

**THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH PODCAST
TRANSCRIPTS**

EPISODES 121 - 125

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EPISODE 121: ENGLISH ASCENT

Welcome to the History of English Podcast – a podcast about the history of the English language. This is Episode 121: English Ascent. In this episode, we’re going to explore the aftermath of the Black Death in England. During this period, the massive death toll led to some important social changes which impacted the history of English. Severe labor shortages caused an economic upheaval in the countryside, and those labor shortages actually turned the feudal system on its head. Farm labor was suddenly in high demand, and the peasants were able to command generous wages. Along the way, power shifted from the lords to the peasants. And a new middle class emerged in the countryside to join the urban middle class in the towns and cities. As we’ll see, these developments gave the English language a boost. And it culminated with a proclamation making English the official language of England. So this time, we’ll explore the ascendancy of English and the ascendancy of the English-speaking classes.

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 this time, I want to look at the period immediately following the Black Death in England. In the decade or so that followed the plague, the old social and economic order started to break down. That old system was the feudal system imposed by Normans about three centuries earlier. That system is usually analyzed in terms of its economic and legal and social structure. But as we know, there was also a linguistic aspect to that system, specifically the forced introduction of Norman French as the official language of the royal court and the nobility. So the English government conducted its business and preserved its records in French and Latin – not English. And that was because the nobles considered French to be a superior language to English. But that entire system started to break down after the Black Death, and the decline of that system also led to the decline of French and the rise of English.

The effects of the Black Death reached every corner of England – and every town and city. But some of the most important changes were taking place in the countryside where the vast majority of the population lived. Out in the country, the status of the peasants was changing. Despite the hardships wrought by the plague, many of the surviving peasants actually experienced an overall improvement in their economic situation. The laboring classes were starting to make a little money and acquire some wealth. And much of that improvement came at the expense of the landed nobility.

Immediately prior to the Black Death, about 90% of the wealth of England lay in land. About 70% of that land was held by the nobility and the church. Most of the rest was held by a wealthy middle class that was becoming known as the *gentry*, which was a brand-new loanword from French in the mid-1300s. Generally speaking, the gentry were wealthy land holders, but they weren’t technically nobles. They didn’t have titles like duke or earl or baron. They were actually commoners, and they represented the upper middle class of rural England.

Below the nobility and the gentry were the peasants, which included the vast majority of the population in the countryside. They were mostly people from Anglo-Saxon stock. They represented the traditional English-speaking class, and most of them held small family plots in exchange for steep rents and labor services that had to be provided to the local lord. So they were tied to that small plot of land – and not just as practical matter. In most cases, they were legally bound to that land, unable to leave without the consent of the local lord.

I explained the role of peasants in the feudal system way back in Episode 70. In that episode, I explained how the Norman Conquest led to the introduction of the feudal system. Under that system, the king owned all the land in the country, and everyone else held land from him. The kings gave most of the land to a small group of barons who held the land as vassals of the kings. They in turn distributed large portions of their land to their vassals. And those vassals distributed their holdings to the people beneath them. Along the way, each holder agreed to pay rents and fees and provide certain services to the person above him or her. This created long chains of lord-vassal relationships.

At the very top was the king. And often, at the very bottom was a peasant who held a small piece of land consisting of a few acres. And as I noted back in episode 70, there were two kinds of peasants – free peasants and unfree peasants. By far, most peasants were unfree.

There were several basic differences between free and unfree peasants. Unfree peasants were usually forced to work for their lord. They provided labor with little or no payment. When payment was made, it often in grains or commodities rather than money. Some did earn some money through side work or the sale of excess crops, but that money usually went to lord to pay the rents and fees associated with small land holding. So those unfree peasants had a heavy burden. And they had no right to leave or transfer their property without the lord's consent. If they had a dispute with the lord or someone else, the dispute was heard in the local manor court which was often controlled by the lord. So the life of an unfree peasant often resembled that of a slave. Their entire existence was largely controlled by the lord from whom they held their property.

By contrast, free peasants were in a much better position. They usually paid rents and fees to their lord, but they didn't have to provide labor services – at least not to the extent of the unfree peasants. So free peasants were more like modern tenants in that their relationship to the landlord was mostly financial. Free peasants also had more freedom to sell and transfer their lands to someone else. And if there was a dispute, they could have their case heard in the local shire court or royal court, which wasn't controlled by the lord. So it was much better to be recognized as a free peasant even though they were relatively few in number.

Now this is all very neat and simple in theory, but the reality was anything but neat and simple. It wasn't always clear if a peasant's holdings were classified as free or unfree. Over time, some free peasants purchased or acquired lands that technically unfree. And there were even cases where unfree peasants acquired lands that were classified as free.

Over time, lands were divided among vassals without little or no documentation. Heirs inherited and further subdivided holdings. Some died or defaulted, and it wasn't always clear if the property rights passed on to an heir or reverted back to the lord. A lord might distribute lands to a vassal with one set of conditions, and that vassal would turn around and distribute those lands to someone else with a different set of conditions. After a couple of centuries of Norman rule, these landholdings were an absolute mess. There were so many links in these long chains of property holdings that barons and prominent lords had effectively lost control of much of their estates. They didn't really know the tenants on the ground who held their land, and they didn't know the conditions under which that land was being held. That meant they had a tough time collecting fees and rents and services from their vassals because these relationships had become so messy and difficult to enforce. The courts were backlogged with cases trying to resolve these disputes and trying to define exactly who held what land subject to what conditions.

If you were a peasant trying to enforce your rights in those local courts against another peasant or against a lord, you were at a severe disadvantage. The court proceedings were conducted in French, and records were kept in Latin. Since most peasants only spoke English, they found it difficult to assert their rights in court. Most needed to hire a lawyer represent them, and many could not afford to do that. That made it especially difficult for a peasant to take on a local lord in court. So even when a peasant had property rights in theory, it wasn't always possible to enforce those rights, and the French language was one of the barriers that got in the way.

About a half century earlier, Edward I had tried to get a handle on this messy system. He was the king known as Longshanks, and back in Episode 111, I discussed how he implemented a lot of legal reforms during in his reign. In fact, the word *statute* dates from that period. And one of the many statutes passed during that time was a law that was intended to clarify the way land was to be held and transferred.

The statute was adopted in the year 1290, and it was written in Latin. It is commonly known today by the first two Latin words in the statute – Quia Emptores. Now you may think this was some obscure Medieval law, but if you've ever had the fortune – or misfortune – of attending law school, that term Quia Emptores will probably ring a few bells because it is one of the statutes that laid the foundation of modern property law throughout much of the English-speaking world.

The law was basically a compromise between the major lords who couldn't collect their rents and labor services, and smaller tenants who held land with vague and uncertain rights. This new law gave free peasants the right to sell and transfer their property as they pleased. Many of them already claimed that right, but this law formalized it. In exchange for that right, the law said that when a seller sold property, the buyer took the seller's place in the chain of ownership. So unlike in the past, when the buyer became a vassal of the seller, thereby creating a new link in the chain of ownership, this new law said that there were to be no more new links in the chain. If I sold land to you, I was no longer your lord. You just took my place in the chain, and my lord became your lord.

The idea behind this law is that those long chains of lord-vassal relationships had become messy and unwieldy. There were too many links. Too many vassals with undefined and uncertain rights. Those chains needed to be scaled back so that everyone understood what their rights were and what their obligations were. So this law – *Quia Emptores* – did that by prohibiting any new links to be added to those existing chains. At the bottom of those chains, the tenants were free to sell their land as they saw fit. So a piece of property could exchange hands over and over again without creating any new lord-vassal relationships. When you bought property, you jumped into the chain, and when you sold property, you jumped out. So now you had something more akin to actual ownership. Something you could buy and sell. This made land more of a commodity. This law ultimately created a market for the purchase and sale of land. And that meant that peasants actually had the ability to build up an estate over time if they worked hard enough and were savvy in their dealings. This law was one of the first major steps in the erosion of the traditional feudal system.

However, one of the limitations of this law is that it technically applied to the free peasants, but not the unfree peasants, and most peasants were unfree. Now many lords allowed their unfree peasants to buy and sell small holdings, but ultimately the lords could object if they wanted to, and this law didn't change that. So even though the law created a new market for land, it was somewhat limited by all the property held by unfree peasants. But in the mid-1300s, those limitations were largely wiped away by the Black Death. The plague was the great equalizer, and the distinction between free and unfree peasants started to disappear.

As we saw last time, about a third of the population died during the initial outbreak of the plague. Many small villages ceased to exist. On some manors, most of the peasants died. In some cases, they all died. And that created a big problem for the manor lords.

They absolutely depended on the labor of the peasants to tend the crops and care for the livestock. But now, there weren't enough peasants to maintain many of those manors. Lords became desperate to retain the peasants who survived, and they had to look for new peasants to fill the vacancies left by the plague. That meant that power started to shift from the lords to the peasants who were now able to dictate their own terms to the lords. Since there was such a great demand for labor, a peasant could leave the manor and go work somewhere else for money. And even though the unfree peasants weren't supposed to do that, there wasn't much the manor lord could do to stop it.

For many lords, one solution to the problem was to release the unfree peasants from their labor obligations altogether. In other words, they could convert unfree peasants into free peasants. Instead of forced labor, the peasants would be paid for their work, and that tended to keep them on the farm. The lords also offered to hire runaway peasants from other manors who were looking to improve their situation. All of this meant that many peasants shifted from being unfree serfs tied to the land to laborers who were paid for their work. It also meant peasants could demand more and more money as the manors were forced to bid against each other for workers. So peasant wages shot up during this period. That was great for peasants, but it became a heavy burden for manor lords who had to spend a lot of money on labor just to keep the manor operating.

