before, and that involved the pronunciation of the long 'A' sound. Back in Episode 96, I talked about how that sound changed in the south of England – from /ah/ to /aw/. During the Great Vowel Shift in the 1400s and 1500s, it shifted again to the /oh/ sound. So we have Old English ***stan*** (/stahn/),

Middle English ***ston*** /stawn/, and Modern English ***stone*** (/stone/). Well, as I noted in that episode, that sound change did not occur in the north of England and in Scotland. So this Northern dialect retained the original /ah/ sound of Old English.

So around the current point in our story, a speaker in the south would have said /stawn/, but a speaker in the north would have said /stahn/. This difference can be detected in the documents of this period because southern writers used the letter O for this new sound. So southern manuscripts spell these words with an O where northern manuscripts use the traditional letter A when spelling the same word. Again, the northern and southern versions of the Cursor Mundi reflect these differences.

Now all of the Northern dialect features I just mentioned were discussed in earlier episodes, but I wanted to put all of those together for you so you could get a sense of how this Northern dialect differed from the dialects of the south. These are not all of the differences, they're just some of the major ones, and they are prominent in the Cursor Mundi.

So let's turn to the actual language of that poem. I'm going to take you through the first few lines of the Prologue of the poem. The Prologue explains that people love to read romances and stories about Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar, King Arthur and Charlemagne. But the poet says that he composed his work in honor the Virgin Mary. He also says that French rhymes are everywhere, but there is nothing for those people who only speak English. So he has composed his poem in English for those people who have no ability to speak French. Here are the first ten lines in Modern English:

Men yearn to hear poems
And (to) read romances in various manners or styles
Of Alexander the conqueror
Of Julius Caesar the emperor
Of the strong strife of Greece and Troy
Where many thousand lost their life
Of Brutus that warrior bold of hand
The first conqueror of England
King Arthur that was so great
Whom none in his time was like

Now here's the same passage in the Northern dialect of Middle English:

Man yhernes rimes forto here
And romans red on manere sere
Of Alisaundur þe conquerour
Of luly Cesar þe emparour
O Grece and Troy þe strang scrijf
þere many thosand lesis þer lijf
O Brut þat bern bald of hand
þe first conquerour of Ingland

Kyng Arthour þat was so rike
Quam non in hys tim was like

Now let's break that down a little bit. The very first line is: "Man yhernes rimes forto here." Literally, "Man yearns for rhymes for to hear." The verb is ***yhernes*** or 'yearns' – with that 'S' ending that was common in the north and which is also standard in Modern English. But the slightly later southern copy of the poem renders the word as ***ȝernen*** with an 'EN' ending that was common around London and the Midlands. So right out of the gate, we see the difference between the two versions. Also note that the northern poet uses the word ***rimes*** – or 'rhymes' – with that plural 'S' ending that was common in the north and which also became standard over time. So, much of this poem looks and sounds similar to Modern English. And as these elements mixed with other elements from the south, we can start to get an idea of how Modern English emerged from a mixture of these various dialects.

The second line of the poem is "And romans red on manere sere" – "And romances read in manner 'sere.' ***Sere*** was a Norse word that meant 'various.' So 'on manere sair' meant 'of various manners' or 'of various styles.' So people like to listen to rhymes and romances of various styles.

Now the southern version of the text used a different wording. Instead of 'manere sere,' the southern poet used the phrase "dyuerse manere" – 'diverse manner.' ***Diverse*** is a French word, and it was a brand new word in English at this point. So whereas the Northern poet used a Norse word, the southern scribe used a new French word. This shows how much Norse influence there was in the language of the north.

Let me make one other note about the second line of the poem – "And romans red on manere sere." The verb here is ***red*** (/raid/) – or ***read***. The northern poet renders the word phonetically as R-E-D. Remember that the letter E had the /ay/ sound at the time, so R-E-D was /raid/ with no inflectional ending. But the southern scribe who re-worked the poem rendered the word as R-E-D-E – /raid-eh/. So he added an E to the end. In an earlier episode, I discussed how the various inflectional endings of Old English had mostly collapsed into a single generic 'eh' ending by this point represented by letter E. Many Middle English documents are filled with words that end with a simple generic E – representing what had once been a variety of very specific endings. So the E wasn't really doing anything anymore, it was just a lingering remnant of a past era when endings were much more important. So it was probably inevitable that English speakers would eventually drop those generic E's at the end of all of those words since they no longer served any purpose. And that's exactly what had happened in the north of England by this point. Most manuscripts composed in the north drop many of the final E's. And even when the E is retained, most scholars think it was probably silent in the north by this point. So here we see the northern poet drop the E in the verb ***red*** (/raid/)– or ***read*** – whereas the southern poet retains the E in his spelling and probably pronounced it as well.

I should note that both writers spelled the word ***manner*** the same way – with an E at the end – M-A-N-E-R-E. But again, most scholars agree that the E was probably silent in the north. Of course, it was eventually dropped in both the north and the south, but sometimes that silent E was

retained as a marker to indicate that the preceding vowel was pronounced as a long vowel. And that was the origin of the modern 'silent E' at the end of many words in Modern English.

For purposes of this episode, the important thing to take from all of this is that E first fell silent in the north of England, and by the time of the Cursor Mundi, it was either being dropped altogether or it was retained in the spelling but not pronounced.

Now I've only analyzed the first two lines of a poem that is nearly 30,000 lines long. And in just those first two lines, we can see lots of important developments, and we can see lots of differences between the dialects of the north and the south.

Let me point out a few other specifically northern features in those first few lines. In line 6, we have "many thosand lesis þer lijf" – "many thousands lost their life." So here we have the Norse pronoun ***their*** instead of the Old English pronoun ***here***. In line 7, the legendary founder of Britain named Brutus is described as "bald of hand" which reads as "bald (B-A-L-D) of hand." So why did Brutus have 'bald' hands. Well, he didn't. This is actually the word ***bold***. He was 'bold of hand.' The Old English version of the word was ***bald***, and here we see the northern text retain that original form and that original long A sound. But remember, in the south of England, that sound experienced the changes I discussed earlier – from /ah/ to /aw/ to /oh/. And the southern version of the text reflects that change and renders the word with an O – spelled B-O-L-D-E. And again, the southern version adds that generic E at the end which is missing in the northern version.

And in the last two lines that I read earlier, the northern poet rhymes ***rich*** and ***like***. Now those words don't rhyme today, but they did rhyme in the poet's northern dialect. ***Rich*** was pronounced (/reek/) and ***like*** was pronounced (/leek/). Here are those two lines again:

Kyng Arthour þat was so rike (/reek/)
Quam non in hys tim was like (/leek/)

literally –

King Arthur that was so rich
Whom none in his time was like

First of all, the vowel sound has obviously evolved in both words. But originally, they had the traditional long I sound of Old and Middle English which was /ee/ – /reek/ and /leek/. But let's focus on the final 'K' sound. If you've listened to all of the episodes, you might remember that I talked about the word ***rich*** in one of the early episodes – specifically Episode 5 where I talked about the letter C. It originally meant 'powerful or great.' And that's how the word was used here. When the poet says that King Arthur was /reek/ or rich, he didn't necessarily mean that Arthur had a lot of money. He meant that Arthur was powerful and great. In the Middle Ages, powerful and great men tended to be associated with nobility, so they also tended to be wealthy. And over time, the English word came to be associated mainly with the wealth of a person.

In early Old English, the word was probably pronounced something like /ree-keh/. But as I noted earlier, that 'K' sound softened to a 'CH' sound in the south, and the word became /ree-cheh/ in Old English. And by the way, the word ***like*** worked the same way. It was pronounced more like /lee-cheh/ in Old English. But in the north of England, the Norse versions of those words were common. The Norse versions were /rikr/ and /likr/. And remember that the Northern dialect tended to retain the hard 'K' sound where southern English had the softer 'CH' sound. So here, the northern poet renders the words as /reek/ and /leek/, but the southern scribe changed both of those words to ***riche*** and ***liche***.

Now today, in Modern English, we have those words as ***rich*** and ***like***, so we kept the southern form of ***rich*** with the 'CH' sound at the end. And we adopted the northern version of ***like*** with the 'K' sound at the end. The fact that Modern English has retained ***rich*** from the south and ***like*** form the north shows how both of those regions contributed to Modern English. As people from around England converged in places like London, these dialects mixed together, and English speakers tended to settle on one form or the other over time.

This difference between the 'K' sound of the north and softer 'CH' sound of the south was one of the distinguishing features of these two dialects. And a few lines later in the Cursor Mundi, the northern poet uses the word ***ilkon*** which is barely recognizable to most Modern English speakers. But if we substitute a southern 'CH' for that northern 'K' sound, we go from ***ilkon*** to /eelch - on/ which is actually an early version of the phrase 'each one.' So ***ilkon*** is simply a northern version of 'each one' – ***ilk*** being the northern equivalent of southern ***each***. In just a few lines of this old northern poem, we have seen lots of features which distinguish the Northern dialect from the speech of southern England.

I want to conclude our look at the Cursor Mundi by looking at a passage from near the end of the Prologue. This passage is interesting because it explains why the poet chose to compose the poem in English instead of French. This passage reflects the re-emerging sense of pride in English. And it also suggests a certain resentment at the prominent role of French at the time.

Here's the passage. I'll rotate the Modern English translation and the original Middle English version:

After the Holy Church's state, this book has been translated into the English tongue to be read for the love of the English people, the English people of England, for the common people to understand. French rhymes are read and are common in each place. Most are written for Frenchmen. But what is there for him who can speak no French?

Efter haly kyrc state
Þis ilk bok es translate
Into Inglis tong to rede
For the loue of Inglis lede,
Inglish lede of Ingland,
For the commun at understand.

Frankis rimes here I redd,
Comunlik in ilk[a] sted;
Mast es it wroght for frankis man,
Quat is for him na Frankis can?

In the nation of England, English men have a common speech with which most may succeed. Most find it necessary to speak with it. But seldom by any chance, was the English tongue praised in France. If we give to each their own language, I do not think we do them any outrage. To the common English man I write. To he who understands what I say.

In Ingland the nacion,
Es Inglis man þar in commun;
Þe speche þat man wit mast may spede;
Mast þarwit to speke war nede.
Selden was for ani chance
Praised Inglis tong in France;
Give we ilkan þare langage,
Me think we do þam non outrage.
To laud and Inglish man I spell
Þat understandes þat I tell.
(Prologue, II, ll. 232-250)

This passage contains a lot of the features we've already examined. We find the Norse pronoun forms ***them*** and ***their***. We find the prominent northern 'K' sound in ***kyrc*** instead of southern ***church***. And once again, we see the use of northern ***ilk*** instead of southern ***each***. We also see the old /ah/ sound which became /aw/ and then /oh/ in the south. So the poem uses ***haly***, ***mast*** and ***na*** instead of southern ***holy***, ***most*** and ***no***.

But there's one other thing that stands out. The scribe routinely refers to himself as ***I*** – pronounced /ee/ at the time. This was a shortening of the Old English pronoun ***ic*** (/each/) – usually spelled I-C. This change was mostly complete in the Northern dialect by this point, so our modern first-person pronoun ***I*** was established in the north first. But in the South, ***ic*** was still common.

Now this is probably a good time to discuss some important developments concerning the letter I that were taking place in early Middle English. First of all, as I just noted, the single letter I was now its own word – the first person pronoun ***I***. And when it was used as a pronoun, it was becoming a common practice to capitalize it to make it stand out. Otherwise, a single lower-case 'I' would tend to get lost in the flowing script of this period. More on that in a moment.

The northern scribes were also starting to use the letter I in another way – to mark a long vowel sound. I have alluded to this before back in Episode 89. To indicate a long A sound, they would sometimes put an I after it giving us the AI spelling of words like ***rain***, ***raid***, and ***saint***. They also put it after an E giving us the EI spelling of words like ***weight*** and ***freight***. It was also added after a U producing a UI spelling that never really caught on in the south but was popular in the

north, and it still survives in Scotland. That's why the Scots word ***guid*** (/good/) is spelled G-U-I-D. And they even put an I after an I to indicate a long I sound. In fact, in one of the passages I read earlier, we had the word ***life***, but it was spelled L-I-I-F.

Now there was a problem with putting two 'I's together in the flowing handwritten text of the Middle Ages. If you did that, it looked like a U. It was much like modern cursive writing. If you write double 'I's in modern cursive, the two 'I's look like U – especially if there are no dots above the 'I's. So L-I-I-F looked like /luf/. This was a constant problem with the letter 'I' during this period. When it appeared before or after a U, it looked like a W. In a word like ***minimum***, all of the repeating up and down strokes made it almost impossible to determine where one letter ended and another began. So scribes look for ways to deal with this problem – to make the letter 'I' stand out.

As I just noted, they capitalized the 'I' when it was used by itself as a pronoun. Another technique conceived by European scribes was to put a dot above the 'I,' and that soon became standard.

The dot helped the 'I' to stand out above the line of text, but scribes also modified the 'I' to make it stick out below the line. They did that by giving the 'I' a little tail at the bottom to make it stand out. The tail usually curved to the left, and it became standard to do that with the second 'I' when two 'I's were used back-to-back. In fact, that's how the Cursor Mundi poet spelled his words. When he wrote L-I-I-F for ***life***, he gave the second I a little tail. Well, no one knew it at the time, but that little tail in the 'I' was the beginning of a brand new letter – our modern letter J.

There was no letter J at this time. There was just an 'I' that was sometimes written like a J to make it stand out. But English was borrowing a lot of words from French with a 'J' sound at the front. Words like ***judge*** and ***justice*** and ***jury*** and ***January*** and ***July***. You might remember that the J sound in those words had evolved out of what was originally an 'I' sound in early Latin. All of those words once began with an 'I' sound and were spelled with an 'I.'

But over the centuries, that sound had evolved from I to Y to J. I've talked about that before. You might remember that the name of the Roman Emperor Caesar went from /ee-oo-lius/ – to /yoo-lius/. And then in French, it became Iulius (/joo-lius/), but it was still spelled with an initial 'I.'

Well after the printing press was introduced a little later in our story, it became common to use the fancy version of the 'I' at the beginning of those words – to represent that /j/ sound. And once that fancy 'I' with the tail was assigned to that sound, it started to be viewed as a distinct letter. And that eventually produced our letter J. So J is really just a fancy 'I' which was assigned to a specific sound that evolved out of the 'I' sound in Latin.

Again, it took a few centuries to get from the fancy 'I' with a tail to the distinct letter J, but we can see the very beginning of that process in English in works like Cursor Mundi. When the scribe spelled ***life*** – L-I-I-F – and when he gave the second 'I' a tail to make it distinct, his intent

was presumably to indicate a long vowel sound and to make the second 'I' stand out, but he was actually employing a technique that ultimately produced our modern letter J.

I should also make it clear that this fancy 'I' was not limited to the Northern dialect of English, and it wasn't invented in the north of Britain. Latin scribes had invented the technique, and it was used in other parts of Britain, and for that matter in other parts of Europe. We see a similar use in the Swedish name Bjorn – B-J-O-R-N. And the name of the Icelandic singer Bjork – B-J-O-R-K. But in Britain, this fancy 'I' was especially common in the north where double 'I's were much more common and where there was a need to distinguish them in writing.

There was one other important development in the north of England that shaped the way we use the letter 'I' today. That development was the merger of the 'Y' sound with the 'I' sound. Now today, letters 'Y' and 'I' can represent the same vowel sounds, but they represented different sounds in Old English. The letter 'I' had the /ee/ sound as we've seen, and we still have that sound in some loanwords like ***pizza***. The letter Y had a slightly different sound. It was pronounced like an 'I' with lips rounded. So 'I' was pronounced /ee/, and 'Y' was pronounced was /ü/. This sound still exists in some European languages, but it has disappeared from standard English. As I noted, it disappeared in the Northern dialect region in early Middle English. There, the speakers just stopped rounding their lips, so /ü/ just became /ee/. Linguists say the Y became 'unrounded.' And when that happened, the 'Y' sound was identical to the 'I' sound. By the way, this same change happened in eastern England from London northward.

Now you may be saying, "So what?," but this was a big deal because it gave scribes a new way to solve the problem they had with writing the letter 'I.' As we saw, the letter 'I' often got lost in flowing handwriting style of the time. I mentioned that one solution was to put a dot above the 'I.' Another solution was to capitalize the 'I' when it was used by itself as a pronoun. And a third solution was to give it a little tail which eventually became our letter J. And now, in the north and east of England, scribes had a fourth solution. They could simply take out the 'I' and put a 'Y' in its place. A 'Y' was much more distinct, so it became common to substitute a 'Y' for an 'I.'

Words like ***my***, ***by***, ***fly***, ***baby***, ***lady*** and ***pretty*** all got their modern Y's at the end though this process – a process that began with the convergence of the 'Y' and 'I' sounds in the north and east of England.

And you might have noticed something interesting about the placement of the 'Y' in those words. The Y's are at the end. The 'Y' substitution was sometimes made in other parts of words, but it was especially common at the end of a word because scribes didn't like to end a word with an 'I.' So it became standard to replace the 'I' with a 'Y' at the end of a word – especially around London where modern standard English emerged.

Again, this spelling change happened when a word ended with an 'I,' but if the 'I' was not located at the end, it was more likely to be retained. That's why ***my*** got a 'Y' at the end, but ***mine*** retained its 'I.'