The lords also faced another problem. The price of the food and other crops produced on the manors started to go down. After the plague, so many people had died that there simply wasn't much demand for all of that food. Lords had a tough time selling their commodities, so the prices went down. At the same time they were having to pay more and more for labor, they were receiving less and less for their products. So they were being squeezed from both sides. Faced with this dilemma, they were lucky to break even.

This led many lords to look at other alternatives. For many, it was better to let the peasants assume the risk. So many lords started to sell or lease their lands to peasants who now had some extra spending money. This allowed those peasants to become independent farmers in their own right, and it hastened the demise of the old manor system. Now I'm painting with broad strokes here, but the bottom line is that the old era of serfs and unfree peasants gave way to a more modern era of small independent farmers. It didn't happen overnight, but the process was set in motion by the Black Death.

Many of those peasants took advantage of these opportunities in the late 1300s, but some were more successful than others. Through hard work and financial savvy, some peasants acquired sizeable estates. These were the peasants who became known as *yeomen*.

Yeomen were free peasants who worked their way up the social and economic ladder by purchasing and leasing lands from other peasants or from manor lords. They were part of a new rural middle class, and their holdings started to grow by leaps and bounds. In many respects, the growth of the yeoman class in the countryside mirrored the growth of the craftsmen and laborers in the towns which we've explored in prior episodes. What all those people had in common is that they were common laborers. They weren't nobles or gentry. They didn't live off of their wealth or the work of others. They worked for themselves, and they accumulated a bit of personal wealth along the way. They had a degree of freedom that the poorest peasants didn't have. They also came from the traditional English-speaking classes. And they took advantage of the opportunities afforded by the collapse of the old economic system that had held them back for three centuries.

Again, this growing class of small independent farmers were called *yeomen*. That word appeared for the first time in English documents around this same period. It is first recorded in a document from the year 1345 about three years before the Black Death, but it was originally used to refer a servant in a noble household. By the end of the century, it had come to refer to these rural peasants who had accumulated a significant estate through hard work. And that helps to explain Modern English terms like "yeoman's service" and "yeoman's work." If you do "yeoman's work" to achieve some goal, it means that you put in hard and valuable labor. And it refers back to these hard-working peasants who accumulated a degree of wealth and power in the aftermath of the Black Death.

I should note that the ultimate origin of the word *yeoman* is uncertain. The most popular theory is that it is derived from an early rendering of the phrase 'young man.' And there is a certain logic to that theory because many of those early yeomen were in fact 'young men.' They were the

ones who were more likely to be healthy and energetic enough to do the work required to become a yeoman. But again, the ultimate origin of the word is obscure

I noted that many yeomen acquired their estates through hard work and financial savvy, but for others, it was a much easier process. Before the Black Death, there tended to be lots of surviving children, so when a parent died, the property tended to be divided among them in some manner. But now, many families lacked heirs to inherit the property and tend to the farm. This meant that more distant relatives could now claim the property when someone died. So an eager peasant who wanted to add more land to his holdings might try to claim the lands of deceased relatives like siblings, and aunts and uncles, and even in-laws. So rather than estates being divided over time, now they were sometimes aggregated and joined together due to a general lack of heirs. This was another way for a yeoman to accumulate a sizeable estate.

According to some estimates, the average peasant holding doubled in size after the plague – from around 12 acres beforehand to around 24 acres afterwards. [Source: “*Marriage and Family in the Middle Ages*,” *Frances and Joseph Gies*]. This was partly due to the combination or aggregation of land. In fact, words like **aggregate** and **congregate** appeared in English documents for the first time over the next few decades. They were both borrowed directly from Latin, and they both have a fundamental connection to peasants. They both share the same Latin root **grex**, which meant a flock or herd. The original root sense of **aggregate** or **congregate** in Latin was to bring together a flock of sheep or other animals. **Segregate** has the same root, and it originally referred to the process of separating or dividing a flock.

This Latin root was derived from an older Indo-European root that meant ‘to gather.’ It also passed into Greek where it produced the word **agora**, meaning a group or collection. **Agoraphobia** has that same root, and you may know that it refers to a phobia or fear of crowds. Old English also had that root. You might remember that under Grimm’s Law, the Indo-European ‘g’ sound became a ‘k’ sound in the Germanic languages. And that produced the Old English word **cram**, meaning to force together. So **cram**, **aggregate** and **congregate** are all cognate having evolved from the same Indo-European root word. And in the same way that Roman peasants **aggregated** or **congregated** their sheep, English peasants in the later half of the 1300s **aggregated** or **congregated** land holdings.

In fact, this situation contributed to the creation of another Modern English word – the word **pedigree**. As I noted earlier, claims involving rights to lands clogged the English courts in the 1300s. Many heirs claimed property based on inherited rights from a distant relative. This was true for nobles and well as peasants. Records were not always maintained very well in manor courts, so some scholars offered their services as genealogists to help trace a person’s ancestry which might help to prove a right of inheritance.

As they identified relatives, they would usually put together diagrams which were basically family trees. If an ancestor had three children, they would write down the ancestor’s name and draw a vertical line beneath the name. They would then split the line into three separate lines to connect to the names of the three children below. These lines that connected a parent to children resembled the tracks left by birds when they walked in mud or snow. So they became known as

‘crane’s feet,’ or in the French language used by the courts, ‘pied de grue’ – literally ‘foot of a crane.’ This French term is found in documents composed in England in the mid-1300s. But by the early 1400s, it had been Anglicized from ‘pied de grue’ to *pedigree*. Again, the word originally referred to these markings that showed lines of descent on a family tree or diagram. Over time, it came to refer to the entire diagram, and later it became a general term for a person’s ancestry or lineage.

So if a peasant could establish his pedigree, he might be able to enforce his claims to a disputed piece of property, thereby increasing his estate and wealth. But as I noted earlier, any legal proceeding to enforce those claims was bound to be conducted in French, which was a language that most peasants couldn’t speak.

Upwardly mobile peasants didn’t just face obstacles in the courts. They also faced obstacles in Parliament. French was also the official language of Parliament, but the peasants’ problem with Parliament wasn’t so much the language that was used as much as the people who sat in Parliament and made the laws. In prior episodes, we’ve seen that Parliament now regularly included commoners as well as nobles. And since the 1330s, the commoners had been meeting separately from the nobles. That was the beginning of the separate House of Commons. But the Commons didn’t really represent the peasant class. They came from the gentry and the knightly class. And together with the nobles, they were the ones having to pay the peasants those steep wages for work that used to be done for little or no payment at all.

So in the final year of the Black Death – 1351 – Parliament adopted a new law called the Statute of Laborers. It said that people could only demand wages at the rates that existed four years earlier prior to the Black Death. The law didn’t just attempt to ‘freeze’ the wage rates, it actually sought to roll them back to the period before the plague.

It was clearly designed to protect the upper classes, but it didn’t work. At the end of the day, if you were a landholder and desperately needed a peasant’s labor, it was easier to just pay him what he wanted. You could always refuse to hire him and turn him over to the authorities, but that didn’t help you plow the fields or harvest the crops. So peasant wages remained high even with this new law in place. The law is important though because it shows that the gentry were trying to use their political power to maintain the status quo. The Statute of Laborers was a response to the economic threat posed by rising working class as they started to acquire wealth and power in this new era. This conflict ultimately led to a major revolt by the peasants in the 1380s, but we’ll deal with that in a future episode.

I should also mention that this controversial law didn’t just apply to rural peasants. It also applied to the wages demanded by carpenters, masons, tailors, blacksmiths, cobblers, and most other professions as well. It also tried to regulate the prices charged by butchers, brewers, bakers, and sellers of other foodstuffs. So it impacted workers in the towns and cities as well. And this illustrates the fact that the power of these lower classes continued to grow in all parts of the country.

Since unfree peasants were now in a position where they could leave the manor and sell their labor on the open market, many of them moved to towns and cities to find work there. And that meant that towns and cities continued to grow, even though the overall population had decreased during the Black Death. So when we consider the rise of the working classes, we have to keep in mind that it was happening in the countryside and in the towns and cities. Again, these were people who spoke English and had little interest in the use or promotion of French. And they may have even seen French as a barrier, especially in the schools and courts where French was spoken. As I noted last time, English replaced French in the schools during this period, and that was about to happen in the courts and Parliament as well.

The first sign of this change occurred in London in the year 1356 – about five years after the Black Death had subsided. In that year, London officials ordered that all legal proceedings in the local sheriff's court be conducted in English instead of French. Though this change was limited to London and Middlesex, it was a crack in the dam, and it was a sign of things to come. It also reflected the increasing power of the laborers and craftsmen in London. The language of the common people was starting to be accepted in official circles, and French was being pushed to the margins.

That change in London occurred in the same year that the next major battle of the Hundred Year's War took place. The war had basically stopped during the Black Death, and in the five years since then, it had been limited to a few skirmishes. But in 1356, the English embarked on two major campaigns in France. One was led by the English king, Edward III. He campaigned in northern France for a few weeks before returning home to deal with Scottish raids in the north of England.

Meanwhile, his son, Prince Edward, led a campaign out of Bordeaux in the south of France. You might remember from a prior episode that Prince Edward was known as the Black Prince because of his black armor. And in the late summer of 1356, the Black Prince headed out of Bordeaux into the central part of France on a raiding expedition – looting and plundering along the way. But the French king got word of the expedition, and he decided to confront the English forces.

The prior French king Philip had died six years before, and he had been succeeded by his son named John – known to history as John the Good. And it was John who decided to surprise the Black Prince. As the English forces made their way back to Gascony, John cut them off near the town of Poitiers.

The Black Prince wasn't prepared for a full-scale battle against a large French army, so he tried to negotiate his way out of the predicament, but John refused the offer and launched his attack. Despite having more troops, the French still hadn't figured out how to deal with the English longbows, and the Battle of Poitiers ended up being a repeat of the Battle of Crecy a decade earlier. The English forces defeated the French cavalry and won their second major victory of the war. More importantly for the English, they actually captured King John in the fighting. The French king and his son were taken prisoner and brought back to England the next spring. The Battle of Poitiers secured the reputation of the Black Prince as one of the great warriors of the

Middle Ages. His forces not only defeated a much larger French army, but he also captured the opposing king and took him prisoner.

Now to be fair, this was the era of chivalry, so King John's detention was pretty cushy. He was placed under house arrest in an English palace. The English king Edward III often visited John where they enjoyed large feasts and entertainment. Edward even brought John to Windsor so they could go hunting together. So it wasn't like John was thrown in Tower of London, but he was still a captive in the possession of his arch-rival.

By the way, John wasn't the only foreign king to be held captive in England. The Scots king David II had been taken prisoner during those Scottish raids in northern England the same year. The English now had possession of the allied kings of Scotland and France – the two bitter rivals of the English. This led to a spike in English nationalism and further challenged the notion of French superiority. It also challenged the idea that the language of France was somehow superior to the language of England. Nevertheless, Parliament and most of the courts continued to conduct their business in French – for now.

In the same year that the French king arrived in England as a prisoner, we also get another piece of evidence to show that the children of commoners had opportunities to move up in society and improve their standing. Under the right circumstances, they could even secure employment in a royal household. In that same year – 1357 – the young son of a London wine merchant was able to find employment in the household of the king's son and daughter-in-law. The second son of Edward III was named Lionel, and he was married to woman named Elizabeth de Burgh. They maintained their own household, and in the spring of 1357, records show that Elizabeth ordered a special suit of clothes for one of their young pages. The surviving ledgers show the purchase, as well as the name of the page who received the clothing. His name was Geoffrey Chaucer. And this is the first reference we have to the man who would become the most well-known poet of Middle English. He was a teenager at the time, and it isn't clear how the son of a wine merchant found his way into that position. Presumably, his father had some personal business connections. But whatever the circumstances, Chaucer took advantage of the new opportunities available to the rising middle class of England.

Two years later, Lionel joined his father and his brothers for another military campaign in France, and Chaucer is recorded as a soldier in Lionel's retinue during that campaign. Edward III had launched what he thought would be the final campaign to secure the French crown for himself. Up to this point, everything had gone his way, so it was probably a reasonable expectation at the time.

The English forces crossed the Channel and gathered at the port of Calais which had been captured by the English over a decade earlier. Edward had amassed one of the largest English armies ever assembled for a foreign invasion. Every available young man between the ages of 20 and 23 had been drafted. Once in northern France, the English army was divided into three divisions. One of the divisions was led by Edward's son – the Black Prince. He was accompanied by his younger brother Lionel, who included among his soldiers one Geoffrey Chaucer. The Black Prince was also accompanied by his two other younger brothers, John of

Gaunt and Edmund of Langley. And I mention them here because John of Gaunt later became the Duke of Lancaster and Edmund became the Duke of York. And it is these two young brothers that ultimately gave us the two distinct houses of Lancaster and York whose descendants would battle for the English crown during the Wars of the Roses. But that's a story for later. For now, those two patriarchs were fighting alongside their older brothers in France.

Edward III intended this invasion to be the final campaign of the war, but it was hampered by several problems. First, the campaign began in November which was very late in the year for a military campaign in northern Europe. Bad weather was a constant problem. In fact, the weather was unusually bad. It rained all the time, and there was constant flooding which hampered troop movements. On top of that, the French had anticipated the invasion, so they had stocked up for a long siege. Whenever an English army approached, they would quickly withdraw behind the city walls and force the English to lay siege in the cold and wet weather. On top of that, the French countryside had been devastated by the Black Plague and the English raids. Many farms lay empty with no crops or livestock. During a long siege, the English army would send out troops to the surrounding countryside to gather provisions, but there were very few provisions to be found or taken. So the English forces simply couldn't manage a long siege anywhere.

At some point during this period – it isn't entirely clear when or where – several English soldiers were captured and taken prisoner by the French. The circumstances aren't really known, but the reason I'm mentioning that fact is because one of the prisoners taken was Geoffrey Chaucer. This is the second time we find his name in the surviving records because ledgers from Edward's court show that the king paid Chaucer's ransom a few weeks later, and he was released back into English custody. The surviving ledger indicates that the ransom paid was 16 pounds.

As I noted, it isn't clear how or why Chaucer was taken captive. It is possible that he was captured while looking for food and supplies in the countryside. It was also common during this period for English scouts to try to lure the French soldiers out from behind their walls. Sometimes they got too close and were captured. So that's another possibility, but no one knows for sure. All that is known is that Chaucer was later released upon that payment of 16 pounds. The records also list him as a 'valettus,' which is a Latin term that basically meant a 'yeoman' in English. I mentioned earlier that the word *yeomen* originally meant a servant in the royal household and later came to refer to a small farmer who owned his own farmland. And the typical ransom payment for a royal servant was 16 pounds – the amount paid for Chaucer's release.

We also know that Chaucer had been a page in the household of the king's son Lionel, so all of that suggests that Chaucer was considered a royal servant at this time.

A few years later, when Chaucer wrote the *Canterbury Tales*, he wrote about the hardships of war, and we can't help but assume that his experiences in captivity shaped his view. He later wrote, "There is ful many a man that crieth 'Werre! Werre!' that wot ful litel what werre amounteth." In Modern English, it reads, "There are many men that eagerly cry out for 'War! War!', but know very little of what war amounts to."

The hardships of war weren't just limited to Chaucer. As the months passed and the French campaign continued, King Edward couldn't manage to secure a victory. The French remained barricaded behind their walls, while Edward's army suffered through rain and snow and dwindling provisions.

Edward eventually brought his three divisions together, and in early spring, he laid siege to Paris. But once again, the citizens retreated behind the city walls, and Edward couldn't manage to take the city. After a couple of weeks, Edward withdrew and headed westward toward Brittany where he had strong allies and where he could re-fortify his army. But shortly after leaving Paris, his forces were struck by a freak thunderstorm. The storm battered the troops with hail and lightning. It was reported that many men died during the storm – some while sitting in their saddles on top of their horses. This storm occurred on the day after Easter, Monday, April 14th of the year 1360. English chroniclers started to refer to this event as “Black Monday.” And this is widely believed to be the origin of the phrase “Black Monday” in English.

A chronicle composed in English in the early 1400s known as the Chronicle of London included the following entry for the year 1360. In Modern English, it reads:

“In this same year, the 14th day of April and morning after Easter Day, King Edward with his host lay before the City of Paris; which was a foul dark day of mist and of hail, and so bitter cold, that sitting on horseback men died. Wherefore, unto this day, it is called Black Monday, and will be so-called for a long time hereafter.”

Now the same passage in the original Middle English:

“In this same yere, the xiiij day off Aprill and the morwe after Ester Day, Kyng Edward with his Oost lay byfore the Citee off Parys; the which was a ffoule Derke day off myste, and off haylle, and so bytter colde, that syttyng on horse bak men dyed. Wherefore, vnto this day yt ys called blak Monday, and wolle be longe tyme here affter.”

So the day after Easter became known as “Black Monday.” The implication was that it was a day of bad luck. In the 1700s, school children started to associate the term with the day after the Easter holiday when children returned to school. So it came to refer to the first school day or work day after a vacation. It thereby acquired an additional negative sense as the day when the fun was over and you had to go back to work. But ultimately, the term appears to have its origin in this devastating storm that battered Edward's army in the French countryside in the year 1360.

Edward took this storm as a sign of God's wrath, that the war needed to be brought to an end, so he began peace talks with the French diplomats. Negotiations took place in the small town of Breigny west of Paris. A settlement was soon reached. It was agreed that the French king John would be released from house arrest in England so he could return to France. In exchange, France agreed to pay a ransom of 3,000,000 gold crowns which was the equivalent of 500,000 English pounds. It was a ridiculous sum of money at the time, and it was never fully paid. The settlement also stipulated that the English king would retain control of Calais and the entire region of Aquitaine – not merely as a vassal of the French king – but as outright sovereign.

France was to be cut apart, with those regions now becoming independent regions under the control of the English king. In exchange for those concessions, Edward agreed to give up his claim to the French throne.

This treaty became known as the Treaty of Bretigny. It took a few months to work out all the details and to prepare the final version of the treaty. And once again, Geoffrey Chaucer was called into service. The surviving expense account of Edward's son Lionel shows that Chaucer was now working as a diplomat. Chaucer was paid nine shillings to travel to Calais and then to England carrying papers with specific questions that had come up during the negotiations. He then returned to France to deliver the answers. In a few short years, Chaucer had risen from the son of a London wine merchant, to a page in the household of the king's son, to royal servant, and now to an English diplomat. In this respect, he epitomized the rise of the English laboring class during this period.

With the terms of the treaty finalized, the French king John was released from English custody, and he returned to France. When John arrived back in France, he set about trying to raise that massive payment of 3,000,000 gold crowns. He soon decided to strike a new gold coin which had the same value as the existing livre, but it had a brand new design which featured John on horseback. Its Latin inscription read, "Johannes Dei gracia Francorum Rex" – literally "John, by the Grace of God, King of the Franks." But rather than using that long formal name, people in France just called it 'frank with a horse' – 'franc à cheval.' And from there, it was shortened to just *franc*. For the next four centuries, the term *franc* and *livre* were both used in France. They were basically interchangeable, sort of like *dollar* and *buck* in the US, or *pound* and *quid* in the UK. In the late 1700s, the *franc* became the official name of the French currency, and it remained so until the introduction of the Euro in the early 2000s. So the old French *franc* has its ultimate origin with King John's attempt to raise the money needed to pay off the English for his release from house arrest in the mid-1300s.

As I noted earlier, the full amount was never paid. And even though Edward agreed to renounce his claims to the French throne, there was never any formal renunciation ceremony. So even though the Treaty of Bretigny looked like it might bring an end to the ongoing war with France, it didn't. The war resumed less than a decade later. Nevertheless, this treaty marked the height of English dominance in the war.