This also explains another English spelling rule. When we have a word that ends in 'Y' and we make it plural, we drop the 'Y' and add 'I-E-S.' So ***baby*** and ***lady*** – become ***babies*** and ***ladies*** – with an 'I-E-S.' That plural ending means that the 'I' is no longer at the end. The 'S' is now at the end, and remember that that plural S ending is a northern innovation. And since the 'I' sound is no longer at the end, we don't have to use the 'Y' anymore. So that plural ending means that we can revert back to the original letter 'I'. And that produces 'I-E-S.'

I should note that we do have a few words that end in 'I' in Modern English like ***ski***, and ***khaki***, and ***spaghetti***. But those are relatively recent loanwords that came in with non-traditional spellings, and those spellings were retained.

Again, the substitution of 'Y' for 'I' really became common a little later, but that substitution was dependent on the merger of the 'I' and 'Y' vowel sounds, and that merger took place in the north and east of England around the current point in our story. And we can see how a slight change in a vowel sound can have a dramatic impact on spelling conventions.

So with that, I'm going to conclude our look at the Northern dialect of Middle English. We've seen several unique features of this dialect – some of which have passed into standard English and some of which didn't. But to get a better sense of the contrast between the speech of the north and the speech of the south, we need to take closer look the southern dialect of Middle English. So next time, we'll shift our focus south and look at an example of the Southern dialect. Once again, we'll see some features that became standard and some that remained regional. We'll also examine some of the modern differences between accents of the south and those of the north. There are a few pronunciations that clearly distinguish one group from the other, but most of those differences are the product of changes that took place in the south. So we'll look at those developments as well.

Until next time, thanks for listening to the History of English Podcast.

EPISODE 113: A ZOUTHERN ACCENT

Welcome to the History of English Podcast – a podcast about the history of the English language. This is Episode 113: A Zouthern Accent. In this episode, we're going to turn our attention to the south of England. Since we looked at the northern dialect of Middle English in the last episode, I thought it would be a good idea to contrast that dialect with the speech of southern England. This time, we'll look at some of the unique features of this old Southern dialect – and we'll see how developments in this region informed some of the modern differences between northern and southern speech in Britain.

But before we begin, let me remind you that the website for the podcast is historyofenglishpodcast.com. And you can sign up to support the podcast at Patreon.com/historyofenglish.

[CATHERINE: When I was visiting England in the 1980s, I was standing at Victoria Bus Station late at night. Three of use were waiting for a bus. Three strangers. One of them was from the north of England, I can't remember where, but I think it was Yorkshire somewhere. Another was from the south of England – I think somewhere around Kent. And there was me – the Australian. And, seriously, I was doing the interpretation between the northern person and the southern person because I had trouble understanding each other's dialect, I suppose.]

That was listener Catherine from Australia recounting her experience with the north-south linguistic divide in England. And as we've seen in the podcast, this divide has existed for centuries, and it certainly existed in the early Middle English period.

Last time, we explored the Middle English dialect of northern England. We saw that some of the features of that dialect survived into modern standard English, and some of them were lost over time. Meanwhile, in the south of England, people spoke a different dialect. And we know from Medieval writers that the dialects were so different at each end of the country that the respective speakers sometimes had trouble understanding each other. And as Catherine suggests, that can still happen today.

In this episode, I want to focus on the Middle English dialects spoken in the far south of England – generally speaking in the region south of the River Thames. I said "dialects" because there were really two distinct dialects in this region. The people in most of this region spoke a dialect which modern scholars call the Southern dialect of Middle English. This region roughly corresponds to the old Wessex region where the West Saxon dialect of Old English was spoken. As you may remember, this was the dominant dialect of Old English. It was where the Anglo-Saxon capital of Winchester was located, and from the time of Alfred the Great, it was the main dialect used for English documents up until the time of the Norman Conquest.

Since the English language changed so much after the Conquest, scholars don't use the term West Saxon to describe this dialect after that point. Once we get into the Middle English period, this dialect is simply known as the Southern dialect.

Now I said that there were two Middle English dialects in the far south of England. The other one was the dialect spoken in the far southeastern corner of England around Kent. This was also a distinct dialect in Old English called the Kentish dialect. And for the period after the Conquest, scholars refer to this dialect as either the Kentish dialect or the Southeastern dialect.

While there are some notable differences between these two southernmost dialects, they have a lot in common and share many of the same basic features. So for purposes of this episode, I'm mostly going to focus on the things they had in common, and I'll treat them as essentially one common dialect region.

Before I go any further, I should mention that there was a vast region in the middle of the country between the dialect regions of the far south and the far north. The region in the middle is known as the Midlands, but in the Anglo-Saxon period, it was called Mercia. So the Old English dialect of this region is called the Mercian dialect. But as we move into the Middle English period, scholars divide this middle region into two separate dialect areas called the West Midlands and the East Midlands. And that distinction arose because the eastern part of the Midlands had been part of the Danelaw, and the dialect of that region acquired more Norse features over time. These Midland dialects tended to have a blend of northern and southern features, but they also had some unique characteristics. I'm going to focus on the Midlands dialects in future episodes because many of the most well-known pieces of Middle English literature were composed in those dialects. That includes works like Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and the Canterbury Tales. But for now, let's focus our attention further south in the Southern dialect region.

Last time, while discussing the Northern dialect, I outlined some basic differences between the northern and southern dialects. So let's take a moment and quickly review those differences. We saw that the Northern dialect tended to retain the hard 'K' sound which existed in many Germanic words – either native English words or borrowed Norse words. But in the South and the Midlands, that hard 'K' sound had shifted to a softer 'CH' sound. So we saw that the north had ***kirk*** where the south had ***church***.

We also saw that northerners made nouns plural by adding an 'S' or 'ES' to the end of a word like we do today. But in the south, people tended to make nouns plural by adding 'EN' to the word like ***children*** and ***brethren***.

And northerners added an 'S' or 'ES' to verbs in third person singular. So they would say, "He loves or she loves" like we do today. But further south, people added other endings. In the Midlands, people added 'EN,' so they would say, "He or she loven." And in the far south, people added 'ETH,' so they would say, "He or she loveth."

Northerners also used the Norse pronoun forms that began with a 'TH' sound – ***they***, ***them*** and ***their***. But in the south, people tended to use the more traditional Old English forms that began with an 'H' sound – ***he*** (/hay/), ***hem*** (/haym/), ***here*** (/heh-re/).

And last time, I also reminded you that northern speakers held on to the original long 'A' sound (/ah/) in many native English words. So in the north, a heavy rock was a ***stan*** (stahn/) instead of

a ***stone***. And a person's residence was a ***ham*** (/hahm/) instead of ***home***. Again those were the original Old English pronunciations. But in the south, that vowel sound had changed to /aw/ meaning those words became /stawn/ and /hawm/ – now spelled with an O. And that vowel sound would change again during the Great Vowel Shift – from /aw/ to /oh/ – producing ***stone*** and ***home***. The main point being that the vowel sound was much more conservative in the north. And as we'll see a little later in the episode, that's still the case with some other vowel sounds.

So those were some of the major differences between the dialects of the north and the dialects further south. But when we look to the far south – south of the Thames – to the Southern and Southeastern dialect regions, we find some unique features there that really distinguished those dialects, and some of those features still exist to this day.

One of the most notable traits of this dialect region was the tendency to pronounce the initial 'S' sound as a 'Z' – and the initial 'F' sound as a 'V.' I've mentioned this tendency before. Linguists would say that speakers in the far south voiced these otherwise voiceless sounds. So the county of Somerset in the southwest of England is sometimes pronounced as 'Zummerzet' by locals. Mechanically, the 'S' and 'Z' sounds are pretty much the same. The only difference is that the vocal chords are engaged when pronouncing the 'Z' sound, but they are silent when pronouncing the 'S' sound. The same thing applies to the 'V' and 'F' sounds. They are mechanically the same sound, except the V is voiced and the F is not. So when speakers in the far south pronounced their S's as Z's and their F's as V's, what they were really doing was voicing those initial sounds – which traditionally were voiceless.

Last time, I gave you a sample of northern speech by playing part of an interview with a farmer from the Durham region. Well, I want to do the same thing this time. In this case, I want to play an excerpt from an interview with a retired miner from Somerset which was conducted back in the 1950s. Once again, this comes from the British Library archives, and the speaker's name is Jim Steeds. He was born in 1872, so just like last time, this is an older version of the dialect. In this sample, you'll hear him describe a mining accident when the roof of the mine he was in collapsed and trapped him. You'll hear him pronounce ***twenty-six*** as /twenty-zix/, ***seven*** as /zeven/, ***somebody*** as /zomebody/, and ***supposed*** as /zupposed/. You'll also hear him pronounce ***from*** as /vrom/ and ***fourteen*** and /vorteen/.

[SOMERSET VOICE SAMPLE]

So that's an example of a traditional Somerset accent. In several parts, we heard Z's for S's and V's for F's. Those initial Z's and V's can still be heard in parts of the West Country today, but in early Middle English, they were common throughout the far south of England all the way to Kent in the southeast. And we know that because the surviving manuscripts from those regions often use Z's for S's and V's for F's.

In the last episode, I used a poem called the Cursor Mundi to illustrate the dialect of the north. Well, this time, I want to use a contemporary poem from the south to illustrate the Southern dialect. This poem is called The Fox and the Wolf. The exact date of the poem is unknown, but it

is thought that the poem was composed sometime between 1275 and 1300. The poet is also unknown, but he was probably a contemporary of the Cursor Mundi poet. The poem was apparently written at the priory in Worcestershire in the southern part of the West Midlands, but the poem itself uses a typically Southern dialect.

This is generally considered to the oldest beast fable composed in the English language, and by 'beast fable' I mean a short story that teaches a moral lesson and features animals with human characteristics. This was a very old type of literature going all the way back to Aesop's Fables. By the current point in our overall story – around the year 1300 – these types of fables were being written in Latin and French, but they weren't common in English. Now English poets had featured animals in their stories like the Owl and the Nightingale which we looked at in an earlier episode, but that poem was a debate poem. We don't really have an English fable featuring animals until now.

This particular poem was actually based on a popular set of fables that had been composed in French and featured a character called Reynard the Fox. This fable also features Reynard as the main character.

Now last time, I noted that the Northern dialect had a higher percentage of Norse words since it had once been part of the Danelaw. Southern dialects had fewer Norse words, and in fact, this poem – The Fox and the Wolf – doesn't have a single word which can be traced back to Old Norse. However, it does have a fair number of French words.

In the first two lines of the poem, we can hear the Southern features. In Modern English, those lines read:

Out of the woods a fox did go
So hungry that he was filled with woe

And here's the original Middle English version:

A vox gon out of þe wode go
Afingret so, þat him wes wo

One of the things you might notice is /gaw/ and /waw/ instead of ***go*** and ***woe***. The Old English versions were ***gan*** and ***wa*** – spelled with an A and using the traditional /ah/ sound. Remember that northern speakers held onto that vowel through most of the Middle English period, so those words would have still been ***gan*** and ***wa*** in the north. But in the south, the vowel had shifted to /aw/ on its way to becoming /oh/ after the Great Vowel Shift. So from Old English ***gan*** and ***wa***, here we have Middle English /gaw/ and /waw/, and after the 1400s, we will have ***go*** and ***woe***. We see that vowel changing in the South in this poem because both words were spelled with an O instead of the traditional letter A.

The other notable sound change in the first line is the pronunciation of ***fox*** as /vox/. The word is actually spelled V-O-X. There we see the voicing of that initial sound so that the F became a V. As we saw earlier, this was one of the common dialect features of the far south.

Now this southern pronunciation didn't have much influence on modern standard English, but I have noted in a couple of prior episodes that the southern pronunciation of fox did give us a word in Modern English. You might remember that a female fox is called a ***vixen*** – and the V in ***vixen*** comes from that southern pronunciation of ***fox*** as /vox/. The '-EN' suffix in ***vixen*** was a feminine ending inherited from Proto-Germanic. So Old English ***fyxen*** became ***vixen*** in the south of England, and that's the version that survived into Modern English. Of course, that word ***vixen*** has been extended over time to describe a type of woman – a 'foxy lady' if you will.

Other than ***vixen***, there are a couple of other words where this southern pronunciation has persisted into standard English. For example, the word ***vane*** (V-A-N-E) as in a ***weather vane*** or ***wind vane*** is derived from the southern pronunciation of the Old English word ***fana***. ***Fana*** meant a flag or banner, and we use the southern version of that word today in terms like ***weather vane*** and ***wind vane*** because those vanes were designed to be placed in the wind like flags or banners. And they sometimes resembled flags or banners.

Another southern pronunciation that has persisted into modern standard English is the word ***vat*** meaning a large tub. ***Vat*** is actually the southern pronunciation of the Old English word ***fæt*** which meant a vessel. But other than those specific examples – ***vixen***, ***vane*** and ***vat*** – the southern pronunciation of F as V has had very little impact on Modern English. In fact, outside of the far south, Old English speakers didn't use the 'V' sound at the beginning of words. So with the limited exceptions of ***vixen***, ***vane*** and ***vat***, all other common words in Modern English that begin with a 'V' sound are actually loanwords from other languages – mostly from French or Latin.

So let me take you through this poem, The Fox and the Wolf, so we can explore some more of the Southern dialect features. Here are the first 14 lines. I'll rotate my Modern English translation with the original Middle English text.

Out of the woods a fox did go
So hungry that he was filled with woe
He was never in any way
Half as hungry as he was that day

A vox gon out of þe wode go
Afingret so, þat him wes wo
He nes neuere in none wise
Afingret erour half so swiþe.

He did not travel by path or street
For he loathed the men who he might meet
He would rather meet a hen
Than half a hundred women

He ne hoeld nouþerwey ne strete,
For him wes loþ men to mete;
Him were leuere meten one hen,
Þen half an oundred wimmen

He struck out quickly overall
Such that he soon saw a wall.
Within the wall was a house
The fox was eager to check it out
For he thought his hunger to quench
Either with meat or with drink to drench.

He strok swiþe ouer-al,
So þat he ofsei ane wal;
Wiþinne þe walle wes on hous,
The wox wes þider swiþe wous;
For he þohute his hounger aquenche,
Oþer mid mete, oþer mid drunche.

So let me mention a few things about that passage. At the end we see the word ***drunche*** for ***drink***. This was a common Southern form with the 'CH' ending in place of the hard 'K'. This softer 'CH' ending still survives in the word ***drench*** – ***drink*** and ***drench*** ultimately being two different versions of the same root word.

Also note that the word appears here as ***drunche*** (D-R-U-N-C-H-E). So it has an 'E' at the end pronounced /eh/ – /drünch-eh/. I noted last time that this represents what remained of the various inflectional endings that had once existed in Old English. By this point, they had mostly collapsed into this generic 'E' at the end of many words. In this passage, ***wood*** appears as ***wod***e, ***wall*** as ***walle***, ***street*** as ***strete***, ***meet*** as ***mete***, ***quench*** as ***aquenche***, and again, ***drink*** as ***drunche***.

Last time I noted that this generic /eh/ sound at the end of many words had stopped being pronounced in the north, but it continued to be pronounced in the south. Since it didn't really serve any purpose anymore, that /eh/ sound at the end gradually fell silent in the south as well over the course of the 1300s, but the letter 'E' was retained at the end of many words, and it started to be used as a marker to indicate a long vowel sound. And that gave us the silent 'E' at the end of so many words in Modern English. Again, at this point, around the year 1300, it was still a pronounced letter in the south. By the time of Geoffrey Chaucer in the late 1300s, the pronunciation was variable, and by the mid-1400s, it was silent in almost all English words.

Now continuing with The Fox and the Wolf poem, the fox finds his way into a hen house. The passage reads:

A house there was, the door was open
Hens were therein creeping about
Five – that maketh a flock
And with them sat a cock
The cock flew about him on high
And two hens sat nearby

On hous þer wes, þe dore wes ope,
Hennen weren þerinne I-crope,
Fiue, þat makeþ anne flok,
And mid hem sat on kok.
Þe kok him wes flowen on hey,
And two hennen him seten ney.

Now again, this passage shows several Southern features. First of all, notice that the hens are referred to as ***hennen*** instead of ***hens***. So here we have that '-en' plural ending that was common in the south, and that still survives in words like ***children*** and ***brethren***.

We also have the verb ***makeþ*** with the '-eth' ending that was common in the South. As we saw last time, northern speakers would have said ***makes*** with the '-s' ending that we use today. But the speakers of the far south used '-eth.' Of course, '-eth' lingered into early Modern English. As you probably know, Shakespeare used both endings in his writings. And the King James Bible used that '-eth' verb ending extensively. But by the late 1600s, the '-eth' verb ending was largely gone, even though it still lingers in some poetic literature.

Also notice the pronoun form in the line "And with them sat a cock" – "And mid hem sat on kok." Here we have the traditional Old English 'H' form – ***hem*** – instead of the northern 'TH' form – ***them***. The poem also used ***hy*** for ***they*** and ***here*** for ***there***. So all of those plural pronouns are the traditional Southern forms. The Norse and Northern 'TH' forms – ***they***, ***them*** and ***their*** – were starting to invade the South. Interestingly, the subject form ***they*** came in first over the course of the 1300s. Then in the 1400s, ***them*** and ***their*** were finally adopted in the South. Geoffrey Chaucer – writing in the later 1300s – reflects this development. He occasionally used the word ***they***, but he only used ***them*** and ***their*** when he was trying to represent the speech of the North. His Northern characters used those words, but Chaucer didn't use them otherwise. But again, at the current point in our story around the year 1300, all of those 'TH' pronouns were rarely used in the south.

Now returning to the poem, the fox finds himself literally in the henhouse, and he kills and eats several hens. Then he becomes very thirsty and leaves to search for something to drink. He eventually finds a pit or well with water in it. In the well, he notices two buckets attached to a pulley system. When one was pulled up the other would go down. The poem reads:

Two buckets there he found,
That both went into the ground,
One came up when it was wound,
And at the same time, the other went down.
He understood none of the engine,
He took a bucket and leaped therein.
He hoped there was enough to drink.
As the bucket began to sink.
Too late, the fox was without thought
When down the pit he was brought
Far enough he thought he had gone
But help there was none
Down he went while he was therein
Caught in a trap – the deceitful engine.

Tuo boketes þer he founde,
Þat oþer wende to þe grounde,
Þat wen me shulde þat on opwinde
Þat oþer wolde adoun winde.
He ne hounderstod nout of þe ginne,
He nom þat boket, and lep þerinne;
For he hopede I-nou to drinke.
Þis boket biginneþ to sinke;
To late þe vox wes biþout,
Þo he wes in þe ginne I-brout.
I-nou he gon him bi-þenche,
Ac hit ne halp mid none wrenche;
Adoun he moste, he wes þerinne;
I-kaut he wes mid swikele ginne.

The fox is now trapped in the well, but at least there is water to quench his thirst. He begins to drink the water, but it stinks and doesn't taste good at all. He begins to cry and laments his situation. He says that his lust for food and water, and his thievery, have led him to this predicament.

Soon a wolf arrives at the same well looking for food. The wolf hears the fox crying in the well, so he approaches the well and asks who is inside. The fox recognizes the wolf's voice because they are old friends. And the fox quickly thinks of a plan that will allow him to make his escape from the well. He identifies himself as the wolf's friend, Reynard the Fox. And he says that he should have asked the wolf to come with him because he has found paradise at the bottom of the well. He has more than enough to eat and drink forever. He will never be hungry again and will never have to work. He will never again experience suffering or woe.

The wolf asks the fox if he has died and found heavenly bliss. The fox says yes, and that the wolf should join him in the well to share in his good fortune. The fox says that he would not even consider leaving to re-join his family or even for all the goods in the world. Now the wolf was very hungry, so he was tempted by the fox's description of paradise at the bottom of the well. The wolf asks the fox how he can join him, and the fox tells him to jump in the bucket. Of course, the fox was sitting in the other bucket at the bottom of the well, knowing full well that as the wolf went down in one bucket, the fox would rise in the other. Here's the passage that begins with the wolf's question:

Now tell me what I shall do,
So that I may come to you."
"Do?" said the fox. "I will you learn.
See that bucket hanging there?
There is an opening to heaven's bliss.
Leap therein, with certainty,
And you shall come to see me soon."
Said the wolf, "That is easily done."
He leaped in, and weighed a great deal
Something that the fox knew full well.
The wolf sank, and the fox did rise;
As the wolf descended, he was greatly surprised.
When he came to the middle of the pit,
The fox going upward he did meet.

Ac sei me wat I shal do,
And ou ich may comen þe to."
"Do?" quod þe vox. "Ich wille þe lere.
I-siist þou a boket hongi þere?
Þere is a bruche of heuene blisse,
Lep þerinne, mid I-wisse,
And þou shalt comen to me sone."
Quod the wolf, "þat is liȝt to done."
He lep in, and way sumdel;
Þat weste þe vox ful wel.
Þe wolf gon sinke, þe vox arise;
Þo gon þe wolf sore agrise.
Þo he com amidde þe putte,
Þe wolfe þene vox opward mette.

So through trickery and deception, the fox makes his escape, and now the wolf finds himself trapped in the well. The well is located next to a house where friars live. And soon a friar comes to gather some water because he is very thirsty. He pulls up the bucket which is very heavy. As the bucket draws near, the friar discovers the wolf inside the bucket. He cries out, "The Devil is in the pit!" and all the other friars come running to the well with sticks and spears, and they beat the wolf as he runs away. The passage reads:

The friar pulled with all his strength
for so long that the wolf he did see!
He saw the wolf who was in sight,
“The Devil is in the pit!” he cried
To the pit they all began to go,
All with pikes and staves and stones,

Þe frere mid al his maine tey
So longe þat he þene wolf I-sey!
For he sei þene wolf þer sitte,
He gradde, "Þe deuel is in þe putte!"
To þe putte hy gounnen gon,
Alle mid pikes and staues and ston,

Each man used what he had;
Woe was him that weapons lacked.
They came to the pit and drew up the wolf;
Then had the wretched enemy enough,
That were eager to render defeat
with great hounds, and to beat.
Well and angrily he was beaten and flung,
with staves and spears he was stung.
The fox tricked him for he found no bliss,
and from the blows he found no forgiveness.

Euch mon mid þat he hedde;
Wo wes him þat wepne nedde.
Hy comen to þe putte þene wolf opdrowe;
Þo hede þe wreche fomen I-nowe,
Þat weren egre him to slete
Mid grete houndes, and to bete.
Wel and wroþe he wes I-swonge,
Mid staues and speres he wes I-stounge.
Þe wox bicharde him, mid Iwisse,
For he ne fond nones kunnes blisse,
Ne hof duntes forȝeuenesse

So that’s the Fox and the Wolf – a poem composed around the year 1300 in the Southern dialect of Middle English.

Now I pointed out that the poet spelled a word like ***fox*** as V-O-X to indicate an initial ‘V’ sound. Other ‘F’ words were also re-spelled to reflect that pronunciation – words like ***find*** and ***frogs*** to /vind/ and /vroggen/.

But what about 'S' words like ***sit*** and ***say*** and ***sin*** – all of which were used in the poem? Did the poet spell them with a Z or zed to indicate how they were often pronounced in the south? Well, no. He didn't. And that's because the letter Z was still not a common letter in English. Let me explain.

The letter Z or zed has its origins in the Greek alphabet as the Greek letter zeta. But Latin didn't really have the 'Z' sound, so the Romans dropped the letter from their version of the alphabet. Eventually, the Romans started to borrow a lot of Greek words, and they needed to represent that Greek sound, so they added the letter Z back into the alphabet, and they put in at the end. But they only used it for Greek loanwords where they needed to represent that 'Z' sound.

Now if we jump forward to England during the Anglo-Saxon period, Old English had the 'Z' sound in the middle and at the end of words, but the letter Z was rarely used in Latin, so Old English scribes tended to follow the Latin practice. They occasionally used the letter in loanwords, but they rarely used it for native English words. They only used the letter S – the way we still do in a word like ***houses***. We use an S even though it has a 'Z' sound. And that was the common practice around the year 1300 when The Fox and the Wolf was written. So in the poem, the poet just used the letter S.

However, about four decades later, a religious text was composed in Kent in the far southeast corner of England called Ayenbite of Inwyt – literally the Remorse of Conscience. And in that text, the letter Z is routinely used to represent the initial 'Z' sound in many of those southern words. So for example, ***sin*** is spelled as ***zenne*** – Z-E-N-N-E. And from that point on, we find the letter Z being used more and more for native English words which had the 'Z' sound. So even though The Fox and the Wolf didn't use the letter Z, it was about to become much more common in English documents.

That Kentish spelling of ***sin*** as Z-E-N-N-E points to another important development in the southeast, and that was changing pronunciation of the vowel sound in that word. Notice that the Kentish version of the word ***sin*** was spelled with an E – not an I. So why was that? Well it has to do with something I mentioned last time – the changing nature of the sound represented by letter Y.

The word ***sin*** – S-I-N – was actually spelled with a Y in Old English. It was usually spelled S-Y-N-N. And last time, I noted that the letters I and Y had distinct sounds back them. The letter I represented the long /ee/ sound which we use today in a word like ***pizza***, and it also represented the short /ih/ sound found in a word like ***pit***. Meanwhile, the letter Y represented a similar sound but the lips were rounded when it was pronounced. So the sound was more like /ü/.

Now you might remember that the 'I' and 'Y' sounds merged in the north and east of England. People stopped rounding their lips for the 'Y' sound in those regions, so I and Y ended up sounding the same. And that meant that they could be used interchangeably. And since modern standard English emerged from the East Midlands region where this happened, we often find these two letters representing the same sounds today. So when the I and Y became

interchangeable, the word ***sin*** lost its original Y and it acquired its modern spelling with an I – S-I-N.

This is also what happened to words like ***king***, and ***kin*** (K-I-N), and ***pit***, and ***kind***, and ***mind***, and ***first***, and ***thirst***. All of those words originally had a Y – but they were eventually re-spelled with an I after the sounds of the two letters merged.

Again, that was the case in the north and east of England – which extended down to London where modern standard English emerged. But things were different in other parts of the country. In the southeast – in Kent – the /ü/ sound of Y shifted to an /eh/ sound, and scribes there started to spell those words with an E. That's why that poem from Kent spelled the word ***sin*** with an E – as Z-E-N-N-E. And that's also part of the reason why the dialect of Kent was considered a unique dialect.

Now the reason why I mention this specific change in the southeast – in Kent – is because it had an influence on Modern English. Kent was located just down river from London – so speakers from that region mixed with other speakers in and around London. And some of those Kentish pronunciations took root over time.

For example, the opposite of ***right*** was ***lyft*** in Old English. When the Y and I sounds merged in the north and east, it became ***lift***. So the opposite of your right hand was your 'lift' hand. But down in Kent – where the Y sound became /eh/ – the word was pronounced ***left*** – and spelled with an E – L-E-F-T. Of course, that Kentish version became standard over time. The same thing happened with ***knell*** – K-N-E-L-L – which meant the sound of a bell. We usually find it in the term 'death knell.' It's an Old English word, and in Old English, it had a Y sound and was spelled with the letter Y. But as the sound changed around the country, the Kentish version became ***knell*** – spelled with an E – K-N-E-L-L - and that's the version that survived. The same thing happened with ***merry*** – as in Merry Christmas. Again, it originally had a Y and a Y sound, but Modern English uses the Kentish version spelled with an E and an /eh/ sound.

Now I've told you that the Y sound merged with the I sound in the north and east of England. And in the far southeast, it became an /eh/ sound – spelled with an E. So what about the rest of the country – specifically the remainder of the south and west? Well, for much of the 1300s, most speakers in those regions kept the original sound of Y – that rounded /ü/ sound. But scribes in those regions did something very interesting. They began to spell those words with a U instead of a Y. It isn't entirely clear why they did that – but it was probably because the sounds of Y and U were similar. The Y sound was /ü/ and the U sound was /oo/. Both had rounded lips. And since the Y and I were becoming interchangeable in other parts of the country, it's possible that scribes in the south and west didn't want to create confusion by continuing to use the letter Y in those words. If they used a Y, it might suggest an I sound. So in many parts of the south and west, they started to use the letter U instead because they thought its /oo/ sound was close to the /ü/ sound of letter Y.

Now this was the case throughout The Fox and The Wolf poem – which I just discussed. Time and again, the poet spells words with a U instead of a Y. So for example, that word ***sin*** was used

by the poet, and he spelled it S-U-N-N-E. So like most of these words, ***sin*** was spelled with its modern I in the north and east, with an E in the southeast around Kent, and with a U in much of the south and the west. This reflected the difference in the various accents.

The poet also spelled the word ***kin*** meaning a relative with a U. He spelled it C-U-N-N-E. He repeatedly used the word ***pit*** to describe the well where the fox was trapped. And it was spelled P-U-T and P-U-T-T-E. I mentioned that word ***knell*** as in a death knell. Well, the poet also used that word, and he spelled it C-N-U-L. ***Thirst***, ***filth*** and ***mind*** were also all spelled with a U. Again, this was common throughout much of southern and western England, and these U spellings also had an influence on Modern English.

Take the word ***busy*** – B-U-S-Y. It seems like it should be spelled B-I-Z-Y. Well, as we saw earlier, scribes didn't tend to use the letter Z for native words, so ***busy*** has an S for the 'Z' sound. But what about that U. Well, the word ***busy*** was originally spelled with a Y, and it experienced the changes I just described in the various parts of the country. The word ***busy*** reflects a blend of these dialects.

It has the pronunciation that was common in the north and east of England where the 'Y' sound merged with the 'I' sound. That's why the vowel has a short 'I' sound. But the spelling is the version that was common in the south and west of England with the letter U. And that gave us the modern spelling – B-U-S-Y.

The word ***bury*** – B-U-R-Y – has a similar story. Notice that F-U-R-Y is ***fury***. And J-U-R-Y is ***jury***. But B-U-R-Y is not /bury/. It's /berry/. ***Fury*** and ***jury*** are French loanwords that came into English with the letter U representing a 'U' sound. But ***bury*** is a native English word which was originally spelled with a Y. The modern pronunciation with the /eh/ sound is the Kentish pronunciation, and the spelling with the letter U is the spelling from the south and west of England.

So I think the main thing to take from that discussion – and the discussion about the letters I, Y and J from the last episode – is that these regional accents complicated English spelling. And it's a small part of the reason why English spelling seems so random today. Letters that had once represented very specific sounds were now being used in different ways.

Sometimes they were used as a marker to indicate a specific vowel sound, like the use of I in the north or the soon-to-be-common use of silent E at the end of a word. These letters no longer represented a particular sound. They were just markers. We've also seen that in much of the country, the I and Y became interchangeable. Last time, we saw that the I sometimes got lost in a word because of the flowing script of the period. That was especially true when it appeared beside a U or an M or N or L or another I. So in those cases, it became common to replace the I with Y to help indicate the vowel sound. But as we've seen in this episode, sometimes the opposite took place. An original Y was replaced with an I. That often happened in the north and east because the two letters represented the same sound in those regions. Meanwhile, the far southeast developed a different pronunciation of that 'Y' sound, so scribes in that region used an E. In other parts of the south and west, scribes used a U when spelling the same words. And in

several recent episodes, we've seen that the original long 'A' sound – /ah/ – was changing in the south of England, and scribes there were now using a letter O for that sound. But scribes in the north continued to use letter A.

So you can start to see why Modern English spelling is such a mess. Letters were starting to be used in new ways, and regional accents required different spellings in each part of the country. And in fact, the summary I just gave you only covers some of the major changes that were taking place. There were others as well.

For example, just as scribes struggled with the letter I and tried to find ways to keep it from getting lost in a word, the same thing happened with the letter U. In fact, if you think about it, in a period before it was common to dot the I, a letter U actually looked like two I's when it was written in a cursive style script. When a U appeared beside an I, you couldn't tell if it was I-U, U-I or W. Two U's together could be read as I-I-U, U-I-I, or I-U-I. And when a U appeared beside an L or an M or an N – which also had straight lines – a similar problem arose, and it also made the word difficult to read. So French-trained scribes started to replace that U with an O in a lot of words.

Think about the word ***love***. In Old English, it was often pronounced /luvu/ – spelled with a U. We might say L-U-V-U, but remember that the letter V was not a distinct letter yet. U was still being used for the V sound. So the word /luvu/ was sometimes spelled L-U-U-U. After you wrote the L – which required a vertical stroke – you had to write out six more vertical strokes to indicate the three U's. So you ended up with the word ***luvu*** represented by seven vertical strokes that all looked the same. When someone looked at that word, they had to figure out what the heck was going on. So it became a common practice to replace that first U with an O. And that gave us the modern spelling L-O-V-E. But notice that the O actually represented a U sound.

The same thing happened with a word like ***some*** as in "give me some of that." It was S-U-M in Old English. But the U beside the M made the word hard to read in the flowing script of the period. So it became common to replace the U with an O – giving us the modern spelling S-O-M-E. This also helped to distinguish the word from the French word ***sum*** – S-U-M – meaning a mathematical total. That word was coming into English around the current point in our story in the late 1200s. So the Old English word got an O, and the new French word kept its U.

This also happened with ***son***. Old English had ***son*** meaning a male child and ***sun*** meaning the giant star in the sky. They were both spelled with U in Old English. But ***son*** meaning a male child was given an O in Middle English, in part because the U appeared beside an N and tended to get lost, and also because the scribes wanted to distinguish the child from the celestial object.

Word like ***tongue***, ***come***, ***monk***, and ***honey*** all got their modern O's through this process. And ***wolf*** also got an O. That's how ***wolf*** went from W-U-L-F as in ***Beowulf*** to the modern W-O-L-F. And by the time of The Fox and the Wolf poem, ***wolf*** was being spelled with its modern O.

That's why it is common in Modern English to represent the short U sound (/uh/) with either a U, as in ***cup***, ***tub*** or ***shut***, or with an O, as in ***love***, ***come*** or ***monk***. But here's the thing. That /uh/ sound in those words is actually a southern innovation. In the Old and Middle English periods, it was actually /oo/ as in ***look*** and ***book***. Think about the difference between ***putt*** (P-U-T-T) and ***put*** (P-U-T). At one time, the vowel sounds were identical like the /oo/ in ***put***. That was the short 'U' sound.