At this point, England looked like it was on the road to recovery after the Black Death. It had been a decade since the earlier plague passed, and a growing middle class was prospering throughout the country, but the next year brought a rude awakening. The plague returned for a second time, and once again, many people died. The death toll was not as great as the earlier outbreak, but for some reason, it was particularly bad for children. It appears that they lacked any immunity or tolerance for the disease since they were born after the Black Death. So many children died in this second outbreak that it became known as the 'Children's Plague' or the 'Pestilence of the Children.' All totaled, it appears that this second outbreak killed about 15% of the remaining population of England. [Source: *Time Travelers Guide to Medieval England*, Ian Mortimer.] This second outbreak also confirmed the fears of many people – that the plague was likely to be a recurring threat – that even when it subsided, it was likely to return to some point.

The second plague also had an indirect impact on our story because it permitted King Edward's third son to emerge as one of the most powerful figures in England. That third son was John of Gaunt, and as I noted in an earlier episode, he was one of Geoffrey Chaucer's most important patrons. He was also a strong advocate of the English language, and his power base was really secured during this second outbreak of the plague in 1361.

John of Gaunt had married a daughter of the Duke of Lancaster named Henry of Grosmont. Now this particular noble, the Duke of Lancaster, was the most powerful and important noble in England outside of King Edward and the Black Prince. The Duke's power base was in the north of England, but he did not have any sons. Her heirs were his two daughters. One of those daughters was named Blanche, and John of Gaunt had married her a couple of years earlier. But when this second plague arrived in England, it killed the Duke of Lancaster and his other daughter. So that left Blanche as the sole heir. So she and John inherited the late Duke's estate and all the wealth and power associated with that title. The next year, John's father King Edward formally designated John as the new Duke of Lancaster. And again, that was the beginning of the House of Lancaster which later vied for the English crown during the Wars of the Roses in the next century.

John received the title of Duke of Lancaster as part of a jubilee celebrating his father's 50th birthday. In 1362, Edward III turned 50, which was considered an advanced age at the time, especially given the Black Death and the second plague the prior year. By this point, Edward's reign was widely seen as a great success – both in England and abroad. He had taken on the kingdom of France, the most powerful kingdom in western Europe. And he had won several major victories in France. Even though he hadn't won the war, he had effectively carved up France and secured part of that kingdom for himself. Edward was wealthy and admired far and wide. He had a good relationship with Parliament. And he had several competent sons, so there was no succession crisis – at least not at this point. So Edward decided to commemorate his birthday with large public celebrations, and the celebrations culminated on November 13 with a grand meeting of Parliament. The Parliament was dominated by a large group of commoners, including knights, town leaders, rural landholders, and other prominent citizens.

This was the Parliament where John of Gaunt was recognized as the Duke of Lancaster. Edward's son Lionel was given the title of Duke of Clarence. Numerous petitions were considered, and citizen complaints were addressed. But there was something very unusual about that Parliament held in November of 1362. As was customary, the Parliament was opened with an address from the king's chancellor, but for the first time, the speech was given in English – not French. That was a remarkable change because it showed that the ascent of English had reached the highest levels of the government. There is no record of the actual comments delivered on that day, but from this point on, English was used in Parliament, thereby giving it an official status within the English government.

And the English language wasn't just making inroads in Parliament. It was also making inroads in the courts. One of the items on Parliament's agenda that year was to make English the official language of the courts. As I noted earlier in this episode, the courts were clogged with legal disputes, especially disputes over the rights to land and inheritances. This was being accelerated

by the death toll stemming from the Black Death and the recurrence of the plague in the prior year. Most of those litigants only spoke English, but the legal proceedings were conducted in French. So this required the average person to have a lawyer who spoke French. And it's very likely that people found it difficult to find a lawyer to handle their case. In the last episode, we saw that so many teachers died during the Black Death that younger less-educated teachers had to be brought in to fill the void. And since many of them couldn't speak French, the schools largely abandoned French in favor of English. Well, the courts apparently faced a similar problem. It is very possible that many experienced lawyers died in the two plagues, and the younger lawyers who replaced them didn't speak French – or didn't speak it very well. So for similar reasons, it made sense to switch from French to English in the courtrooms.

The law that formally adopted English as the language of the courts was called the Pleading in English Act of 1362, but it is more commonly known as the Statute of Pleading. It specifically said that all pleadings and oral arguments in court should be made in English. And it is important to remember that Parliament itself was a court – essentially the Supreme Court of the day. So this law also required that Parliament use English as well. Here is an abridged version of the statute in Modern English:

“Because it is often shown to the king . . . that great mischief has occurred throughout the realm because the laws . . . of this realm are not commonly known and understood since they are pleaded and judged in the French language, which is mostly unknown in this realm; so that the people who plead in the king's court, and in the courts of others, have no knowledge nor understanding of what is said for them or against them by their lawyers and other pleaders; it is therefore reasonable that the laws and customs should be learned and known and better understood in the language which is used in this realm, so that the people of this realm may better govern themselves without offending the law, and may better keep and defend their inheritances and possessions . . .”

The statute continues:

“. . .the king, desiring the good governance and tranquillity of his people, and to discourage the harms and mischiefs described above, has ordained and established . . . that all pleas which shall be pleaded in his courts, before any of his justices, or in his other places, or before any of his other ministers, or in the courts and places of any other lords within the realm, shall be pleaded, defended, answered, debated, and judged in the English language, and that they be entered and enrolled in Latin.”

Now notice that last part. Despite the fact that English was to be spoken in the courts, when it came time to write down the final verdict or judgment on the docket, it was to be written down and preserved in Latin. And the surviving court rolls are actually a mixture of English, Latin and French for the next century or so. In fact, this statute – which required the use of English – was itself composed in French. So here we have a bunch of English-speaking Parliamentarians who sometimes spoke French in Parliament, enacting a law in French, which required English to be spoken in the courts, but also required that the proceedings be written down and preserved in Latin. And that pretty much sums up the linguistic situation in England in the mid-1300s. All

three languages jockeyed for position. And despite the terms of this law, French continued to be used beside English in the courts for another century or so.

What really matters here isn't the practical effect of the law, it's the symbolic effect. For the first time, the government declared that English was to be used for official purposes, thereby giving the language a legitimacy that it hadn't had for three centuries. It is often said by scholars that this law made English the 'official' language of the country again for the first time since the Norman Conquest. The law also reflected the growing power of the English middle class – the merchants, the craftsmen, the yeomen, and the many other people who only spoke English. They not only preferred the use of English, they were also suspicious of French. Notice that the statute gave two reasons why it was necessary for people to speak English in the courts. First, because so few people understood French, and second, because 'great mischief' occurred when the law was written and enforced in French. This reflects the views of the rising middle class – not the views of the established nobles who either spoke French or had access to lawyers and representatives who spoke French. It was the lower classes who viewed the French-speaking courts with suspicion and scepticism.

The other giveaway is the part of the statute that says that the use of English in the courts would help people to 'keep and defend their inheritances and possessions.' This provision reminds us that this was an era when the courts were clogged with people trying to make their claims to the property of deceased relatives. And they wanted to make sure that their claims were heard in the language they understood.

So this law – the Statute of Pleading – is an important landmark in the history of English. It marks the official recognition of English as the primary language of England. English was now the spoken language in the courts and in Parliament, and it was also being used in the schoolrooms. So English was now being used in most of the environments where French had once been used as the primary language.

Of course, French remained an important language. It was still the dominant cultural and literary language of western Europe. By this point, about 10,000 French words had been borrowed into English. And since it remained a prestige language, French words continued to flow into English over the next few centuries. But the current point in our story marks an important transition in the way English borrowed from French.

Up to this point, English speakers still borrowed words from the native Anglo-Norman dialect that had developed within England after the Norman Conquest. That was the dialect spoken by the original Normans which was distinct from the French dialect of Paris. And that Norman dialect had evolved within England so that it became distinct from the dialect spoken back in Normandy.

For the first 150 years or so after the Conquest, that Anglo-Norman dialect was the French dialect spoken in England, and almost all French loanwords came from that dialect. Then around the year 1200, after bad King John lost most of the English possessions in France, the Anglo-Norman dialect started to become more stigmatized, and the French of Paris became more

valued. And for the next 150 years or so, English increasingly borrowed words from standard French even though the Anglo-Norman dialect was still being spoken. I discussed that transitional phase back in Episode 99.

Well, now in the mid-1300s, we have another transition. With the ascent of English, and the prestige of the French spoken in Paris, there was no longer any room for the Anglo-Norman dialect. It was ridiculed in Paris as bad French. And most people in England agreed with that sentiment. It came to be mocked within England as well. It was soon abandoned altogether in favor of English, which was now accepted as the primary language of England. And if people wanted to speak French, they opted to learn the French spoken in Paris, which was the standard literary dialect of French. For most practical purposes, the Anglo-Norman dialect died out over the next generation or so.

This fact was reflected in the writings of that commoner's son who became a royal servant and diplomat, and who later became the famous poet of Middle English. When Geoffrey Chaucer composed his *Canterbury Tales* a few years later, one of his pilgrims was a high-born prioress. Since she was upper class, she spoke French, but Chaucer was quick to point out that she spoke the lowly French of England, not the proper French of Paris. He wrote:

And Frenssh she spak ful faire and fetisly,
After the scole of Stratford atte Bowe,
For Frenssh of Parys was to hire unknowe.

In Modern English:

And French she spoke very well and gracefully
After the school at Stratford at Bow
For the French of Paris was to her unknown

It was probably the decline of the Anglo-Norman dialect, and the ascent of English, that led Chaucer to compose his poetry in English. Up until now, most poets preferred to use French – the language of the court and the language that was read throughout Europe. But Chaucer elected to use English, a language that was only spoken in the British Isles. And he wasn't the only writer to make that choice. Most of the greatest works of Middle English literature were composed over the next generation, and that was no coincidence. The people of England were proud of their language again, and they were eager to put it on full display. Writers throughout England started to put it through its paces and show what it was capable of producing. And it was capable of producing some of the most important literature ever composed in the language.

As we move forward with the story of English, we'll explore those developments, and we'll also explore some of those wonderful works of literature.

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

EPISODE 122: THE NAME OF THE GAME

Welcome to the History of English Podcast – a podcast about the history of the English language. This is Episode 122: The Name of the Game. In this episode, we’re going to explore the events leading to the first major poem composed by Geoffrey Chaucer. This story will take us through the 1360s – a decade in which the power of the peasants was growing stronger and the Hundred Years War continued to simmer. It was also an era in which archery was considered to be the only pastime in the national interest, so most other games and sports were outlawed. Despite those restrictions, most people continued to entertain themselves with games that were popular at the time, and many of those games evolved into the games and sports we play today. Along the way, these activities contributed lots of words and phrases to the English language. So this time, we’ll explore those developments, and we’ll see how they 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 and get bonus episodes and transcripts at Patreon.com/historyofenglish.

Now this time, I want to pick up the story where we left off last time – with the official recognition of English as the language of the English Parliament and the courts. As you may recall, the English Parliament adopted a law in the year 1362 which gave English an official status for the first time since the Norman Conquest. The law was called the Statute of Pleading, and it reflected the rise of the peasants and yeomen – the traditional English-speaking classes in England.

But the rise of these lower classes did meet with resistance. Parliament was still controlled by the nobility and the gentry, and last time we saw that Parliament tried to limit the wages that peasants could demand in the wake of the plague. Well now, the king also took aim at the working classes – or maybe I should say that he made the working classes take aim.

The king was Edward III, and in the year 1363 – the year after the Statute of Pleading – he issued a proclamation ordering that all able-bodied men take up the sport of archery. And to reinforce that mandate, he took the additional step of prohibiting all other sports in England. Now this order had one main purpose – to make sure that the English army had enough archers to fill its ranks and to ensure that England maintained its military advantage over France. As I’ve noted before, the main advantage which the English had in battle was the longbow which took many years to master. Ideally, the archers were trained from youth to handle the bow. And in the early years of the Hundred Years War, the French had no effective answer for the weapon.

So Edward III wanted the young men of his kingdom to spend their spare time with the bow and arrow rather than wasting their time with the sports usually played by commoners on the village green. Archery was considered a more noble and more practical pursuit. So everyone was required to pick up the bow and arrow, and they were told to stop playing ball games and any other games involving the throwing of objects.

Now this proclamation is fascinating for a few reasons. It gives an insight into the types of games that people played in the 1300s. It also suggests that certain games and sports were associated with specific classes of society. As far as the nobles were concerned, games that prepared you for war were good for society and were encouraged. But ball games played by commoners and peasants served no social purpose and were therefore a waste of time. So Edward's plan was to sanction and mandate the former, and to outlaw the latter.

With respect to the former, the sports of the nobles included fencing and archery. It also included horse-riding and jousting, especially at the large tournaments held in England and France. And it including hunting and falconry.

Not only was the hunt considered a type of game, it was sometimes called 'the game of hunting' or simply 'the game.' *Game* is an Old English word which not only meant a contest or competition, it also meant amusement or pleasure in general. And the nobles found pleasure in the challenge of the hunt or the chase. And around the current point in our overall story in the mid-1300s, the word *game* started to be extended to the hunt itself. And around the same time, it came to refer to the animals pursued in the hunt or chase. And that's the other sense of the word *game* today. It even produced a separate adjective – the word *gamey* referring to something having the flavor or smell of wild game.

So today, the word *game* had an extended sense well beyond its original meaning as a contest or sporting event. But even when restricted to a type of competition, it can encompass many different types of activities. And many of the games we play today have their roots in the Middle Ages.

Around the year 1180, a cleric named William Fitzstephen wrote a detailed description of the city of London. I mentioned this account in an earlier episode a long time ago. It's one of the few detailed accounts of life in London in the early Norman period. In his account, William described the games and sports that residents of London played at the time. He described cock-fighting, fencing, sword-fighting, leaping, wrestling, archery, jousting and javelin throwing. He said the people would go ice skating when the lakes froze over. And he also mentioned a game of ball played by young boys in the fields around town.

William's account was written in Latin, but the ball game he described was probably the sport known as *camp-ball*. And camp-ball was an early version of modern-day football or soccer. Now I've discussed the word *camp* in earlier episodes. You might remember that *camp* is derived from the Latin word *campus* meaning an open field. The open field was the place where troops gathered during military campaigns. That gave us the sense of the word *camp* as a place where people make a temporary home outside in the open. It also gave us the word *campaign*.

A *camp* – or open field – was also a place where people gathered to play sports and other games. And during the later Middle Ages, the word *camp* was extended to this ball game played in the open fields of England. And that sport became known as *camp* or *camp-ball*.

Now the term *camp-ball* isn't actually found in English documents until the 1600s, but when it was used in those documents, it was used in reference to a sport that was played in earlier generations. Those writers in the 1600s were referencing an older game played in parts of county in earlier centuries which they said was called *camp-ball*. So it appears that this was an old name for the sport, but no one knows for sure just how old it was.

So we don't know for sure if the people of the 1300s called this sport *camp-ball*, but it does appear that it was one of the sports which drew the ire of Edward III, and it was one of the sports outlawed by his proclamation in 1363. The sport was apparently targeted because the nobles perceived it as an uncivilized and dangerous game played by commoners. They also targeted the game because it was so popular. There were too many people playing ball, and not enough people practicing archery.

This early game of football probably didn't have fixed rules. The game likely varied a little bit from place to place, but generally speaking, it was a game played with a ball in an open field. There were two teams which sometimes included the whole population of a village or small town. Each team tried to advance the ball up the field against the other team. There were usually two goals on each side of the field. The sport may have resembled a blend of rugby and football or soccer. It appears that players could either kick the ball with their feet or pick it up and throw it or run with it. Gloucester Cathedral is a cathedral located in the west of England, and there is an engraving on the building from the early 1300s. It shows two men playing this early version of football with one player lunging at the ball and the other player making a kicking motion in the direction of the ball. However, the ball itself is placed up high near the players hands which suggests that the players could use their hands as well as their feet.

The sport probably had very loose rules, and when it was played, it likely resembled a melee. Lots of players were hurt, and some were even killed during the game. And it encouraged feuds between the two sides that often led to further violence after the game – often in the streets. That probably contributed to the desire to ban the sport, but Edward's prohibition didn't meet with much success. People kept playing this game. And future kings also tried to pass similar prohibitions – again with little or no effect. By the way, the first recorded reference to this game as *football* occurred in the year 1409 about a half century later in our story, though it is certainly possible that it was being used in common speech in the 1300s.

Football may have been derived from an earlier French term with the same meaning. It is probably a direct translation using the native English words *foot* and *ball*. By the current point in our story in the 1300s, the word *ball* had already been extended from the physical object itself to a game played with a ball. Thus, *football* is the game of ball played with the feet.

Now, going back to Edward III's proclamation which banned ball games, it was composed in Latin, and the banned games are described as "Pilam manuaem, pedinam, et bacculoream, et ad cambucam, etc." That passage literally translates as 'balls propelled by hand, by foot, by club, or by hook-shaped stick.' So that tells us that people were playing a variety of ball games, and they were using a variety of implements to propel the ball.

The first part restricts the playing of games where balls are thrown or propelled by hand. This would have included the sport that became known as *tennis*. The French introduced the game to England around the current point in our story in the 1300s. At this point, it was more like handball. It was played indoors, and rackets were not used yet, so players batted the ball around with their hands. In fact, the French called the sport ‘jeu de paume’ which meant ‘game of the palm.’ Now it was apparently common for players to yell out the French word *Tenez!* before they served. *Tenez!* basically meant ‘Hold’ or ‘Hold this,’ but it really meant ‘Here, take this!’ And it appears that English speakers adopted that call or expression as the name of the game, thereby creating the name *tennis* which first appeared in writing around the year 1400.

Now that’s the traditional theory for the origin of the name, but there is a contrary theory that suggests that the game originated in the Arab world, and the word *tennis* is actually an Arabic word – *tanaz* – meaning to leap or bound. This was a theory encouraged by the great etymologist Charles Earle Funk who wrote several books about English etymology in the mid-1900s.

At any rate, at some point during this period, the game started to be played with a *racquet*, and in fact the word *racquet* appeared for the first time in the writings of Geoffrey Chaucer. The word was borrowed from French, so it also came into English around this time. But interestingly, when Chaucer used the word *racquet*, he used it to refer to the sport itself. So initially, *racquet* was just a synonym of *tennis* – but by the 1500s, when players were routinely using stringed bats or paddles to hit the ball, the word *racquet* was extended from the game to the implement used in the game, and that gave us the modern meaning of the word as ‘tennis racquet.’

Tennis may not have used racquets in the mid-1300s, but other sports did use sticks and clubs and bats and other similar implements. Remember that Edward’s proclamation banned all games in which a ball was hit with either a club or a hook-shaped stick. These passages were probably intended to include a common sport which evolved out of a shepherd’s pastime.

For centuries, shepherds throughout Europe used the curved ends of their staffs to hit rocks and stones. Sometimes they would try to hit a distant target like a tree or a post, and sometimes they would try to knock the stone into a rabbit hole. This activity eventually evolved into the sport we know today as *golf*. Over time, this pastime spread from the countryside into the towns and villages. People used wooden clubs to hit wooden balls in the streets, and courtyards and village greens. By the current point in our story in the 1300s, this pastime was popular in Flanders and the Netherlands where it was called *kolven* or *kolf*. That name comes from a Dutch word meaning ‘club or stick.’ And it is apparently the ultimate source of the English word *golf*.