But a little later in our story, in the 1600s, that short 'U' sound started to change in southern England from /oo/ or /uh/ – from the vowel in ***put*** to the vowel in ***putt***. As I said, this happened in the south – including London, so at a time when modern standard English was emerging there, it became common throughout the language to pronounce that vowel as /uh/, including much of Wales, Scotland and even North America. But it didn't happen in the north of England. And even today, this is one of the major markers used to distinguish speakers in northern England from those in southern England. Northerners tend to pronounce the vowel the old way as /oo/, where most other English speakers use the newer /uh/. So southern ***cup*** is contrasted with northern /coop/. And southern ***love*** is contrasted with northern /loov/. Again, the northern pronunciation is actually the original pronunciation.

There was also another vowel shift in the south of England which provides an additional way of marking the modern north-south linguistic divide. During the 1700s, in the south of England, the flat /æ/ sound in words like ***bath***, ***path***, ***laugh***, and ***grass*** shifted to an /ah/ sound and became /bahth/, /pahth/, /lahf/ and /grahs/. In some parts of England today, this is considered a posh feature, but it is actually standard throughout southern England and is also a feature of standard British English known as Received Pronunciation. Since this change happened in the 1700s, it was too late to have an impact on American English. And the change also failed to occur in northern England. So the American pronunciation of those words is much closer to the pronunciation in northern England. Again the /æ/ sound of ***bath*** was the original sound, whereas the /ah/ sound of /bahth/ was a later development in the south.

I should also note that I will deal with all of these accent differences in more detail when I get to the Modern English period, but the details here are fascinating. This /æ/ to /ah/ sound change only affected certain words – not all words with the /æ/ sound. And the words that were affected varied from region to region. But to keep it simple for now, these two rules regarding the pronunciation of the short U sound and the short A sound are the two main ways to identify and distinguish northern accents from southern accents in England. And let me actually illustrate this for you.

Using some of the voice samples that I've received, I am going to take you on a quick tour of England to hear some of these differences. I am going to play you two sentences from each speaker. The first is, "Lucy accidentally stuck a pin in her palm while mending her dress." And the second is, "The goose took a bath in the mill pond." In this first group of Northern speakers, you're going to hear ***stuck*** pronounced as /stook/ and ***bath*** pronounced as /bæth/ – both in the northern fashion.

Let's begin in the northwest of England. First we have Andrew from Lancashire. [VOICE SAMPLE] Now let's listen to Sally from Lancashire. [VOICE SAMPLE] Now let's move south just a bit to Manchester and listen to Richard. [VOICE SAMPLE] Now let's move over to the northeast to Yorkshire – and listen to Jim. [VOICE SAMPLE]
And now let's head a little further south to Nottingham and listen to Hayley. [VOICE SAMPLE]

So as you can hear, all of these accents have these typically northern features. Let me conclude our look at the north with a quick anecdote from Alex who is originally from Lancashire.

Now remember, these two northern vowel pronunciations – /stook/ and /bæth/ – were the older and more traditional pronunciations. They shifted to /stuck/ and /bahth/ in the south in the early Modern English period. So let's listen to a few southern examples:

First we have James from Exeter in the far southwest. [VOICE SAMPLE] Now let's move to the southeast to London and listen to Matt. [VOICE SAMPLE] And let's conclude with a quick anecdote from Bettina who also speaks with a southern English accent and who encountered this /ae/ versus /ah/ issue when she moved to America. [VOICE SAMPLE]

I hope you found all of that interesting. I know a lot of you are looking forward to the part of the podcast where we explore the evolution of modern English accents. And I wanted to start that process here with the accents in Middle English. It's also great to finally be able to use some of the voice samples that I've been collecting over the past couple of years. By the way, I am still collecting those – especially if you speak with a regional or non-standard accent. You can always leave a sample on the Voice Samples page of the website. I have lots of standard accent samples, but if you have a regional accent or an accent that is a little different, that is kind that I'm still looking for. And as we eventually transition into the Modern English period, I'll use a lot more of those samples to help illustrate how modern English accents developed.

So with that, I'm going to conclude this look at the north-south linguistic divide in England. Next time, we'll return to etymology, and we'll see how a measurement revolution was taking place around Europe in the late 1200s and early 1300s. These changes were the product of several technological innovations, and we'll see how these developments shaped the English language. So until next time, thanks for listening to the History of English Podcast.

EPISODE 114: THE CRAFT OF NUMBERING

Welcome to the History of English Podcast – a podcast about the history of the English language. This is Episode 114: The Craft of Numbering. In this episode, we're going to shift gears a little bit. We usually look at the history of words, but this time we're going to look at the history of numbers. Actually, we're going to do both. We'll explore the origin of numbers and the words we use to talk about numbers. Number words are some of the most conservative words in most languages – including English. Almost all of the words we use for basic numbers can be traced back Old English. But in the 1300s, English started to borrow new number words from other languages. Those words came from the usual suspects – French, Latin and Greek. But English even picked up at least one number word from Arabic. And that was because the Hindu-Arabic numerals that we use today were starting to appear in England for the first time. Those new numerals gradually replaced the traditional Roman numerals which had been used since the Anglo-Saxon period. So this time, we'll look at those developments, and we'll also explore the interaction of language and numbers.

But before we begin, let me remind you that the website for the podcast is historyofenglishpodcast.com. And you can sign up to support the podcast at Patreon.com/historyofenglish.

Now this time, we're going to turn our attention to numbers and the way we express numbers in the English language. My original plan was to discuss numbers in the larger context of measurements and the words we use for measurements. After all, numbers are the fundamental tools we use to measure most things. But there was so much material to discuss that I've decided to treat the two topics separately. This time, I'm going to focus on how we talk about numbers, and next time, I'm going to explore how numbers were put to use to measure things – things like distance, speed, volume and time. Both of these applications were undergoing changes around the current point in our overall story of English in the early 1300s.

As I noted in the introduction, most of our words for numbers have been in the language for over a thousand years. Words like ***one***, ***two***, ***three***, ***four*** and so on can be traced back not only to Old English, but all the way back to the original Indo-European language. That means that most of our number words have the same ultimate root as the number words used in Greek and Latin and French. And with the flow of French words into English in the Middle English period, English started to pick up some of those other ways to express numbers. For example, if we want to describe two of something, we might use the Old English word ***two***. But in the early 1200s, that English guide for female recluses called the Ancrene Wisse introduced two new ways to express the same idea. That text gave us the first use of the French words ***double*** and ***couple*** in the English language. So by the current point in our story, English speakers had a variety of words to choose from – ***two***, ***double*** and ***couple***.

Around the year 1300, English speakers also found a new way to express 'one-ness' by borrowing the word ***single*** from French. The word ***solitary*** found its way in a few decades later. And other French words also started to come in around the same time. The word ***dozen*** was also borrowed in the early 1300s. And there was another French word that entered the language during this same period, and that word is especially important to this episode because it was word ***number*** itself.

In a manuscript called the "Lives of Saints" composed around the year 1300, the word ***number*** is recorded for the first time in the English language, at least according to the Oxford English dictionary. The word began to replace the Old English word for number which was ***rim***. That word has long since disappeared from standard English, but it shares a common Indo-European root with the Latin word ***arithmetic***. The 'rith' part of ***arithmetic*** comes from the same root as the Old English word ***rim*** meaning number. And I mention the word ***arithmetic*** because it was also borrowed into English around the current point it our story. It is first attested in English in the year 1305.

The word ***arithmetic*** referred to the process of calculating with numbers. It replaced the term ***rimcræft*** – literally 'the craft of rims' – or the 'craft of numbers.' This was actually an important field of study during this period because a brand-new numbering system was being introduced into England. And that numbering system is the system we use today. The Hindu-Arabic numerals that I discussed back in Episode 90 were finally starting to make their way to England, and they very gradually replaced the Roman numerals that had been used up to that point.

But when those new numerals were first introduced, people in England didn't really understand how they worked. They didn't understand the place value system – that in a number like 105, the 1 represented the total number of hundreds, the 0 represented the total number of tens, and 5 represented the number of individual units. Roman numerals didn't work that way. In Romans numerals, the number 105 would have been written as CV with C representing 100 and V representing 5. Notice that the version with Roman numerals doesn't have a 0 because the entire concept of a 0 was unknown in Roman numerals. That was the great disadvantage of Roman numerals and the great advantage of new Hindu-Arabic numerals. The new numerals made arithmetic easier thanks to the 0 and the place-value system. But in order to enjoy their benefits, Englishmen had to know how to use them.

So during the 1300s or early 1400s, an English manuscript was composed called "The Crafte of Nombrynge" – literally 'The Craft of Numbering.' In other words, 'the craft of using the brand-new Hindu-Arabic numerals.' This was the first English manuscript to describe those numerals and to explain how to use them. The date of the text is uncertain with some scholars dating it to the early 1400s but others dating it as early as the year 1300 at the current point in our story. I'm going to look at this manuscript in some detail at the end of this episode, but before we look at how Englishmen were dealing with the new numbers, let's explore how they dealt with the traditional numbers. In other words, let's explore the history of numbers and the history of the English words for those numbers.

Now obviously, numbers are a universal concept, but the words and symbols we use for numbers vary from culture to culture. Evidence for the use of numbers can be traced back to the earliest humans. Archaeologists have discovered bones with notches marked in them that are between 20,000 and 30,000 years old. It is generally agreed that the notches in those ancient bones were used for counting. It is believed that early humans would run their thumb along the notches to count the total number of things they were observing, and that number could be recalled by running the thumb in the opposite direction back to the beginning.

Long after those first humans died out, the use of notched sticks for accounting continued on well into the Middle Ages. In French, this kind of stick was called a ***taille***. In the early Middle English period, the word was borrowed into English as ***tally*** or tally stick. And even today, we might keep a 'tally' of the total number of some particular item.

The Anglo-Saxons had a word for the notches in those types of sticks. The word was ***score***, and it was borrowed from Old Norse. We still use that word in the sense of making notch marks when we score a piece a meant before cooking it. And of course, we 'keep score' today when playing games. So ***score*** originally meant a mark – typically used when counting.

You might also know that the word ***score*** has another sense specifically related to numbers. It is sometimes used as another word for twenty. Many of us know it from the first line of Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address. It begins with the line, "Four score and seven years ago" which literally meant 87 years ago. "Four score" meant 'four twenties' – so it meant 80. And "four score and seven" therefore meant 87. This use of the word ***score*** was common until the last century or so as represented by Lincoln's use of it in the mid-1800s. And it was a secondary meaning of the word ***score*** from the very beginning. So the word ***score*** always referred to both notches and the number twenty. But what was the connection between notches and the specific number 20?

Well, it has to do with the way some cultures counted in the past, and some still count that way today. We inherited our own counting system from the Indo-Europeans who apparently counted in groups of 10. We count to 10, then we repeat the same process for the next ten – generally using 'teen' at the end of each number. Then we repeat it again for the twenties, thirties and so on. When we reach 99, we run out of numbers, we introduce a hundred, and start all over again. And we can continue this approach as far as we need to go – from tens, to hundreds, to thousands, to tens of thousands, and on and on – all in regular increments and multiples of 10.

This system of counting based on units of 10 was the most common method used in the ancient world. And most scholars agree that it is rooted in the fact that ancient people tended to use their fingers when counting. Of course, they had 10 fingers and therefore they tended to think of numbers in units of 10. In fact, we can still see that connection in the word ***digit*** which was borrowed from Latin. ***Digit*** can refer to a finger. For example, we have 5 digits on each hand. And it can also refer to a numeral. So the number 125 has three digits using our modern Hindu-Arabic numerals. So the word ***digit*** reflects a time when fingers were used for counting, and that also explains why a counting system based on units of 10 was so common.

I should also note that the word ***finger*** is derived from the same Indo-European root as the word ***five***. We have five fingers on each hand – assuming that we count the thumb as a finger. So these words show us that people once relied on their fingers when counting. Of course, many modern people do the same thing today.

But in a period before shoes and other foot coverings were common, it appears that some cultures used their fingers and their toes. That meant they used a counting system based on units of 20 instead of 10. The Mayans and the Aztecs used a 20-base counting system, as did the ancient Celts of Western Europe. And those Celtic people included the tribes who inhabited Gaul before it became France. In fact, vestiges of that old Celtic system still exist in Modern French. For example, the French word for 80 is ***quatre-vingts*** which literally means 'four twenties.' So it's essentially the same construction as English 'four score.' Again, both of these terms reflect an older system where people counted in groups of 20. But what's the connection between that counting method and notches on bones or sticks.

Well, ancient humans sometimes used tally sticks with 20 notches carved into them. And some of those old tally sticks have been found. The person would run his or her thumb along the notches to count the total number of items being observed, like the total number of sheep in a flock. After counting to 20, the shepherd would make a mark on another object. When he counted another 20, he would make another mark. For each group of 20, a new mark was made. In that way, the mark – or score – represented 20 sheep or whatever objects were being counted at the time. And that's why the word ***score*** came to have a secondary meaning as the number 20.

The important thing to keep in mind about this system is that it didn't require any particular words for numbers. The numbers were represented by notches or fingers or sometimes toes. And that's why many of these tally sticks with notches have been found in excavations of early human settlements. They were commonly used before a standard vocabulary of larger numbers had developed. Early humans probably had words for a few basic numbers – perhaps 1 through 10 or 1 through 20, but beyond that, it appears that they relied on physical objects to help them count.

Sometimes they used stones of various sizes to keep track of things. Small pebbles could be used to represent units of 1. And larger rocks could be used to represent units of 10 or 20 or some other amount. So if the big rock represented a unit of 10, then the number 25 could be represented with two big rocks and 5 small pebbles.

Believe it or not, this method of using pebbles and stones for counting is still reflected in our language. The Latin word for a small stone was ***calculus***. And of course, that word exists today in its original form as an advanced form of mathematics. But that root also gave us the words ***calculate*** and ***calculation*** and ***calculator***. Again, all of those words derived from a root that meant small stones – the type usually used when counting objects. By the way, that root first appeared in English in the late 1300s when it was used by Geoffrey Chaucer. He referred to the process of ***calculing*** which meant calculating or working with numbers. The word ***calculator*** appeared around the same time, but it originally referred to a person who calculates – not a mechanical device.

And here's another interesting fact. The early Germanic tribes encountered the Romans through trading networks. And they picked up this Latin word for rocks or stones. The word then passed into Old English as ***cealc***, or as we know it today, ***chalk***. The early Anglo-Saxons used that word to refer to the soft white limestone found in the south of England. That limestone made very distinctive marks when it used, so it became common to use that stone for writing. And even today, some teachers still do mathematical equations with chalk on a chalkboard. So the word ***chalk*** comes from the same Latin root as words like ***calculate*** and ***calculus***. They all go back to a root word that meant stones or pebbles

And there's another connection between stones and counting in Modern English. This one should be very apparent if you are from Britain, but less so if you are American. That's because British English still uses the word ***stone*** to mean 14 pounds. So, for example, a person might weigh 12 stone. The specific use of the word ***stone*** to mean 14 pounds is first recorded in the late 1300s. But of course, the use of stones for counting goes back much further than that.

And you can also start to see how the use of pebbles and stones eventually led to the invention of the abacus with stones or beads attached to wires to that they could be moved around for counting and calculations.

Now the use of stones for counting is very similar to the use of notches on sticks because both systems can be used without specific words for numbers. You don't have to have a word for 84 in order to count to 84 with these methods. You can just add a pebble or make a mark for each additional item being counted. And these methods also have something else in common. They both rely on a base counting system for larger numbers.

Even when ancient humans counted 84 items, they didn't tend to use 84 separate individual marks or 84 separate pebbles. They used number groupings. As I noted, they might use smaller pebbles to represent individual items and a larger rock to represent a group of those items like a group of ten. This made it easier to keep track of the total number.

Markings or notches often worked the same way. Scholars have noted that early humans tended to use specific marks for individual items up to a certain point. But then, they would use a new mark to indicate a group of items.

Across many cultures, the mark for one item was usually represented by a single straight line. And it is amazing how that simple little line found across so many different cultures has survived the centuries. Our modern number 1 is still a simple straight line. And think about Roman numerals which used letters for numbers. It is widely believed that the Romans used the letter I for one because it so closely resembled the simple straight lines traditionally used to represent one item.

After that, if you wanted to represent additional items, you could just add more of those lines – 2 lines for 2, 3 lines for 3, and so on. And again, Roman numerals worked the same way. The Roman symbol for 2 is I-I. The symbol for 3 is I-I-I. And early on, the Roman symbol for 4 was I-I-I-I.

But at some point, all those straight lines or I's became too difficult to read a glance. You would have to count each mark to determine the total number. So it became common to introduce additional symbols to represent larger groups of items. This was the same idea as using a big rock to represent a specific group of items rather than using a bunch of small pebbles. It made it easier to keep track of larger figures by grouping a certain number together.

The Romans did that by introducing new letters or symbols for groups of 5, 10, 50, 100, 500 and 1000. Specifically, they used V for 5, X for 10, L for 50, C for 100, D for 500, and M for 1000.

Again this was the Roman system, but other cultures operated on a similar principle. For example, the Greeks also used letters for numbers, and they introduced new letters in many of the same increments. Other cultures used other symbols and other increments, but the principle was always the same. Some symbols represented individual items, and some represented larger groups of items. And the larger groupings usually reflected the base number that was used in the counting system. The Romans used a system based on increments of 10, so naturally, they had specific symbols for groups of 10, 100, 1000 and so on.

As I noted earlier, this numbering system based on units of 10 was the most common base used by ancient cultures, but some cultures settled on other base numbers. As we've seen, the Celts used a base of 20. And the Sumerians of Mesopotamia used a completely different base. They counted in groups of 60, and from that 60-base, they also developed an auxiliary unit of 12. So Sumerian mathematicians routinely worked in units of 12 and 60. That system may seem odd to us today, but we have many remnants of it in our daily lives. The fact that we have 60 seconds in a minute, and 60 minutes in an hour, is ultimately due to this numbering system. It's also why clocks count up to 12 o'clock, and it explains why we have 12 inches in a foot, and why we buy a dozen eggs, instead of 10 eggs. In the next episode, I'll explain how some of these modern measurements developed, but this time I want to explain how that Sumerian numbering system worked and how it originated.

The Sumerian civilization was one of the oldest civilizations on Earth. It was located in modern-day Iraq, and the Sumerian people used this numbering system based on units of 60. Whereas the later Romans had unique symbols for 1, 5, 10, 50, 100, 500 and 1000, and they worked with those specific increments, the Sumerians used different groupings and different increments. The Sumerians had specific symbols for 1, 10, 60, 600, 3600 and 36,000, but except for the different increments, they worked much the same way as Roman numerals. If you wanted to represent 250 with Sumerian numerals, you would use the symbol for 60 four times giving you 240. Then you would add the symbol for 10 giving you 250.

The Sumerian civilization was eventually replaced by that of the Babylonians who used a numbering system based on units of 10. For a while, the Babylonians blended the two systems together. For example, they added new symbols for 100 and 1000. But eventually, much of the old Sumerian system eroded, and the Babylonians reverted to their traditional system based on units of 10. However, they kept the old Sumerian 60-base system for use in astronomy and other advanced mathematical calculations. So some of that old system survived, and it passed to other

cultures around the Mediterranean and eventually passed into Western Europe. And that ultimately helps to explain why we count some things today in increments of 12 and 60.

But why did the Sumerians adopt a numbering system based on units of 60 in the first place? I mean, they had 10 fingers like everybody else. How did they come up with 60? And why did they use 12 as a common divisor instead of 10? Well, unfortunately, no one from that period left a tablet explaining why they did that, but there are lots of theories.

The most commonly accepted theory is that 12 and 60 are simply better numbers to work with because they can be divided into so many different equal segments. The number 10 can be divided in half into two 5's. But it can't be divided into thirds or quarters without having to use a fraction. So if you want to avoid fractions – which ancient traders preferred to do – 10 wasn't really a good number to work with. But if you moved up to 12, it solved a lot of problems. 12 could be divided in half with two 6's. It could be divided into thirds with three 4's. And it could be divided into fourthswith four 3's. So it was very flexible. Traders working in units of 12 could easily divide money and goods into a variety of shares. And if we take this one step further, we find something very interesting about the number 60. It is the smallest number that can be divided into 2 equal parts, 3 equal parts, 4 equal parts, 5 equal parts and 6 equal parts. So if you were choosing the most flexible base number to work with – that could be divided into the most equal shares without fractions – you would have settled on the number 60, with 12 being a common subgroup because it is almost as flexible. So that's the most popular explanation for this old Sumerian and Babylonian numbering system.

Another theory is that the Sumerians used numbers like 60 and 12 because they were consistent with natural phenomena which they tracked very closely. They estimated that there were approximately 360 days in a year. There was 12 lunar months in a year, and that left about 30 days in each month. So working with basic units of 12, 30 and 360, they settled on a base number of 60. This theory may explains why the Babylonians maintained much of this system for use in astronomy long after the Sumerian civilization had disappeared. This system worked very well with those astronomical calculations. But whether or not it was the reason why the Sumerians came up with the system in the first place, we may never know.

Another theory has been proposed by Georges Ifrah who has written several books on the history of numbers. I used two of those books for some of this research, so let me recommend those to you. One is titled "From One to Zero" and the other is "The Universal History of Numbers." Anyway, Ifrah suggests that the Sumerian system based on units of 60 was also derived from finger counting like the more common base of 10. It was just a different type finger counting. In fact, it is a system that is still used in parts of Iraq, Iran, India and Turkey. This other system is used for counting on one hand. And it is based on the fact that each finger has three joints and thus three segments. There is the segment at the top by the fingertip. There is the segment in the middle. And there is the segment at the bottom by the palm. This counting system uses those three segments. You actually count those segments with the thumb – one finger at a time. And when you count those three segments on each of the four fingers, you end up with a total of 12. So that finger-counting method gives you a base unit of 12. But what if you want to go beyond 12? Well, you can use your other hand.

At the first unit of 12, you can extend one finger of the other hand. At the second unit of 12, you can extend a second finger. And since you have five digits on that other hand, you can repeat this process 5 times. And 5 times 12 gives you 60. So using this finger counting method – which still survives in this same part of the world – you would routinely count in units of 12 with a total base system of 60. So this might provide another explanation for the origin of this Sumerian and Babylonian system.

Now the reason I went through that exercise is because that 60 base system, with 12 as an sub-unit, is also reflected in some of our English words for numbers. So with all of that history as a background, let's look at how the English language deals with numbers

As I noted earlier, most of our number words were preserved from Old English. And those words were inherited from the original Proto-Germanic language. And most of those words can be traced back to the original Indo-Europeans. So given all of that, we should expect that English number words are closely related to the number words found in other Indo-European languages, and that is indeed the case. And around the current point in our overall history of English in the early 1300s, a lot of those other words started to filter into English giving English multiple ways to express numerical concepts. Of course, Latin, Greek and French were the primary sources of those new terms.

So let's go through the numbers beginning with number one. Of course, that word is ***one*** today, but it was ***an*** in Old English. I discussed the evolution of that pronunciation change back in Episode 96, so I won't repeat it here. We have also seen that the original form of the word still survives as our modern articles ***a*** and ***an***. So 'an apple' literally means 'one apple' if we use the original meaning of the word ***an***.

The Latin word for one was ***unus*** from the same Indo-European root as ***one***. And ***unus*** passed into English as the prefix ***uni-*** meaning one. This prefix was starting to pass into English in the early 1300s, and it gave English speakers a new way to indicate one-ness. The word ***unicorn*** is one of the first known words with that prefix to pass into English. It was actually used in the Ancrene Wisse because it was also used in the Bible. It was a direct translation of the Greek word ***monoceros*** which literally mean 'one horn.' ***Unicorn*** meant 'one horn' in Latin, and English actually used a direct translation of that word early on. English had the word as ***anhorn*** before the Latin ***unicorn*** won out. The next word with that prefix to enter English was the word ***university*** which is first attested in English at the current point in our overall story in the year 1300.

Now I noted that the word ***unicorn*** was a direct translation of the Greek word ***monoceros***. And that's because the Greeks sometimes used the word ***monos*** to mean one. And that word also entered English as a prefix usually as ***mono-***. The first known use of that prefix in English occurred in the late 1300s with the appearance of the word ***monarchy*** which meant rule by a single king or sovereign. But English already had at least one word with that Greek root by the beginning of the Middle English period, and that was the word ***monk***. As I noted in an earlier episode, ***monk*** was a Greek word that originally referred to someone who lived alone in solitude.

I also noted earlier that the French word ***single*** entered English around the year 1300. So English was acquiring lots of new ways to express one-ness.

The next number in English is ***two*** derived from the Old English word ***twa*** – usually spelled T-W-A. So the 'w' was actually pronounced in Old English. And that's why the number ***two*** has a 'w' in it, whereas the preposition ***to*** – T-O – does not. The 'w' started to disappear in the south of England during the Middle English period, but I should note that the original form of the word still survives in Scots where the number is still pronounced as ***twa***. The 'w' also exists in closely-related words based on the same root – words like ***twelve***, ***twenty***, ***twice***, and ***twin***.

Now I noted that modern ***two*** came from Old English ***twa***, but I should note that ***twa*** was the feminine version of the word. Remember that Old English had grammatical gender. So the form of some of the number words varied depending on how it was being used in the sentence. The masculine version was ***twegen***, and that word still survives as the word ***twain***. We use that word in a phrase like 'Never the twain shall meet.' Again, ***twain*** was just a different form of ***two*** in Old English.

I should also mention the word ***between*** which uses a variation of the same root word as ***two*** and ***twain***. ***Between*** is the state of being in the middle of two or more other objects.

So that's English, but if we think back to laws of sound change identified by Jacob Grimm, we know that the Germanic languages developed a 't' sound from an original Indo-European 'd' sound. So when we look to Latin and Greek, we should expect to find words meaning 'two' that begin with a 'd' sound, and that's exactly what we find in the Greek and Latin words ***duo*** (/dwo/) which became ***duo*** (/do-oh/) over time – D-U-O. So ***duo*** is cognate with ***two***. Of course, the Latin root gave us words like ***duo***, ***dual***, ***duet***, and ***deuce*** – all of which were borrowed in later periods of English. However, as I noted earlier, English had borrowed the word ***double*** by the current point in our story from the same root.

Latin also had the prefix ***bi-*** which was used to indicate two of something. We find it in modern words like ***bicycle*** and ***bilingual***. That prefix was also starting to enter English around the current point in our overall story. One of the first occurrences of that prefix in English is the word ***bigamy*** found in a document from the early 1300s. Of course, it referred to a situation where a person was married to two or more people. Before ***bigamy*** was borrowed, Old English has the same concept as ***twie-wifing*** – literally 'two-wifing.' So as you can see, English was starting to tap into Latin and French for new ways to express two-ness.

For the next number we have ***three*** which was ***þrie*** in Old English. So it hasn't changed very much. The Indo-European root was ****trei*** which produced Latin ***tres***. The Greek form was very similar to that Latin form. These Latin and Greek forms gave us the prefix ***tri-*** (/tree/) or ***tri-*** (/try/) meaning three. And this is another classic example of Grimm's Law at work. The Indo-European 't' sound became a Germanic 'th' sound. And once we account for that sound change, we can see the clear connection between T-R-I – as in ***triangle*** or ***trio*** – and the English word ***three***.

By the current point in our story, English had borrowed the word ***trinity*** with that Latin root for three. And English speakers were probably familiar with the Latin word ***trivium*** for the three basic courses taught in schools, even though that word isn't found in an English document until much later. Also, the word ***triangle*** appeared in English for the first time in the late 1300s. So English was starting to borrow that common prefix from Latin and Greek.

Of course, after ***three***, we have ***four*** which was ***feower*** in Old English. It has been shortened over time from a multi-syllable word into a single-syllable word. The Latin word for four was ***quattuor*** – which gave us words like ***quarter*** and ***quart***. Now English ***four*** and Latin ***quattuor*** came from the same Indo-European root word meaning four, but there is a little bit of mystery here. The Indo-European word began with a 'k' sound as found in that Latin word ***quattuor***. Under Grimm's Law, that 'k' sound should have switched to an 'h' sound in the Germanic languages. So English should have ended up with 'heower' or 'hor' instead of ***four***. So where did that 'f' sound in four come from? It was already there in the original Germanic language, so whatever happened, it happened very early on.

The most popular theory is that the Germanic speakers were influenced by the following number ***five*** – or ****fimfe*** in Proto-Germanic. So the original Germanic words began with the same sounds as the modern English words. And just as today, people were accustomed to reciting the numbers in order – 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 ,6 and so on. And in a time when alliteration was common in Germanic poetry, it became common to give the word after ***three*** an 'f' sound so that it began with the same sound as ***five***. In fact, if we look at the preceding and following numbers, we see that ***two*** and ***three*** begin with similar sounds – T and TH. And ***six*** and ***seven*** both begin with the 's' sound. So if we give the word for ***four*** an 'f' sound, we get a nice little rhythm – 2,3 – 4,5 – 6,7. Again, Germanic culture would have been much more focused on alliteration that our modern culture. Where we tend to use rhyming schemes and focus on similar sounds at the end of words, they used alliteration. So they would have been accustomed to the rhythm of repeating sounds at the beginning of words. And this is the most popular theory for the 'f' sound at the beginning of ***four***.

As I noted, the related Latin word was ***quattuor***, and the Q-U-A-R root was just starting to enter English at the current point in our story around the year 1300. In fact, several documents composed in that year provide us with the oldest examples of that root in the English language. The word ***quarter*** appeared for first time in that year. Of course, it meant one-fourth. The word ***quart*** appeared a short time later. A ***quart*** was one-fourth of a gallon. The year 1300 is also the year in which we find the first known use of the word ***square*** in the English language. It actually appeared for the first time in the Cursor Mundi – that northern text that I discussed a couple of episodes back.

Now we know that a square has four equal sides, but you might not have ever noticed that it has that Latin word for 'four' buried right in the middle of it. Take away the 'S' at the front and the 'E' at the end, and you have that root – Q-U-A-R. And that's because the word originally combined the Latin prefix ***ex-*** meaning 'out' with the root ***quadrus***.

It originally referred to the tool that is still used by carpenters to draw a right angle. And four of those right angles with equal sides forms the pattern which became known as a square. And again, that word is first recorded in English around the year 1300.

The next number on the list is ***five*** from the Old English word ***fif***. I noted a few minutes ago that it came from the Germanic word ****fimfe***, but that word was derived from the Indo-European root ****penkwe***. And once again, we see Grimm's Law at work here. The original 'p' sound became an 'f' sound in the Germanic languages. But Greek retained the original 'p' sound, and it produced the Greek word for five which was ***pente*** – found in words like ***pentagon*** and ***pentagram***. Those words were borrowed during later periods of English, but the Anglo-Saxons had borrowed a couple of words with that root during the Old English period thanks to the influence of the Church. The Latin Bible had been translated from Greek, so a few Greek words had entered Old English. And that included the words ***Pentecost*** and the word ***pentapolis*** which meant a group or federation of five cities. So that Greek root for 'five' entered English very early on.

Interestingly, that Indo-European root ****penkwe*** developed in a completely different direction within Latin. It produced the Latin word ***quinque***, and that gave use the prefix ***quin-*** for five as in ***quintuplets***. That root also entered English in the early 1300s in the Latin word ***quinzaine***. It meant a period of 15 days, but it has largely disappeared from English over time.

That brings us to the number ***six*** which was ***siex*** in Old English. The Latin form of the word was very similar – ***sex***. We have it in a word like ***sextuplet***, and that prefix also started to enter English during the late 1300s. It first appeared in words like ***sextary*** and ***sextula*** which were specific Roman measurements. The Greek word for six was derived from the same Indo-European root, but Greek had a sound change that caused the original 's' sound to switch to an 'h' sound. So English has ***six***, and Latin has ***sex***, but Greek had ***hex***. And that Greek version survives in words like ***hexagram*** and ***hexagon***. But that Greek root isn't really found in English until later centuries.

For seven, Old English had ***seofon*** and Latin had ***septem*** – again from the same root. The Anglo-Saxons had borrowed that Latin root in the word ***September*** in the Old English period. And just as Latin as ***sex***, where Greek had ***hex***, Latin had ***septem*** and Greek had ***hepta***. And in later centuries, English borrowed that Greek root in words like ***heptagon*** and ***heptarchy***.

For eight, Old English had ***eahta*** where Latin and Greek had ***octo*** – all from the same root. English had borrowed the word ***October*** with that root during the Anglo-Saxon period. By the end of the 1300s, English had also borrowed the word ***octave***. Words like ***octopus*** and ***octogenarian*** came during later centuries.

For nine, Old English had ***nigon*** where Latin had ***novem*** from the same root. Again, English had borrowed the word ***November*** with that root prior to the Norman Conquest, but that month name remains one of the few words borrowed with that Latin root.

For ten, Old English had ***tien***. The Indo-European root was ****dekm*** which produced Greek ***deka*** and Latin ***decem***. So once again, we see the shift from the 'd' sound to the 't' sound under

Grimm's Law. The Latin and Greek words retained the original 'd' sound where English had ***ten*** with the 't' sound. English had borrowed that Latin root ***decem*** in the word ***December*** very early on. In the early 1300s, English also borrowed the word ***decima*** which meant a tenth part. We have a similar version of that word today in the word ***decimal***. And in fact, the base-10 number system used by the Indo-Europeans and cultures is called a decimal system since it is based on units of 10. And some people who are very literal with their English will remind you that the word ***decimate*** means to kill one-tenth of an army or group. That was the original meaning of ***decimate***, even though the word has acquired a broader sense over time. As I noted, ***decima*** was borrowed in the early 1300s, but ***decimal*** and ***decimate*** were borrowed in later centuries.

So that's our basic group of ten using the Base 10 system which we inherited from the Indo-Europeans. Generally speaking, after 10, we start over with a very simple formula. We take our basic numbers and add ***-teen*** to the end which is just another variation of the word ***ten***. So ***thirteen*** is literally 'three-ten' or 'three plus ten.' ***Fourteen*** is 'four plus ten.' ***Fifteen*** if 'five plus ten,' and so one. Now I said we "generally" do that. But there are couple of obvious exceptions – ***eleven*** and ***twelve***. So why do we say ***eleven*** and ***twelve*** and not 'one-teen' and 'two-teen'? Well, the short answer is that this was a development within the original Proto-Germanic language. The Indo-Europeans didn't have these words or words that followed this pattern.

In Old English, ***eleven*** was ***enleofan*** – literally 'one-left.' So ***eleven*** meant 'ten with one left over.' Meanwhile, ***twelve*** was ***twelf*** – from the Germanic ***twa-lif*** – again literally 'two left.' So ***twelve*** meant 'ten with two left over.' So why did these unique words exist for 11 and 12?