The rules of modern golf started to be formulated at St. Andrews in Scotland in the early 1400s, but it appears that an early version of the game was being played in England in the mid-1300s. This was probably a more informal version of the game – similar to the game that was being played across the Channel in Flanders and the Netherlands. One piece of evidence that the game was being played in England in this earlier period is Edward III’s ban which specifically included sports where people hit balls with clubs and hook-shaped sticks. That provision was included for a reason.

But another piece of evidence can be found at that cathedral in Gloucester that I mentioned earlier. Not only does that cathedral have an engraving showing two men playing an early version of football, it also has a large stained glass window showing a person swinging what appears to be an early form of a golf club. The golfer is shown in one panel of a massive stained glass window on the east side of the cathedral. The entire window is as big as a modern tennis court, and it was one of the largest windows in the world at the time it was added to the cathedral around the year 1350. It was actually commissioned by a knight to commemorate English soldiers who had died at the battle of Crecy in northern France. So this window pre-dates Edward's sports ban by about a decade, and it has the panel showing a man swinging what appears to be an early golf club. It is considered to be the oldest depiction of golf in the British Isles.

As I noted, the rules of modern golf started to be formulated at St. Andrews on the eastern coast of Scotland in the early part of the following century. The main innovation there was for players to play the game on a specific course where the balls had to be hit into a series of distant holes – marked by poles sticking out of the ground. By the mid-1400s, the game was well-established, and the modern word *golf* had entered the English language. Again, the word was apparently borrowed from that Dutch game called *kolven* or *kolf*.

Now today, if you play golf, you might have a specific handicap which is based the number of strokes over par that you usually average when playing a course. And that word *handicap* also has its origins in the Middle Ages. And in fact, it has its origins in another medieval game.

The word *handicap* began as part of a game that was played in the 1300s called 'new fair.' A fair was place where items were bought and sold, and this game of 'new fair' was a type of trading game. It could be played as a gambling game or it could also be used as a way to settle a dispute if two people were negotiating the purchase or sale of an item.

The rules varied, but in a common version, you and I might have a couple of items that we want to exchange. Let's say we each have a cloak that we want to trade, but I think my cloak is worth a lot more than your's. We can't agree on the difference in value or even if there is a difference in value, so we agree to play this game called 'new fair.' We bring in a friend who acts an umpire. We all three put some money in a hat or cap held by the umpire. So the umpire is playing too. The money in the cap is a random amount of money. It's basically the prize. Now you and I both place our hands in the cap, and the umpire estimates the value of each cloak. He is basically the appraiser, and he determines that my cloak is worth 3 shillings, and your's is worth 2. So if we're going to make a deal, you have to give me a shilling to make up for the difference in value. Each of us then pull our hands out of the cap. If we agree with the umpire's valuation, we pull our hand out opened. If we disagree, we pull our hand out closed. If both of our hands are open, it means we both agree with the umpire's appraisal, and we complete the trade. You add in the extra shilling, and the umpire keeps the money in the hat. He has basically done a good job. He's made a good appraisal and allowed us to complete the trade, so he keeps the prize money. Now if both of our hands are closed when we remove them from the cap, it means we both disagree with the umpire's appraisal. So we don't trade our cloaks, and you don't owe me the shilling, but again the umpire keeps the money in the hat. The reason why he keeps the money is because he

again has done his job, he came with a number that was too low for me and too high for you, but it was somewhere in the middle, so even though we don't accept the number, he keeps the prize money in the hat. But if you and I remove our hands from the cap, and one hand is open and the other is closed, it means that one of us liked the umpire's valuation and the other didn't. In that case, again there is no deal, so there's no trade. But the person whose hand was open and agreed to the valuation gets to keep the prize money in the cap. That money in the cap was the incentive for each of us to agree with the valuation. If I agreed with the umpire, it meant that I either made the deal with you or I got to keep the money in the cap. If you kept your hand closed because you disagreed with the umpire's valuation, you kept your cloak, but you lost the money you put in the cap. So there was an incentive to agree with the valuation if the number was close to what you wanted. Of course, the umpire was also risking his money in the cap as well. So there was an incentive for the umpire to be fair and reasonable in his valuation. Otherwise he would lose the money he placed in the cap. To put it another way, the only way the umpire would lose his money in the cap is if his valuation was either too high or too low so that only one of us agreed to it. As long as the value was somewhere in the middle, we would both either accept or reject the number, and he would keep the prize money. So that's the basic idea behind this negotiating game.

Again, this game was called 'new fair' around the current point in our story in the 1300s, but it soon became known as 'hand-in-cap.' And from there, it gave us the word *handicap* which appeared as a distinct word for the game in the 1600s. The idea behind *handicap* is that it was a way to determine the relative difference in value between two items. Specifically, it was a way to determine exactly how much less value one item had relative to another. So the word came to be used within horse racing and golf when methods were adopted to estimate the relative skill levels of horses or golfers. And the word *handicap* came to refer to that difference in skill level.

So, via sports, the meaning of the word was extended from a difference in monetary value to a difference in ability or skill level. And then in the 1800s, it was further extended to a person who has physical disability which may put them at a disadvantage relative to another person. So the modern non-sporting sense of the word *handicap* was derived from the sporting sense, and the sporting sense was derived from this popular game of the Middle Ages called 'new fair' or 'hand-in-cap.'

So modern golfers determine their golf handicap, but they also try to avoid hazards like bunkers and lakes. And the word *hazard* is another word that can be traced back to the games of the Middle Ages. I discussed the origin of the word *hazard* back in Episode 91. You might remember that *hazard* was a dice game which Europeans picked up during the Crusades from players in the Near East. There is some dispute about the ultimate origin of the word, but one popular theory is that it is based on an Arabic word for dice. The game eventually evolved into the modern dice game known as craps. It was a game of chance, and therefore there was always a risk of losing. And that risk or peril associated with the game gave us the modern sense of the word *hazard*.

Now dice games like hazard were popular throughout England. The winters tended to be long and cold and wet, so people looked for games that could be played indoors, and these types of games found an eager audience in England. Board games like chess were also popular for many of the same reasons. And one very popular game combined both activities. It was a board game that used dice. This game had its origins in the Near East at some point in the distant past. Along with chess, it found its way into western Europe during the Crusades. In this particular board game, each player had a series of game pieces, and a roll of the dice determined the movement of the pieces across the board. Since it was a board game, it was usually played at a table, and in France it was called ‘jeux de tables’ – literally ‘game of the tables.’ English adopted that name, and in England, it was simply known as *tables*. But by the 1600s, English-speakers had developed a native English term for one version of the game. That name is *backgammon*.

Backgammon is a compound word made up of two native English terms – *back* and *gammon*. And if *gammon* doesn’t sound familiar to you, well that’s because it’s actually the original version of the word *game*. In Old English, the word *game* was actually *gamen*. That ‘n’ sound at the end remained for much of the Middle English period. It wasn’t really lost until the Modern English period. So *backgammon* was literally the ‘back game,’ and that was because the players sometimes had to move their pieces back to the starting point.

But again, at the current point in our story in the 1300s, the game was still known as *tables*. And that name is widely believed to have been the origin of the phrase ‘turn the tables.’ If you ‘turn the tables’ on someone, you reverse your respective positions. It’s often used to refer to a situation where a disadvantage is turned into an advantage. Apparently, when playing board games, it was somewhat common for game players to literally turn the tables and exchange places during a game. This was also done for other board games like chess. The phrase ‘turn the tables’ isn’t actually found in writing until the 1600s, but when it first appeared, it was used in the context of gaming. The turning of the game board was used as a metaphor for a reversal of fortune.

Now there is a modern variation of backgammon called *acey-deucey*. In this particular game, if a player rolls the dice and one die lands on one and the other die lands on two, then special rules apply. And that’s why the game is called *acey-deucey*. In dice games, the side of the die with one dot is called an *ace* and the side with two dots is called a *deuce*. Both terms come from French. Now those terms are probably familiar to you today from playing cards, but we’re about a decade away from the introduction of playing cards to western Europe. So before *ace* and *deuce* were used in cards, they were used in dice.

In fact, each of the sides of the die was once known by numbers derived from French. The word *ace* was derived from the name of an old Roman coin. The word was borrowed into English from French in the early 1300s. The names of the other five sides were derived from the numbers two through six in Old French. As I noted, two was called *deuce*, and it is first appeared in English documents in the 1400s. Three was called *trey* (T-R-E-Y), and it first appeared in the writings of Geoffrey Chaucer in the 1380s. Four was called a *cater* (/cæt-er/) – or /cay-ter/ after the Great Vowel Shift. It was spelled C-A-T-E-R, and it first appeared in English documents in the 1500s, even though it was probably in common use before then. Five dots on the die was called *cinque*

(C-I-N-Q-U-E) from the French word for five. Again, *cinque* was first used in reference to dice in the writings of Geoffrey Chaucer in the 1380s. And the side with six dots was called *sice* (/seece/) – or /saice/ after the Great Vowel Shift. And again, that word appears for the first time in English in the writings of Chaucer in the 1380s. So the formal names of three of the six sides of a die were first used by Chaucer.

And Chaucer was also the first person to use a phrase that can apparently be traced back to those names. That was the phrase ‘at sixes and sevens.’ If you say that something is ‘at sixes and sevens,’ it means that it is in a state of confusion or disarray. And if two people are ‘at sixes and sevens’ with each other, it means that they are fighting or arguing. Again, the first recorded use of this phrase was in Chaucer’s poem called *Troilus & Criseyde* in the 1370s.

He used the phrase in the sense of carelessly risking one’s fortune, and it was apparently derived from a similar phrase which used those French words for the sides of a die. That other phrase was ‘to set at cinque or sice,’ and again, Chaucer’s writings contain the first use of that phrase as well. Now ‘to set at cinque or sice’ literally meant to ‘set at five or six on the die.’ Those are the two highest numbers you can roll, and the meaning implied that you were risking your entire fortune on the highest possible rolls of the die. To do so was a very careless act, and that sense of carelessness or throwing caution to the wind led to the more modern sense of confusion or disorder.

So why did this original phrase meaning ‘to be at five or six’ evolve into the modern phrase ‘to be at sixes and sevens’? I mean, a die doesn’t have seven sides. Well, one possibility is that the phrase ‘at sixes and sevens’ took the original concept one step further. It implied an impossible bet since you couldn’t actually roll a seven on a die, so it meant an even more ridiculous or careless wager.

Another theory is that English speakers wanted to maintain the alliteration of the original phrase ‘at cinque or sice’ with its repeating ‘s’ sounds. A literal translation of the phrase is ‘at five or six,’ but that translation loses the original alliteration. However, by shifting each number up by one, you get ‘at sixes and sevens,’ which has the same ‘s’ alliteration as the original. So that may be why the numbers shifted within English. I should also note that there are some competing theories about the ultimate origin of this phrase, but the Oxford English Dictionary adopts the version I’ve presented here. And the fact the Chaucer was the first known writer to use both versions of the phrase suggests that the two phrases were linked together at one time, and the modern phrase is therefore derived from the original phrase which specifically referred to dice.

Chaucer also introduced another common word related to dice. And that’s the word *raffle*. Now it may come as a surprise that the word *raffle* was originally related to dice, but it was. It was a game involving three dice. Each player would throw the dice, and if all three dice landed on the same number, that player automatically won the round. Otherwise, the player with the highest combination of any two of the dice won. The game was called *raffle* from the French name of the game. And again, Geoffrey Chaucer was the first known English writer to refer to the game with that name and to use the term in his writings. He used it in the *Parson’s Tale* within the

Canterbury Tales. Since then, the word *raffle* has evolved to encompass other games of chance, specifically lottery style games where the winner is chosen at random by a drawing.

So Chaucer was the first writer to use the words for three sides of the dice. And he was the first to use the phrases ‘at cinque or sice’ and ‘at sixes and sevens,’ both of which apparently relate to dice. And he was the first English writer to use the word *raffle* which was also a dice game. These terms are spread across the Canterbury Tales, as well as his earlier poem *Troilus & Criseyde*. So it’s fair to assume that he was very familiar with games involving dice.

I began this discussion about games with Edward III’s ban on most sports other than archery in the year 1363. At that time, Chaucer was about 20 years old. We know from the last episode that he was serving in the king’s service as a soldier, a yeoman, and a low-level diplomat. It’s also possible that he was already composing poetry for the king’s court by this point.

The University of Pennsylvania has in its possession a manuscript which was compiled in England in the late 1350s or early 1360s – so around the current point in our overall story. The manuscript contains a collection of poems that were composed in or for the royal court. There are 310 poems in all, and they are all composed in the traditional style of courtly poems. And they are all composed in French. Three of those poems have the initials ‘Ch,’ so it appears that someone with those initials composed those three poems, and some scholars think those initials stand for ‘Chaucer.’ Now, there’s simply no way to know for sure, but it is possible that these are the oldest surviving poems composed by Geoffrey Chaucer. If that’s the case, these would be the only surviving poems which he composed in French. But again, all we have are initials, and those initials may represent the name of some other poet in the court at the time.

Even though scholars are not sure if Chaucer composed those three early court poems, they are sure that he got married a short time after those poems were composed. A young lady working in the queen’s household was named Philippa – and the government records from 1366 list her as ‘Phillipa Chaucer.’ So she and Geoffrey were married by that date.

Now around the time Chaucer married Phillipa, he worked on another poem, and this is the oldest surviving poem which is clearly attributed to him. It’s actually an English translation of a French poem called *Roman de la Rose*, or in English ‘*The Romance of the Rose*.’ Again, this was a translation, not an original work, and Chaucer only translated part of the poem. So we still have to wait a little bit longer for a surviving original work. But that’s coming very soon.

The next official mention of Chaucer’s activities occurred in 1366 – the same year as the records which confirm his marriage to Phillipa. In that year, he left England on another diplomatic mission – this time to Navarre in northern Spain. The nature of the mission to Navarre is unknown, but modern scholars suspect that the trip had to do with what was happening in the neighboring kingdom of Castille.

Without getting too bogged down in the details, the gist of the problem was that the throne of Castille was being disputed between two claimants, one of whom was allied with France and the other was allied with England. Castille was a powerful kingdom in northern Spain, and the claimant who was allied with England was named Pedro.

Now Castille in northern Spain was located just across the Pyrenees from Gascony in southern France. And as we know, Gascony was controlled by the English king, specifically by the king's son known as the Black Prince.

Well, there was one tiny kingdom located between Gascony and Castille, and that was this kingdom of Navarre. And that's where Geoffrey Chaucer was sent as a diplomat in 1366. Again, we don't know exactly what Chaucer's mission was, but it seems likely that it had something to do with the English support of Pedro next door in Castille.

At any rate, Pedro was soon defeated and forced out of Castille. He then turned to the Black Prince for help, and the Black Prince led a campaign to Castille to return Pedro to the throne. The campaign was a success, and Pedro once again became the king, giving England an important ally in the region.

Now at the time, this was seen as another great victory for England and the Black Prince, but it soon turned sour. Pedro had promised to pay the Black Prince back for the cost of the campaign – over a quarter of a million pounds. But once Pedro was back on the throne, he couldn't raise the money to pay the debt. So the Black Prince suddenly found himself near bankruptcy.

On top of that, he contracted some type of illness during the campaign – perhaps a form of dysentery or malaria. Whatever it was, he never recovered from it. Even though he lived for several more years, his health deteriorated with each passing year.

As bad as all of that was, things soon went from bad to worse for the Black Prince. He was officially the Duke of Aquitaine, so in an attempt to get out of his massive debt, he levied heavy taxes on the nobles and other landholders of Aquitaine. But by that point, they had had enough of the Black Prince and his taxes, so they rose in rebellion against him. John of Gaunt was the younger brother of the Black Prince, and he soon left England to join his brother in Gascony to deal with the rebels. By this point, Geoffrey Chaucer was back in England, but when John of Gaunt left to go to Aquitaine, Chaucer went with him. Chaucer's role is not recorded, but the records show that he was paid 10 pounds for his service in John's retinue.

At this point, the French king decided to get in on the action. He threw his support toward the rebels in Aquitaine, and he mounted his own campaigns against the Black Prince. The French king was now Charles V – son of King John who I discussed in the last episode. And Charles was a formidable king. He is known to history as Charles the Wise, and he 'turned the tables' on the English during the Hundred Years War. The English dominance during the early phases of the war quickly came to an end, and over the next few months and years, Charles managed to reclaim much of the French territory that had been lost under his predecessors.

The final two years of the decade were horrible years for the English monarchy. In 1369, Pedro was assassinated in Castille, and the region once again became allied with France. So the Black Prince's whole effort there accomplished nothing. Meanwhile, the Black Prince's health continued to decline, he was in heavy debt, he was facing a rebellion within his own duchy, and he was also facing a resurgent French army on his borders. He incurred one loss after another in Aquitaine, and within a couple of years, he was forced to abandon Aquitaine altogether and return to England a broken man.

In the midst of all of this bad news, another round of death struck the royal family in 1368 and 1369. The Queen of England died. So did the king and queen's second eldest son Lionel. That left Edward the Black Prince and John of Gaunt as the two eldest children. But as I just noted, the Black Prince was sick and growing sicker by the month. And the king – Edward III – was also getting old and withdrawing from public life. Suddenly, John of Gaunt emerged as one of the most important figures in the royal family.

His father and his elder brothers were either in very poor health or dead. Meanwhile, John was already one of the most powerful nobles in England given his status as the Duke of Lancaster. As I noted in the last episode, he received that duchy through his wife Blanche. She had inherited it from her father who died from the plague. So John and Blanche were the Duke and Duchess of Lancaster, and outside of the king and queen, they were the most prominent couple in England.

But death was not yet done with the royal family. In September of 1368, Blanche also passed away. The cause of her death is a little unclear. Some sources say that she died from another round of plague. Others say that she died in childbirth. Either way, her death left John of Gaunt as a widower while he was still on campaign in France. And as I noted earlier, Geoffrey Chaucer was serving in John's retinue at the time.

Now all of this is very important to our story because John of Gaunt, and Chaucer, and the rest of John's men, eventually made their way back to England. And soon after they returned, it appears that John of Gaunt asked Chaucer to compose a poem to commemorate Blanche's death. And that poem is the oldest surviving original poem composed by Geoffrey Chaucer.

The poem is known today as 'The Book of the Duchess,' and it shows that Chaucer and John of Gaunt already had a pretty close relationship by this point in the late 1360s. John eventually became an unpopular figure in England, but he was a strong advocate for the English language. And he was Chaucer's primary patron. And their literary relationship really began with this poem commemorating the death of John's wife. After returning to England, John arranged for Blanche to be buried at St. Paul's Cathedral. He also reserved a tomb for himself to be buried beside her. And each year thereafter, he held a memorial service for Blanche at the cathedral. It appears that Chaucer composed his poem to be read at one of those memorial services. So this was a courtly poem composed at the request of and for the benefit of one of the leading nobles of England.

As such, the poem was composed in the style of French poetry that was normally recited at court, but Chaucer used English rather than French. And that was really a major innovation.

The poem is written in first person, and it begins with the poet trying to sleep, but he lies awake thinking of a woman he loves who does not love him in return. The poet then recalls a recent night when his insomnia forced him to grab a book. In Modern English, the passage reads:

But lately now, this other night,
Upon my bed I sat upright,
And asked someone bring me a book,
A romance, and this I took
To read and drive the night away,
Since I thought it better play
Than chess or backgammon tables.
And in this book were written fables
That scholars had in ancient times,
And other poets, put in rhymes
To read and preserve in my mind
When men still lived by law of kind.