Well, the most common theory is that the early Germanic tribes sometimes broke from the Indo-European number system which used units of ten, and they sometimes used a system based on units of 12 like the ancient Sumerians and Babylonians. So English appears to have these remnants of a completely different number system which the Germanic tribes picked up from somewhere and which was incorporated into the original Proto-Germanic language.
And that's why each of our numbers up through twelve have unique names. And after twelve, we resort to the default system of adding 'teen' to each root number – 13, 14, 15, and so on.

If we look a little closer at Old English, we can actually find more evidence of a Base 12 number system. Today, when we run out of 'teens' at 19, we create a new unit of ***twenty*** which is two-tens. We do the same thing for ***thirty***, ***forty***, ***fifty*** and so on. But we stop after ***ninety*** and then go to a ***hundred*** which is 'ten 10s.' So all of this is consistent with a counting system based on units of ten. Old English used this same system, but it also had an alternate system which has disappeared. After ***ninety***, instead of 100, people would often say ***hund-teontig*** – literally 'hund-tenty.' And for 110, they would say ***hund-endleofantig*** – literally 'hund-eleventy.' And for 120, they would say ***hund twelftig*** – literally 'hund-twelvety.' Other Germanic languages like Frisian had similar words based on the same formula.

So at one time, English not only had ***eleven*** and ***twelve***, it also had a form of 'eleventy' and 'twelvety,' which reinforces the idea that the early Germanic peoples sometimes thought of numbers in groups of 12.

In fact, the Old Norse word ***hundrað*** didn't mean 100 like it did in English. It actually meant 120. And the Norse word ***þusend*** didn't meant 1,000 like English, it actually meant 1,200. Again, that's more evidence that the early Germanic people used two different bases when counting – one method using units of 10 inherited from the Indo-Europeans and another method using units of 12 which they acquired from somewhere else.

In fact, older legal documents in some Germanic languages distinguish between a "common hundred" which meant 100 and a "great hundred" which meant 120. So if the Germanic tribes sometimes used a number system with a base of 12, where did they get that system from?

Well, no one really knows, but keep in mind that the original Proto-Germanic vocabulary had a lot of words in its core vocabulary that didn't come from the Indo-Europeans. And as I noted in the early episodes of the podcast, it appears that the Indo-European speakers who migrated into northern Europe encountered another tribe who spoke a different language. And over time, the two groups fused together, and the language which emerged as Proto-Germanic retained words from both languages. Well, if that is indeed what happened, it is possible that the other unknown tribe used a counting system based on units of 12. And as the two vocabularies mixed together, the resulting Germanic language retained aspects of both systems.

But I can add one more little piece of evidence to the story. A lot of you may be familiar with the various books by the linguist John McWhorter. He has written numerous books about the history of English – and the history of language in general.

Well in his book "Our Magnificent Bastard Tongue," he argues that the non-Indo-European words in the Proto-Germanic vocabulary show some striking similarities to words in the Semitic languages. And he argues that a group of Phoenician traders may have explored the interior of Europe, and may have established a settlement in northern Europe. And that may have been the tribe who mixed with the Indo-Europeans and provided the other part of the Proto-Germanic vocabulary. Of course, the Phoenicians were from the Near East and spoke a Semitic language, and they would have been familiar with the counting system of the Babylonians who were also a Semitic people. So perhaps this Base-12 counting system buried within the Germanic languages is more evidence to support McWhorter's theory. But to be clear, this is all speculation. None of these theories have been generally accepted by modern linguists.

Now not only does basic English show some evidence of a Base-12 counting system, it has also borrowed words to reinforce the approach of counting in units of 12. For example, English borrowed the word ***dozen*** from French in the mid-1300s. And by the early 1400s, English had even borrowed a word meaning 'a dozen dozen' – or 144. Of course, that is the word ***gross***.

Now let me conclude my review of English numbers by pointing out that the word ***thousand*** is also an Old English word inherited from the Proto-Germanic language. Versions of this root are also found in some other Indo-European languages, but the word for the number 1000 varies greatly among the modern Indo-European languages which suggests that the original Indo-Europeans didn't normally count that high and didn't have a standard word for that number. For example, Latin used the word ***mille*** which entered Old English as the word ***mile*** meaning 'one

thousand double paces.' For 'a thousand thousands,' English uses a variation of that word ***mille*** which is of course ***million***. That word first appeared in English in the late 1300s. Beyond a ***million***, terms like ***billion***, ***trillion***, ***quadrillion***, ***quintillion***, and so on, are obviously based on the Latin roots we saw earlier. And they all proceed in increments based on units of 10.

So I have covered almost all of the numbers we use in Modern English with one important exception. Did you notice which one I left out? It's the number ***zero*** – the number that represents nothing at all. It's the only basic number word in English that isn't native to the Indo-European language family. It comes from Arabic. And it came into English with the arrival of the Hindu-Arabic numerals in the 1300s. I discussed the origin of the word ***zero***, and the concept of the numeral zero, back in Episode 90. It was a key part of those new Hindu-Arabic numerals which I also introduced back in that episode.

Those new numerals were very different from the traditional Roman numerals. The value of each Hindu-Arabic numeral depended on where it was placed in the overall number. A 2 by itself, or a 2 located at the end of a larger number, just represented 2. But if it was moved over one position, it represent a unit of 20. If moved over one more position, it represented a unit of 200.

Of course, all of this is second nature to us today, but it was a revolutionary concept in the 1300s. In order for that system to work, it needed a zero to indicate when there were no units in a particular position. So in order to represent the number 320, there were three units of a hundred, two units of 10, and no individual units. Without the zero, you had the number 32. You had to have that zero to mark the empty position. So the zero was essential to those new numerals. But the zero wasn't just a place holder. It actually served as its own unique number, and you could do arithmetic with it. 5 plus 0 was 5. 5 times 0 was 0. It had its own numerical function. And that was what made arithmetic with these numerals so revolutionary.

Again, all of this was a completely foreign concept to most Europeans. Up until this point, Europeans used Roman numerals, and they continued to use Roman numerals for many centuries. Acceptance of the new Hindu-Arabic numerals was slow –VERY SLOW. Even though the new numerals started to appear in England in the 1300s, they didn't really start to replace the traditional Roman numerals until the mid-1500s.

During that intervening period, English scholars studied those new numbers, and they gradually came to understand the mathematical advantages afforded by those numerals. And that was the context for the creation of that manuscript I mentioned at the beginning of this episode entitled "The Crafte of Nombrynge."

That manuscript was really a translation and explanation of an earlier Latin work which was itself a commentary on al-Khwarizimi's original Arabic work on the numerals. You might remember from Episode 90 that the Muslim scholar al-Khwarizmi wrote an extensive manuscript about mathematics and the use of these Hindu-Arabic numerals. His name gave us the word ***algorithm*** – or ***algorism*** as it was originally called in English. The word originally meant the use of the new Hindu-Arabic numerals. If you did arithmetic with those numerals, you were said to

be engaged in the craft of algorism. That word actually appeared for the first time in the Ancrene Wisse, but most Englishmen didn't really know where the word came from. And this particular manuscript called "The Craft of Nombrynge" actually begins with an attempt to explain the meaning of that word. Unfortunately, the manuscript got it wrong. It suggests that the name was derived from a king of India who invented the whole numbering system. Here are the opening lines of the manuscript – first in Modern English and then in the original Middle English:

This book is called the book of algorism, or Augrym after common use. And this book analyzes the craft of numbering, which craft is also called algorism. There was a king of India, named Algor, and he made this craft. And after his name he called it algorism; or perhaps there is another reason why it is called algorism for that is the Latin word for it.

This boke is called þe boke of algorym, or Augrym after lewder vse. And þis boke tretys þe Craft of Nombryng, þe quych crafte is called also Algorym. Ther was a kyng of Inde, þe quich heyth Algor, & he made þis craft. And after his name he called hit algorym; or els anoþer cause is quy it is called Algorym, for þe latyn word of hit.

The manuscript then introduces the symbols for the ten figures used in the new numeral system. After introducing those new symbols, the manuscript contains a series of passages which explain the concept of positional numbers – where the position of the numeral determines its overall value.

The manuscript then illustrates this concept further with an example. It uses the numbers 9-6-3-4 in that order, and it explains how the respective positions mean that 9 represents 9 thousand, 6 represents six hundred, 3 represents thirty, and 4 represents four individual units of four. The text concludes this example with the following passage:

The whole number is nine thousand six hundred and four and thirty. Furthermore, when you read a number of figures, you should begin with the figure on the left side and read so forth to the right side as here – 9-6-3-4. You should begin to read at the figure of 9 and read forth thus – nine thousand six hundred thirty and four.

Al þe hole nombur is 9 (niȝen) thousande sex hundryth & foure & thretty. fforthermore, when þou schalt rede a nombur of figure, þou schalt begyne at þe last figure in the lyft side, & rede so forth to þe riȝt side as here 9 (niȝen). 6 (sex). 3 (Þre). 4 (foure). Thou schal begyn to rede at þe figure of 9 (niȝen) & rede forth þus. 9 (niȝen) thousand sex hundryth thritty & foure.

Now this is actually a fascinating passage because it points to a basic change in the way the numbers were read in English. The first time the author wrote out the number with words, he did so in the traditional manner going back to Old English. He wrote "nine thousand six hundred and four and thirty" instead of 'thirty four." But then he wrote the same number again at the end of the passage, and he wrote that it should be read as "nine thousand six hundred thirty and four." So he switched to the more modern phrase 'thirty-four" rather than the older and more traditional "four and thirty." We still see remnants of that old system form time to time. For example, in the nursery rhyme "Sing a Song of Sixpense," a well-known verse reads:

Sing a song of sixpence,
A pocket full of rye.
Four and twenty blackbirds,
Baked in a pie.

So instead of 'twenty-four,' the line reads 'four and twenty.' But during the Middle English and early Modern English periods, people stopped saying 'four and twenty' and they started saying 'twenty-four.' And presumably, they did that in part because people were taught to read out the names of the numerals from left to right when working with this new numbering system. And that meant that the word for the units of ten – like ***twenty***, ***thirty*** or ***forty*** – started to precede the final number at the end. There certainly may have been other factors at work as well, but this linguistic change took place at the same time that the new numerals were starting to be fully accepted in England in the 1500s and 1600s.

The Craft of Numbering manuscript goes on to explain that the new numerals use a symbol called ***sifr*** – or zero – which represents nothing. It then explains how to do addition, subtraction and multiplication with the new numerals one column at a time. This new system made arithmetic quicker and simpler, and it brought about a mathematical revolution. Some scholars compare the overall impact of that new numbering system to the literary revolution that took place when the alphabet was introduced. In fact, the upcoming scientific revolution was largely dependent on the mathematical equations and calculations that could be easily rendered with this new numbering system.

In this episode, we explored where our number words came from. Next time, in what is really the second part of this overall discussion, I'm going to explore how people used those numbers. In other words, I'm going to examine the words we use for measurements. For example, you can probably figure out why we measure certain things in feet, but where did inches and yards come from? And why do we sometimes refer to 13 items as baker's dozen? And why is 1/60 of a minute called a second? Shouldn't it be called a sixtieth? Well, I'll try to answer all of those questions and more next time – when we look at the history of English measurements.

So until then, thanks for listening to the History of English Podcast.

EPISODE 115: THE MEASURE OF A PERSON

Welcome to the History of English Podcast – a podcast about the history of the English language. This is Episode 115: The Measure of a Person. In this episode, we're going to look at the way we measure things and the words we use for measurements. This is really an extension of the last episode where we explored the history of numbers. People used numbers in lots of different ways, and one of the main uses was to measure things. But for much of human history, measurements varied greatly from region to region. And even within the same region, measurements were often inconsistent. But around the current point in our overall story of English in the early 1300s, all of that started to change. Around this time, many of our common measurements were standardized which allowed for more precision and accuracy. This time, we'll explore those developments, and we'll see how the evolution of measurements contributed to the English language.

But before we begin, let me remind you that the website for the podcast is historyofenglishpodcast.com. And you can sign up to support the podcast and get bonus episodes and transcripts at Patreon.com/historyofenglish.

Now last time, we looked at the history of numbers and the words we use for numbers. And we saw that the modern Hindu-Arabic numerals were just beginning to appear in England in the early 1300s. But it took a long time for Europeans to appreciate the mathematical benefits of the new numbers. For most of the Middle Ages, the English held onto their traditional Roman numerals, and that meant that most people didn't have the ability to make advanced calculations. Numbers were used for basic counting. They were used to keep track of things like the total number of sheep in an open field. And they were used in trade and commerce and in the assessment of taxes. And numbers were also used for basic measurements – to measure things like length, distance, area, volume, and weight.

Like today, measurements permeated daily life. Land was divided into parcels based on specific measurements. Taxes were assessed based on those measurements. Craftsmen and farmers relied on specific measurements to keep track of their commodities. And those commodities were bought and sold in specific amounts.

Like most aspects of daily life after the Conquest, measurements were often a blend of native Anglo-Saxon units, traditional Roman units, and borrowed French units. And that meant that the words for those measurements were derived from a variety of sources. Some were native to English and some were loanwords. In fact, some of the oldest Latin words in the English language are words associated with Roman measurements. And that's because the Romans traded with the Germanic tribes of northern Europe. So some of those Latin words were in the original Proto-Germanic language before the Anglo-Saxons relocated to Britain.

Latin words like ***pound*** and ***mile*** are older than English itself. They are well-attested throughout the Germanic languages and were almost certainly borrowed by the original Germanic speakers on the continent. The word ***ounce*** is another Latin word attested in some of the earliest documents composed in Old English. After the Conquest, the Normans imposed even more continental measurements. That gave English even more measurement terms from Latin and French. French words like ***gallon*** and ***bushel*** appear for the first time in English documents around the year 1300 at the current point in our overall story of English.

The word ***quart*** was borrowed from French a couple of decades later. I noted last time that the word ***quart*** is derived from the Latin word for 'four' which was ***quattuor***. It gave us the word ***quarter*** meaning one-fourth, and it gave us the word ***quart*** meaning one-fourth of a gallon.

By the end of the 1300s, the words ***pint*** and ***peck*** had also been borrowed from French. The word ***pint*** appears to be derived from the same root as the word ***paint***, and one theory holds that ***pint*** was derived from containers that had specific marks painted on them to indicate that amount.

Of course, in many places today, those traditional units have been replaced with metric units. The metric system that was devised in France in the 1790s in the midst of the French Revolution. And it gave English other words like ***meter***, ***liter***, and ***gram*** which were all borrowed in the late 1700s, even though that system didn't gain widespread acceptance until the 1900s.

By the way, the words ***meter*** and ***metric*** are both derived from the same root as the French word ***measure***, and the word ***measure*** itself was a relatively new word in English at the current point in our overall story in the early 1300s.

So as we consider those words, we can see that many of the terms we use for measurements today are loanwords. Some were borrowed during the Anglo-Saxon period, some came in after the Norman Conquest, and some came in with the metric system in recent centuries. This reflects a long-term trend whereby measurements have become standardized over time, and many of those standardized measurements have their origins in continental Europe.

But as I noted, the Anglo-Saxons did have their own native measurements, and some of those units – or at least the words for those units – are still with us today. The best example of that is probably the word ***foot***. Like most basic body parts, the word ***foot*** comes from Old English. The foot was both a body part and a standard unit of length in the Anglo-Saxon period. Of course, the length was roughly based on the length of a human foot. And in fact, most ancient societies used the human foot to measure length. The Egyptians, Greek and Romans all had a measurement unit based on the length of the foot, and the measurement was named after the word for foot in those languages. The Greek foot was a ***pous***, and the Roman foot was a ***pes***. And thanks to the P to F sound shift under Grimm's Law, we can see that ***pous***, ***pes*** and ***foot*** are all derived from the same Indo-European root word.

There is a reason why the foot was such a common unit of measurement in ancient societies, and that's because early humans had to come up with a way to standardize measurements. And the obvious way to do that was to resort to body parts. It was something that everyone had in common, and it was something that people carried with them everywhere they went. So many ancient measurements were ultimately derived from body parts.

In the last episode, I noted that the tendency of ancient humans to count in units of 10 was ultimately based on the fact that humans have 10 fingers. And even the Sumerian system which used a base of 60 – and an auxiliary group of 12 – may have been based on a specific finger-counting method which I described in that episode. So the human body was essentially an ancient calculator, and it was also an ancient measuring stick.

Not only was the foot a standard unit of measure, so was the hand. The Romans had a measurement called a ***palmus***. That word became ***palm*** in French, and in the 1300s, English borrowed that word ***palm*** both in reference to a part of the hand and as a specific unit of measurement. The measurement was approximately the width of a hand. For much of the Middle English period, the people of England measured things in palms. But during the 1500s, English speakers came up with their own version of that measurement by using the native word ***hand***. The word ***hand*** eventually came to refer to a measurement of 4 inches. And if you're an equestrian, you'll know that the height of horses is still measured in hands.

Beyond feet and hands, many ancient cultures also used a finger to measure short increments. The Egyptians, Greeks and Romans all used their fingers in this manner. It Latin, that type of measurement was called a ***digitus*** – or ***digit*** in English. Of course, it meant a finger, and in Modern English the word ***digit*** can still refer to a finger or a numeral. But ***digitus*** – or ***digit*** – was also once a term for a specific unit of measurement – specifically about 3/4 of an inch. And again, it was based on the width of a finger.

So individual body parts were often used – from fingers to hands to feet – but since those units varied from person to person, they varied greatly in actual use. Given that problem, there was a constant need to standardize those units. And those units worked better if they could be coordinated so that the various units worked together. So it made sense if there were a certain number of digits in a palm and a certain number of palms in a pes or foot. So early on, the Romans did that by declaring that there were four digits in a palm and four palms in a foot. And that meant that the digit was the smallest increment of a foot, and if you do the math, there were 16 digits in a foot.

But later on, after the fall of Rome, in the early Middle Ages, the pes or foot was redefined. And it was redefined by dividing it 12 parts instead of 16.

As we saw last time, the ancient Sumerians often counted in units of 12, and that system had spread eastward over time. And that led to Romans to sometimes divide larger units into 12 parts.

The Latin word for 1/12 was ***uncia***. So anytime something was divided into 12 parts, each of those smaller parts was called an ***uncia***. And when the Latin foot was redefined by dividing it into 12 parts instead of 16, each those new units were called an ***uncia***. And over time, that word ***uncia*** passed into English as ***inch***. So the word ***inch*** literally means 1/12. It was borrowed by the Anglo-Saxons in the late Old English period. And by that point, the English foot was largely modeled on the Roman foot or ***pes***, so England also divided its foot into 12 parts. And those parts were called ***inches***. So even though the foot is a native English measurement, the inch is a measurement from the continent.

By the way, when the Latin word ***uncia*** passed into English as ***inch***, it was actually the second time that English had borrowed that word as a measurement term. Under the Troy system of weights, which is still used for precious metals, the pound was divided into 12 parts instead of 16. Since each part was 1/12 of a pound, each of those parts was called an ***uncia***, but that version of ***uncia*** became ***ounce***. So believe it or not, the words ***ounce*** and ***inch*** are two variations of same Latin root word which meant 1/12. One was applied to length – being a twelfth of a foot – and one was applied to weight – being a twelfth of a pound. The difference in pronunciation has to do with the fact that the words were borrowed at different times. As I noted, i***nch*** came in during the late Old English period, and ***ounce*** was actually borrowed twice – first in early Old English as ***yndsan*** and then again from French after the Norman Conquest as modern ***ounce***.

So again, ***inch*** and ***ounce*** share the same root meaning 1/12, and inch came into English after the foot was re-divided from 16 parts to 12 parts. So the old 16 digits were replaced with the new 12 inches. And once the Anglo-Saxons had adopted those inches, they didn't have as much use for the old digits used on the continent. And that's why digits had very limited use in England.

But keep in mind that measurements like digits and palms and feet reflect a time when ancient people used their body parts to measure things. But what did they use when they wanted to measure something bigger than a foot? Well, of course, they could use multiple feet. But they also had a slightly larger unit which they could use. And this next largest unit was based on the length of an arm or part of an arm.

One of the most basic units of measurement throughout the ancient world – across many different cultures – was the distance from the elbow to the tip of the fingers. This unit of length was used by the Sumerians, Egyptians, Greeks, Romans and the Germanic tribes. The Romans called it a ***cubit***, and it is generally known as that today, even though each culture had their own word for it. And within this common unit, we might find the ultimate origin of our modern ***yard***. And I say "might" because the connection is a little bit vague. But before we can explore that connection, we have to consider how the Anglo-Saxons defined this unit.

As I noted, the Anglo-Saxons had this same basic unit, but they had their own word for it. They called it an ***eln*** in Old English. ***Eln*** literally meant arm or forearm, and that word came to refer to the average length of a person's forearm. The word lost its 'n' over time and became simply ***ell*** – E-L-L – by the start of the Modern English period. By the way, that old word also gave us the word ***elbow***. ***Eln*** meant arm, and ***bow*** – or ***boga*** – meant a bend. So ***eln-boga*** meant the place

where the arm bends, and over time ***eln-boga*** became ***elbow***. So the word ***eln*** – or ***ell*** – survives as part of the word ***elbow*** and as an old unit of measure equal to the length of the forearm.

Now I said that the Old English word ***eln*** could refer to just the forearm or to the entire arm. And this created some confusion with the measurement over time. It originally referred to a smaller unit – basically the length of a forearm. But over time, it came to represent a longer unit – the length of an entire arm.

This measurement was used in many parts of northern Europe including Britain and Flanders. And it became a standard unit for measuring cloth. I've talked about how important the cloth industry was in those regions in an earlier episode, and that's why the ***ell*** became such an important measurement in Medieval England. You could hold a large piece of cloth near your torso and extend a segment outward with your hand. That was one ell. You could then grab the next segment and extend it outward. Each time you did that, it was an ell. So it became common to measure cloth in this manner.

This measurement was very common in the Middle English period and even into the early Modern English period. In the 1500s, a specific saying began to appear in many English documents. Though the wording varied, it was essentially "If you give him an inch, he'll take an ell." This saying is recorded many times from the 1500s through the 1700s, but it was almost rendered with the word ***ell*** at the end. But when the ***ell*** ceased to be used as a common unit of measurement, the phrase was re-worded. Then people started to say, "If you give him an inch, he'll take a yard" – or "take a mile." Those sayings are still common today, but its original version used the word ***ell***.

Now, again, the word ***ell*** was a native English word. But when the word was used in Latin documents, it was often translated into Latin as ***ulna***. Remember that ***ell*** or ***eln*** originally meant forearm in English, and ***ulna*** was the Latin word for forearm. We still have the word ***ulna*** in English meaning the large bone in the forearm. So in Latin, the measurement of an ell was often rendered as an ***ulna***. And in fact, ***eln*** and ***ulna*** both come from the same Indo-European root word which meant forearm.

So we've talked about digits and palms and feet and cubits and ells. All of those old measurements were ultimately based on body parts. But the problem with using body parts is that the actual size varied a little bit from person to person, so these units varied greatly throughout England and throughout Europe.

Very often, there was no fixed standard. And if there was a standard, most people didn't know what it was. Since measurements were highly variable, it created a lot of problems – especially when it came to trade and commerce. Buyers wanted to be certain that they were getting what they paid for. There were occasional attempts to standardize and fix those measurements, but those efforts met with mixed success.

There is an often repeated story that Henry I tried to standardize the length of the yard in England during his reign in the early 1100s. According to the story, Henry proclaimed that the 'yard' was to be fixed as the distance from the tip of his nose to the end of his outstretched thumb. Now there is one basic problem with this story. You might have noticed that I haven't really said anything about the ***yard*** so far, and that's because the yard didn't really exist a measurement at that point – at least not in any surviving documents. This story about Henry trying to standardize the yard is actually taken from William of Malmesbury's history of that period. You might remember that William of Malmesbury is one of the most famous historians of the Norman period in England, and he lived during Henry's reign. William wrote that Henry fixed the length of the ell – not the yard. He wrote that Henry was upset that traders were using a false ell to take advantage of customers, so Henry declared that the ell was to be fixed as the length of his arm and anyone who used a different measure was subject to severe punishment. It wasn't until later centuries that this account was re-told and modified to refer to the yard and to refer to the distance from Henry's nose to his thumb. So it was actually the ell that was standardized by Henry in the early 1100s.

Now we don't know how Henry enforced his rule which fixed the size of the ell. I mean, how were merchants supposed to determine the exact length of Henry's arm? Traders couldn't exactly call up the king and ask him to show up in person every time they needed to measure something. We don't really have an answer to that question, but a few decades later, during the reign of Richard the Lionheart, a new law was issued which proclaimed that the size of the ell should be fixed by an iron rod, and the length of that rod would be the official length of the ell. So that law suggests that an iron rod representing the ell was made and maintained during that period. But again, nothing more is known about that iron rod. And notice that nothing was said about feet or inches or other measurements. So those lengths remained somewhat variable.

The people of England had to wait until the current point in our story in the early 1300s for all of this to be resolved. And it was resolved by a law issued during the reign of Edward I. As we saw in prior episodes, Edward's reign is known for many things, including his conquest of Wales and his temporary conquest of Scotland. But he also gave us the modern inch and foot and the measurement that became known as the yard.

The surviving statute books from this period include a law which attempted to define and fix the basic measurements of length in England. It also referenced an iron ell or Iron Ulna maintained by the king which was to be used to fix the measurements. The law was written in Latin, but in Modern English it reads as follows:

"It is remembered that the Iron Ulna of our Lord the King contains three feet and no more; and the foot must contain twelve inches, measured by the correct measure of this kind of ulna; that is to say, one thirty-sixth part of the said ulna makes one inch, neither more nor less... It is ordained that three grains of barley, dry and round, make an inch, twelve inches make a foot, three feet make an ulna, five and a half ulna makes a perch, and forty perches in length and four perches in breadth make an acre."

Now keep in mind that many Latin documents used the Latin word ***ulna*** for the English word ***ell***. So this law mentions the ***ulna***, but it was really referring to the English ***ell*** which was that unit based on the length of an arm or forearm. Again, the law fixed the size of the ulna or ell by reference to this iron rod which apparently existed. This iron rod or Iron Ulna consisted of three feet, so 1/3 of the rod equaled a foot. And each foot consisted of 12 inches. If that sounds a lot like a yardstick, it's probably because this Iron Ulna was essentially the prototype of the later yardstick. The law also said that the inch was equal to three grains of barley. It was a tradition to measure certain small units like inches with grains of barley, and this law does the same thing. So since average people didn't have access to the king's iron rod, they could at least estimate the length of an inch in this traditional manner.

Again, we don't find the word ***yard*** in this law, but we have the first formal statement that the king's iron rod or Iron Ulna was three feet in length, and this appears to be the measurement that soon became known as a ***yard***. In fact, the word ***yard*** in its sense as a measurement originally meant 'a stick' in Old English. So a ***yardstick*** is literally a 'stick stick' using the original meaning of the word ***yard***.

Now up until the current point in our story in the early 1300s, the word ***yard*** was only used in a generic sense to mean a stick. But by the late 1300s, people started to refer to this specific measure of three feet as a ***yard***. It isn't entirely clear why the word ***yard*** replaced the traditional word ***ell*** or ***ulna***, but it did. It may have been because that unit of three feet was legally defined by reference to Edward's iron rod or Iron Ulna. And it appears that each town kept a copy of that rod which became known as an ***ellwand***. And those local ellwands could be consulted to verify the specific measurement.

Since the word ***yard*** originally meant a stick or rod, it seems logical that these three-foot measuring sticks just became known as ***yards***. And that gave us the term ***yard*** for a measure of three feet. Again, that's just a theory, but by the end of the century, the word ***yard*** had become an accepted term for that length. Over time, the ***ell*** became restricted to the cloth industry, and it eventually fell out of common use altogether. But the ***yard*** has survived, especially in countries like the United States which haven't fully accepted the metric meter.

By the way, I should note that the word ***yard*** in the sense of the 'front yard' or 'back yard' comes from a different Old English root, and it appears to be unrelated to the yard measurement.

So as we can see, our basic length measurements for small increments – the inch, foot and yard – were all standardized during the reign of Edward I. But what about larger measurements?

Well as I noted earlier, many ancient measurements of length were based on body parts. And a common unit of length was based on a person's outstretched arms. From fingertip to fingertip, this distance usually measured about 5 or 6 feet. It also happened to be roughly equal to a person's height, but it was easier to measure length by using the outstretched arms. The ancient Greeks had this measurement which they called an ***orguia***. The Anglo-Saxons had the same basic unit, and the Old English word for that unit literally meant 'outstretched arms' or 'embracing arms.' That word was ***fæðm*** which we still have today.

The word ***fathom*** literally meant an embrace, and the unit of length represented by a person's outstretched arms was also called a ***fathom***. It was typically a measurement of around 6 feet, and was very common in the Anglo-Saxon period. Through much of the Middle Ages, it was used as a land measurement, and by the 1500s, it had been officially fixed at a length of 6 feet. But it soon stopped being used to measure distances on land, and it started to be restricted to a measure of depth. It was sometimes used to measure the depth of a mine, but we mainly know it today as a measure water depth. And that's why sailors measured the depth of the sea in fathoms.

On the water, this type of measurement was usually made with a weighted rope which had a knot tied in it at every six foot increment. In other words, every fathom was marked by a knot. The rope was dropped in the water, and as it sank, the total number of knots taken into the water was the total depth in fathoms.

This also gave us the modern use of the word ***fathom*** as a verb. 'To fathom' was to check the depth of something – literally to get to the bottom of the sea or lake. So if you get to the bottom of something, you fathom it. We usually use the verb today in the negative. If I say, "I can't fathom why you would do that," what I'm really saying it that I can't penetrate or get to the bottom of the idea. I can't take the measurement or determine the answer.

Now traditionally, life at sea was very difficult, and death at sea was common. When someone died during a voyage, they were usually buried at sea, but those types of burials were not done in shallow water. They required deep water – normally a depth of six or more fathoms. And this is believed to be the origin of the phrase 'deep six' meaning death or the process of killing or rejecting something. So if you are considering an idea and you reject it, you might be said to 'deep six' the idea. This phrase first appeared in the early 1900s, and the 'six' in 'deep six' appears to be a reference to fathoms. I should note that there is a competing theory that the phrase has to do with a burial on land – essentially the same as putting someone 'six feet under.' But the phrase was originally common among sailors, and the Oxford English Dictionary attributes the six in 'deep six' to fathoms – not feet.

Of course, determining water depth was important for many reasons, including the safe passage of the boat or ship through the water. In the early United States, paddle steamers traveled up and down the Mississippi River, but they needed at least two fathoms of water to safely navigate the river. This depth was constantly checked to make sure that at least two knots of the fathom rope were being marked.

You might recall from the last episode that Old English actually had a masculine and feminine version of the word for ***two***. The feminine version gave us the word ***two***. And the masculine version gave us the word ***twain*** – as in "Never the twain shall meet." Well, on the Mississippi River in the 1800s, people still used that word ***twain***. And when the depth of the water was checked to make sure that the rope marked a depth of two fathoms, that measure was called a ***mark twain*** – literally 'a mark of two' or 'a mark of two fathoms.' That was a very important measurement because that's what the paddle steamers needed to navigate. And a young riverboat captain and budding writer named Samuel Clemens took note of that measurement. He heard people calling out the depth of 'mark twain' so much that he decided to make it his pen name.

And of course, today we know Mark Twain as the author of books like "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn," but it was originally a term that meant a mark of two fathoms.

I should also note that sailors used knotted ropes for other reasons. Not only did they use them to measure the depth of water, they also used them to measure the speed of the boat. A separate knotted rope was thrown overboard as the ship moved. The sailors counted the total number of knots that were pulled into the water over a 30-second period. And that allowed them to measure the ship's speed in knots. And that's why nautical speed is still measured in units called ***knots***, though modern mechanical equipment has replaced those old knotted ropes.

Now I began this discussion by noting that the word ***fathom*** originally referred to a person's extended arms or arms that were spread wide open. Well, the word ***fathom*** is ultimately derived from an Indo-European root word that meant 'to spread'. As we know, the Germanic 'f' sound was often derived from an original Indo-European 'p' sound. And that happened here as well. The Indo-European root of ***fathom*** has been reconstructed as ****pete***. And that Indo-European root also passed into Latin as ***passus*** which later passed into English as ***pace*** around the current point in our overall story in the early 1300s. So ***fathom*** and ***pace*** are cognate. And in fact, just as ***fathom*** was a unit of English measurement, a ***passus*** or ***pace*** was a unit of Roman measurement. Whereas a ***fathom*** was based on arms that were spread wide, a ***pace*** was based on legs that were spread wide. Technically, when walking, it was the distance from the point where one leg left the ground to the point where the same leg touched the ground again. So let's think about that.

When you're walking, you take a step with one foot and then you take an equal step with the other foot. Each of these individual steps was called a ***gradus*** in Latin. And a ***gradus*** was a specific measurement of 2 ½ Roman feet. And two of these steps was a ***passus*** or ***pace*** – which was a specific measurement of 5 Roman feet. So a ***pace*** was basically two steps, and since we take a step with each foot, the pace was really the distance from the point where one foot leaves the ground to the point where the same foot touches the ground again. And again, the word ***pace*** is cognate with ***fathom***, even though a pace was five feet and a fathom was six feet.

Now the reason why a pace is important is because it was the foundational unit for the mile. The word ***mile*** is derived from the Latin world ***mille***, and you might remember form the last episode that ***mille*** meant one thousand. So that suggests that the word ***mile*** originally meant 1000 of something – and it did. It meant 1000 paces. And since a ***pace*** was five feet, that meant that a ***mile*** was originally 5000 feet. As I noted earlier, that measurement was borrowed by the early Germanic tribes and it then passed into Old English. So the mile is a very old measurement, and even though it is a Latin word, it has been a part of English from the very beginning. But the modern mile isn't 5000 feet – it's 5280 feet. So what happened there? How did we end up with that specific number of feet for such a basic measurement? Well believe it or not, the answer to that question actually lies in the ***acre*** and a specific Anglo-Saxon measurement called the ***furlong***. So let's consider those two measurements for a moment.

Both the acre and the furlong were Anglo-Saxon measurements, and both words go back to Old English. Today, an acre represents a very specific area, but in the Anglo-Saxon period, it had a much looser definition. Again, almost all the measurements we've looked at had a looser definition back then. Originally, an acre of land was considered to be the total area of land that a plowman could work in one day with a group of oxen. Now the reason why that was such a loose concept is because the nature of the soil varied from region to region around the British Isles. Some regions had soil that was easy to plow, and that meant that a plowman could work a lot of it in the course of a day. But other regions had harder and rockier soil that was difficult to plow. And in those regions, a plowman could only work a small portion each day. So the size of the acre actually varied with the soil, and therefore varied from region to region.

In Devon in the west of England, an acre was 5760 square yards. In Scotland, an acre was over 6000 square yards. In Ireland, it was almost 8000 square yards.

Now, in order to understand the how the acre became standardized, and how it ultimately influenced the mile, we have to consider that farmland was usually divided into fields of a very specific shape and size. So an acre wasn't just a theoretical measurement, it was actually a physical piece of land. A field would be clearly marked and laid out as an acre. And an acre field was usually a long narrow rectangle. Its length was ten times longer than its width.

When the farmer plowed that long narrow acre, he would lead his oxen along the length of the field. The trench that was created by the plow was called a ***furh*** – or ***furrow*** as it is known today. And the entire length of that furrow from the beginning of the row to the end was called a ***furlong*** – literally a 'furrow-long' – meaning the length of the furrow. So this furlong also became a standard measurement over time. A furlong was basically the length of one of those standard rectangular acres. But again, the precise length of the furlong varied depending on the precise size of the acre. In southern England, it was approximately 600 feet because an acre was usually laid out with about 600 feet on the long side and about 60 feet on the short side. But again, the size of the furlong and the acre varied a little bit from region to region.

So the acre was much like the inch, the foot and the ell in that it didn't really have a consistent definition throughout England. But when Edward I standardized and fixed those other measurements, he also standardized the acre. The very end of that law I read earlier declared that a standard acre was to be 40 perches long and 4 perches wide. A perch was a unit introduced from France, but the law states that there were 5 ½ ulnas in a perch, and as we know, there were three feet in an ulna. So if we do the math, Edward's law declared that a standard acre was to be 660 feet long and 66 feet wide. And here's the thing, since the long side of an acre was called a furlong, this new law also had the effect of fixing the length of the furlong at 660 feet. So even though the law doesn't specifically mention the furlong, it standardized it anyway since it was tied to the size of the acre.

Now I began this discussion by saying that the furlong had something to do with the specific length of the modern mile at 5280 feet. Well, Edward's new law provides the connection. Remember that the Roman mile was 5000 feet – a nice round number. And the Romans divided

that mile into 8 smaller units called stadia. So each of those 8 increments was 625 feet long. 5000 divided by 8 is 625. So the Roman units fit together perfectly.

Now, the Anglo-Saxons were familiar with those 8 divisions called ***stadia***, but that length was almost exactly the same size as the traditional English furlong. So rather than adopting the Roman unit – or the Latin word for that unit – the Anglo-Saxons just called that unit a ***furlong***. So on the continent, a mile was divided into 8 stadia of 625 feet each. And in England, a mile was divided into 8 furlongs of around 600 feet each. So again, same concept, but England just used its traditional furlong. But, when Edward I fixed the size of an acre, and thereby fixed the size of the furlong at 660 feet, that created a problem. Remember that the Roman increment was only 625 feet long. So this new law meant that the English unit was now officially 35 feet longer than the Roman unit.

With this new law in place, what was the proper definition of an English mile? Was it still 5000 feet, or was it still 8 furlongs? It couldn't be both anymore. If it was 8 furlongs, that would make it 5,280 feet using the new standard measurement.

This dispute wasn't fully resolved until the year 1593 during reign of Elizabeth I. In that year, the second option was chosen. Since the furlong was such a common unit of measurement in the countryside, and since it was so fundamentally tied to the taxable acre, it was decided that the English mile should be based on that unit even though it resulted in a mile with a peculiar length when measured in feet. But again, since the mile was such a long distance, people didn't really think of it in feet, they thought of it in furlongs. So the furlong became the basis of the English mile, and the English mile was set at 5280 feet.

So the English measurements of length and area owe a great deal to Edward I. And by fixing the size of those units, he moved English society away from the variable and inconsistent units that had been used previously to the fixed, regimented system that we use today. To be fair, things didn't change overnight, but Edward's reign did mark a turning point.

Now in this episode, I have focused mainly on the measurement of length and area, but the measurements of weight and volume were also evolving during this period. I noted earlier that words like ***pint***, ***quart***, ***gallon***, ***bushel*** and ***peck*** were all borrowed from French during the 1300s. Whether the measure was native to England or borrowed from France, there was an increasing emphasis on standardized units during this period. The loose, inconsistent measurements of the Anglo-Saxon period were becoming fixed units, and one of the main reasons for that change was the growth of trade and commerce. As traders traveled around the British Isles, they routinely encountered measurements that varied from place to place. By standardizing those measurements, it allowed everyone to operate with the same basic units, and it provided a reliable standard for buyers and sellers. And anyone who deviated from those standards was subject to punishment.

As I noted earlier, Henry I had tried to fix the length of the ell in the early 1100s because traders were taking advantage of people by using a shorter length. A buyer might think he was buying 12 ells of cloth, only to find out later that he had only purchased 10. Without a fixed standard, careless buyers were routinely short-changed in that way.

This was an especially common problem at the large fairs held throughout Europe. Some of the merchants took advantage of buyers, and some even engaged in outright fraud. Some bakers would sell bread with stones inside to increase the weight of the loaf. Instead of selling dry pepper, they would sell damp pepper which weighed more. So the buyer wasn't buying as much pepper as he or she had paid for. The moisture also made the pepper rot quicker. Some merchants sold bad meat to customers.

In order to address those problems, the large fairs adopted specific rules designed to prevent that type of abuse by merchants. Those rules included a fixed set of measurements which each merchant had to honor. And to enforce those rules, the fairs set up their own courts to hear complaints made against any of the merchants. The court was actually part of the fair. If a merchant was found guilty of breaking the rules, he could be fined or banned from the fair altogether. These fair courts were called ***piepowder courts***. So why were they called that?

Well the word ***piepowder*** is actually an old word for a trader – and more specifically for a traveling merchant. It is actually a French term that was Anglicized over time. The French term was 'pieds poudreux' – literally 'powdery feet' or 'dusty feet.' Traveling merchants were continually on the road, and most roads were dirt roads, so they tendered to have dusty or dirty feet. English speakers took that French term and Anglicized it to ***piepowders***. Some English speakers preferred a direct translation of the term, and for a while a trader was called a 'dusty foot' in Middle English.

Over time, those large regional fairs were gradually replaced by smaller markets in towns and cities that were open in a regular basis. As those local markets grew, some of them also established piepowder courts to regulate the merchants and keep them honest.

The growth of those piepowder courts reflects the fact that there was an increased emphasis on a system of fixed weights and measures. Those courts were usually maintained by merchants and merchant guilds, but sometimes the rules were imposed by the king himself. As we saw, Henry I had tried to fix the length of the ell to minimize fraud in the early 1100s. And, around the current point in our story in the early 1300s, Edward I adopted rules to fix the length of a variety of units. And before Edward became king, his father had tried to regulate the weights and measures used by certain merchants. Edward's father was Henry III, and Henry had tried to regulate bakeries to make sure that they didn't take advantage of their customers.

In the year 1266, Henry had issued a law called the Assize of Bread and Ale. Bread and ale were staples of the English diet. Bread was made from wheat, and ale was made from barley and other grains. This new law regulated the price and weight of the bread and beer that was sold in local markets. The prices were set in relation to the underlying price of the grains. But the important thing about this new law is that the price of bread was fixed in relation to its weight – not its size.

Before the law, bread was sold by size. A big loaf sold for more than a small loaf. But bakers sometimes deceived customers by baking large loaves with lots of air pockets. So the customer paid for a large loaf – only to get home and realize that a lot of it was just air. The new law tried to solve that problem by requiring that all loaves of bread had to weigh a certain amount – regardless of size.

Despite its good intentions, the law created a lot of problems for bakers – even for the honest ones. First of all, it was hard to bake a loaf that was a specific weight. And even when a baker did bake a loaf that was heavy enough, it would dry out over time as it sat out. As it lost its moisture, it would also lose some of its weight. So an old loaf might dry out and fall under the required weight. For one loaf, that might not be a big deal. But if people bought a lot of loaves, it started to add up, and the baker could be punished by being fined or worse. A baker who sold underweight bread could even be whipped or pilloried. To avoid this potential problem, it became customary for bakers to add a little extra to make sure that they didn't violate the law. They might add an extra slice to a loaf, and if someone bought several loaves, they might throw in an extra loaf just in case the loaves were a little underweight. Of course, this was the ultimate source of the term 'a baker's dozen.' A baker's dozen was a regular dozen with one extra item thrown in for good measure – literally for good measure. So 'a baker's dozen' means 13. The term isn't actually found in an English document until the late 1500s, but the concept had been around for several centuries prior to that.

But this does raise an interesting question. Why it is a baker's 'dozen'? In other words, why did people buy loaves or rolls by the dozen. Well, it's the same reason why people bought eggs by the dozen. Because the English currency encouraged people to buy things in that amount.

The basic unit of English money was the silver penny, and many items therefore sold for a penny like eggs and rolls. They were typically one for a penny. Well 12 pennies – or 12 pence – was a shilling. In the 1500s, a shilling coin was introduced. So a shilling coin bought 12 items priced at a penny each. And as more and more people started to use that shilling coin, merchants began to group those penny items together into groups of 12 so that they could be sold as a group for a shilling. That way the merchant didn't have to make change.
And that's when people started to buy things like eggs and rolls by the dozen. And that's also why we don't actually find the term 'baker's dozen' until the very end of the 1500s, when it became common to sell items like that by the dozen.

Now I first mentioned the fact that 12 pence equaled a shilling back in Episode 45. And I noted that that ratio was borrowed from France. And earlier in this episode, we saw that the terms ***inch*** and ***ounce*** both derive from a Latin word that meant 1/12. So the number 12 is still an important increment. Today, we still buy things like eggs by the dozen, and we still divide a foot into 12 inches. If you deal in precious metals, you still divide the Troy pound into 12 ounces. And until the shilling was phased out in the 1970s, it was still divided into 12 pence. Again, this tendency to group things into units of 12 can be traced back to France and Rome, and the Romans presumably picked up the idea from the Babylonians and Sumerians. That old Sumerian counting system with a 60 base also had that sub-group of 12. And that unit of 12 has persisted through the ages, and it's still with us over 5000 years later.

And there's one other situation where we measure and count in units of 12 and 60. That's when we tell time. We have 12 hours AM and 12 hours PM. Each hour is divided into 60 minutes, and each minute is divided into 60 seconds. And the reason why that is important to this episode is because the mechanical clock was first introduced around the current point in our overall story of English. No one knows exactly who invented it or the time or place where it was invented, but the surviving literature shows that references to mechanical clocks started to appear in the late 1200s. And the first reports of actual mechanical clocks being installed in cathedrals and bell towers appear in the early 1300s. So around the current point in our story, the mechanical clock was being introduced for the first time. And the introduction of that clock was another example of how life was starting to become regulated by fixed measurements in the 1300s. Before the mechanical clock, there was no fixed hour. But after the clock was introduced, time started to become quantified and fixed in ways that it hadn't been before. And smaller increments of time also started to become more important.

Now the modern division of the daytime into 12 hours can be traced back to the Sumerians, the Babylonians and the Egyptians. These ancient cultures used sundials to keep track of time during the day, and again, they divided the daytime into 12 equal segments. The sundials had a mark for each of those segments which later became known as ***hours***. The word ***hour*** is a French loanword, but it originated with the Greeks.

Now by dividing the daylight into 12 equal segments, that meant that ancient people thought of an hour as a fraction of the daylight. But as we know, the amount of daylight varies throughout the year. The days are longer in the summer and shorter in the winter. And since the hours were merely fractions of that time, that meant that the length of an hour also varied throughout the year. An hour was longer in the summer and shorter in the winter.

That was true for thousands of years, and it didn't really change until the mechanical clock was introduced in the early 1300s. The mechanical clock counted time in regular, fixed intervals. It didn't rely upon the movement of the sun or the amount of daylight. So the mechanical clock created the fixed length of an hour that we have today.

For a while both types of time-keeping devices existed. There were the variable solar hours depicted by sundials and the fixed mechanical hours depicted by the new clocks. Either way, the hours were usually marked by ringing of a bell in the local church cathedral or bell tower. And it became important to determine if the ringing bell reflected solar time or clock time. To distinguish the two, people started to refer to the fixed hours of the new mechanical clock as "the hours of the clock." So if the time-keeper was using a mechanical clock, the bell that rang at 9 in the morning was described as "9 of the clock." And over time, "of the clock" was shortened to "o'clock." And today, we still say "9 o'clock," even though the "o'clock" part seems a little obvious and unnecessary since we don't really use solar hours anymore.

Now as I said, these first mechanical clocks were placed in cathedrals and bell towers, and they marked time by ringing bells. At first, most of those new clocks didn't have a clock face with dials or hands, and therefore, they didn't have numbers to indicate the specific hour. But very soon, it became common to design large clocks in town squares with a clock face so people could

estimate the time without having to wait for the bells. During the 1400s, those clocks started to appear with a minute hand in addition to an hour hand. So clockmakers were starting to divide the hour into 60 smaller increments called ***minutes***. And that allowed for an even more precise measure of time. By the late 1600s, clockmakers started to design clocks that could tell time in even smaller units. Once again, the minute was subdivided into 60 even smaller increments called ***seconds***, and a new second hand was added to the face of the clock in addition to the minute hand. So were these new increments called ***seconds*** because a second dial was added to the clock to keep track of them? Well, no, not exactly. But that is the basic idea behind the term. ***Seconds*** are actually called seconds because they represent a second division of the hour into smaller units.

The concept of minutes and seconds is much older than the mechanical clock. In fact, it goes all the way back to the Roman period. If you're familiar with geometry, you know that a circle is divided into 360 increments called ***degrees***, and each degree is divided into 60 smaller units called ***minutes***, and each minute is divided into 60 even smaller units called ***seconds***. Well, the clock face was considered a basic circle, so as it was subdivided into small units, these old geometric terms were applied to the clock.

But where did the names of these smaller units come from? Why do we call them ***minutes*** and ***seconds***? Well, the Romans divided something into smaller parts, they called those smaller parts ***minuta***, which we also have in English as ***minutia*** meaning 'small parts.'

When the Romans divided the degree of a circle into 60 smaller units, this was considered the first division of the degree, and each of the smaller units created by this first division of the degree was called a ***pars minuta prima*** – literally the 'first small part.' ***Prima*** meant 'first,' and we still have that word as ***prime*** as in Prime Minister. And over time, that long phrase ***pars minuta prima*** was shortened to just ***minute*** because it was a small part.

Well after this first division of the degree into small parts, there was then a second division of each of those small parts into even smaller segments. So these new even smaller segments were called the ***pars minuta secunda*** – literally the 'second small part.' ***Secunda*** was actually the original version of our modern word ***second***. English borrowed that word from Latin. And since this was the second division of the degree, these smallest units were called ***seconds***. And that's why those geometrical units are called ***minutes*** and ***seconds***.

Well, as I noted, clocks started to keep track of smaller and smaller increments of time in the late Middle Ages, and as the hour was divided into smaller and more precise units, those Latin terms ***minutes*** and ***seconds*** were applied to those smaller time units.

Now again, all of these precise measurements of time stem from the introduction of the mechanical clock around the current point in our story in the early 1300s. And I'll have a lot more to say about the history of clocks and time-keeping terms in the next bonus episode at Patreon. So be to sure to check that out if you are a patron there.

I think the important thing to take from the introduction of mechanical clocks in the 1300s is that it was yet another example of how Medieval society was changing. Before this point, people's lives were regulated by astronomical events like sunrise and sunset. And even the concept of an hour was variable. The length of an hour changed throughout the year, and even changed depending on what latitude you were standing in. But now, with the invention of the mechanical clock, people's lives started to regulated by fixed non-changing hours. And those hours were soon divided into smaller units of minutes and seconds. This changed the way people thought about time. Their lives became more regulated by the regular ringing of the bells. Those clocks determined the exact time when the town gates were opened and closed, when curfews began and ended, when the markets opened for business, when people were expected to be at work, and when the workday ended. The average Medieval life started to be regulated and governed by these regular increments of time.

At the same time, measurements of length, volume and weight were also being defined in specific increments and regulated for the first time. And that gave merchants, craftsmen and other people a standard that they could all rely upon. Those who strayed from those standards risked a fine or even physical punishment.

These changes reflect a society that was starting to change the way it thought about measurements. The people of England were moving away from loose, relative measures that varied from region to region and person to person, and they were moving toward a society of universal standards that applied to everyone the same way. And that opened the door to a world of precise measurements and regulations.

When these developments were combined with the mathematical advantages of the new Hindu-Arabic numerals, all the tools were in place for a revolution in mathematics, astronomy, geometry and science. It took a few more centuries for those developments to be fully realized, but the foundation of those later advancements can be found here in the early 1300s.

I'm going to conclude this episode on that note. Next time, we'll turn our attention back to Edward I, and we'll move the story forward from his reign to that of his son Edward II. Those events are closely tied to developments in Scotland. So we'll also turn our attention back to the north, and we'll explore the first piece of literature composed in the Scots dialect – or the Scots language if you prefer.

So until next time, thanks for listening to the History of English Podcast.