Now here's Chaucer's original verse:

Til now late, this other night,
Upon my bedde I sat upright
And bad oon reche me a book,
A romaunce, and he hit me took
To rede and dryve the night away;
For me thoghte it better play
Then playen either at ches or tables.
And in this boke were writen fables
That clerkes hadde, in olde tyme,
And other poets, put in ryme
To rede, and for to be in minde
Whyl men loved the lawe of kinde.

In this passage, we get a sense of Chaucer's love of games. He says that it was better to read to a book than play chess or tables. We know from earlier in the episode that *tables* was the common word at the time for the game that became known as *backgammon*. So it was better to read than to play board games. As we'll see, Chaucer refers to games throughout the poem.

While reading the book, the poet finally falls asleep. And at that point, the poem turns into a dream vision as the narrator recalls the dream he had. In his dream, he awoke in the springtime. Birds were singing on his roof. And his room had been fully transformed. Color and light filled his chamber. Bright beams of light from the sun came in through the windows. The entire Greek legend of Troy was depicted on the glass windows. And the poet says that the entire text of the Romance of the Rose was written on the walls. Chaucer writes:

And all the walls with colors fine
Were painted, both text and gloss,
Of all of the Romance of the Rose.

This is a notable passage because Chaucer specifically refers to the French poem that he had partially translated a few years earlier. That poem was obviously important to Chaucer because he referenced it again here.

The poet then tells us that he heard a commotion outside of his window. It was a hunter blowing his horn. Then he heard other hunters with their horses and dogs. So the poet went outside, and mounted his horse and joined the hunting party. But the hunters soon lost track of the deer they were chasing, and the poet decided to withdraw from the hunt. Suddenly, a small dog appeared, and the narrator followed the dog to a secluded area in the woods teeming with deer and rabbits and all kinds of other wildlife. Of the wildlife, Chaucer tells us the following:

But forth they roamed wondrously fast
Down the wood, till at the last
I was aware of a man in black
That sat there, and turned his back
Against an oak: a huge tree.
'Lord,' thought I, 'who may this be?
What ails him so that he sits here?'
And right along I went full near;
Then I found there sitting upright
A handsome and well-faring knight,

Here's the same passage in Chaucer's original Middle English.

But forth they romed wonder faste
Doun the wode; so at the laste
I was war of a man in blak,
That sat and had yturned his bak
To an ook, an huge tree.
'Lord,' thoghte I, 'who may that be?
What ayleth him to sitten here?'
Anoon-right I wente nere;
Than fond I sitte even upright
A wonder wel-faringe knight

So the poet came across a knight wearing black and sitting under an oak tree. The knight was clearly in mourning. We soon find out through some subtle – and some 'not so subtle' – references that this knight is intended to represent John of Gaunt. And everyone listening to the poem would have immediately known why he was in mourning.

The poet says that the knight was reciting a mournful poem to himself about the death of his lover. So the poet approached the knight assuming that he was part of the hunting party. The poet says that he told the knight that the deer was lost, but the knight was not interested in the hunt. In Modern English, the passage reads:

'Sir,' said I, 'the game is done;
I think that the deer is gone;
The huntsmen nowhere can it see.'
'I take no thought of that,' said he;

Now here's Chaucer's original passage.

'Sir,' quod I, 'this game is doon;
I holde that this hert be goon;
Thise hunttes conne him nowher see.'
'I do no fors therof,' quod he,

Now in this passage, Chaucer actually uses the word *game* for the hunt itself. So he makes it very clear that the hunt was a game. As I noted earlier in the episode, this is how the word *game* acquired its secondary meaning as wild animals. The hunt was a game, and over time, the animals that were pursued became known as *game*. And we can clearly see that connection in this passage.

The poet tells us that the lonely knight was not interested in the hunt. He was pining for his lover. The knight explained that he had lost the woman he loved. Fortune had taken her away. And notice how the knight expresses this loss. Here's the passage – first in Modern English:

My boldness is turned to shame,
For false Fortune has played a game
Of chess with me, alas, the while!
The traitress false and full of guile

Now in Middle English.

'My boldnesse is turned to shame,
For fals Fortune hath pleyd a game
Atte ches with me, allas, the whyle!
The trayteresse fals and ful of gyle,

So Fortune had deceived the knight and defeated him at a game of chess. And then, a few lines later, the poet tells us more. The knight elaborates on his game with Fortune in the following passage:

. . . By our Lord, I will to you say.
At chess with me she began to play;
With her false moves diversely seen
She stole upon me and took my queen.
And when I saw my queen away,
Alas, I could no longer play,
But said, 'Farewell, sweet, by this,
And farewell all that ever there is!'
Therewith Fortune said, 'Check, here!'
And 'Mate!' in mid-point of the checker
With an errant pawn, alas!
Full craftier at play she was
Than Athalus, who first the game
Of chess made; such was his name.
I wish to God that once or twice
I'd studied and learnt the jeopardies
Known to the Greek Pythagoras,
I should have played the better at chess
And better kept my queen thereby.
Yet, in truth, I say, what for and why?

Here's the same passage in Chaucer's original Middle English.

. . . By our Lord, I wol thee seye.
Atte ches with me she gan to pleye;
With hir false draughtes divers
She stal on me, and took my fers.
And whan I saw my fers aweye,
Alas! I couthe no lenger playe,
But seyde, "Farewel, swete, y-wis,
And farwel al that ever ther is!
Therwith Fortune seyde, "Chek her!"
And "Mate!" in mid pointe of the chekker
With a pounne erraunt, allas!
Ful craftier to pley she was
Than Athalus, that made the game
First of the ches: so was his name.
But God wolde I had ones or twyes
Y-koud and knowe the jeopardyes
That koude the Grek Pithagores!
I shulde have pleyd the bet at ches,
And kept my fers the bet therby;
And thogh wherto? for trewely,

Now in that passage, we get a very explicit analogy between the loss of a game of chess and the loss of a lover. The knight says that Fortune defeated him at chess and took his queen. I should also note a few other things about that passage. First, Chaucer uses the word *fers* for queen. *Fers* was the French name for that chess piece, and it was commonly used in English until the 1700s. In fact, this poem contains the first known use of the word in English.

Now that word *fers* is ultimately derived from Persian and Arabic because the game of chess originated in India and passed through Persia and the Arab world before it made its way to Europe during the Crusades. So a lot of chess terminology can be traced back to Persian and Arabic. That includes the word *chess* itself, as well as the phrase ‘Check Mate’ which was originally ‘Shah Mat.’

I mentioned this in an earlier episode, but *shah* meant ‘king’ in Persian, and the goal of chess was to capture the king. When the opponent’s king was trapped and couldn’t escape, the winning player would say ‘Shah Mat’ meaning ‘the king is helpless.’ This phrase ‘Shah Mat’ evolved into English ‘Check Mate.’ And through the same general process, the word *shah* as used in early chess gave us the words *chess*, *check* and *checkers*. I discussed all of that etymology way back in Episode 73 when I first talked about the introduction of chess to Europe.

Well in the passage I just read, we can see how Chaucer used those terms for poetic effect. At this point in history, the word *checker* referred to the chessboard itself. That’s how England got the office of the Exchequer where accountings were made on a grid that resembled a chessboard. And in this passage, Chaucer used the word *checker* as a homophone for the phrase ‘Check, here!’ He wrote:

Therewith Fortune said, ‘Check, here!’
And ‘Mate!’ in mid-point of the checker

In Middle English ‘check here’ and ‘checker’ would have been pronounced almost the same.

Now today, checkers is a distinct game played on the same type of game board as chess. *Checkers* is the common name in the US, but in the UK it is commonly known as *draughts*. So where did the name *draughts* come from? Well, during the time of Chaucer, the word *draught* could refer to the movement of a game piece on a game board, especially a chess piece in the game of chess. If you moved a pawn or a rook, that move was called a *draught*. It came from the sense of the word *draught* as something pulled or moved. It’s the same sense that we have in the term ‘draught animal’ meaning an animal that pulls a plow or wagon. And in chess, a *draught* was the movement of a game piece on the board.

Well, the passage I just read from Chaucer’s ‘Book of the Duchess’ contains the first known use of the word *draught* in that sense, meaning the movement of a game piece on a game board. Chaucer wrote that Fortune:

With hir false draughtes divers
She stal on me, and took my fers.

Or in Modern English:

With her many false drafts or moves
she stole upon me, and took my fers or queen

Over time, the word *draught* was extended to this other game that we know today as *draughts* or *checkers*. It was played on the same game board as chess, and it was another game picked up by Crusaders in the Near East. It was called *alquerque* there, but English developed its own names for the game. Again, the name *checkers* is derived from the word for the game board itself, and *draughts* is derived from the word for the movement of the game pieces across the board.

The passage I read also contains another interesting turn of phrase. Chaucer wrote:

I wish to God that once or twice
I'd studied and learnt the jeopardies

Or in Middle English:

But God wolde I had ones or twyes
Y-koud and knowe the jeupardyes

So what did Chaucer mean when he said that the knight wished that he had learned the *jeopardies*? Well, *jeopardy* was a brand-new word in the English language. It had been borrowed from French in the early 1300s, and Chaucer was actually one of the first English writers to regularly use the word in his writings. In its original usage, it was commonly used in reference to chess or other board games. It meant a key decision or move in the game that would determine victory or defeat. It was essentially the turning point in the game – when it could go either way – and when the outcome was essentially determined. It is actually a compound word. The first part is the French word *jeu* which meant game. You might remember from earlier in the episode that handball was called ‘jeu de paume’ in French – literally the ‘game of the palm.’ So the first part of *jeopardy* also used that French word for game. The second part of *jeopardy* is *parti* – literally a part or share or division. So *jeopardy* is literally ‘a divided game,’ but it meant an ‘evenly divided game where there was an equal chance of winning or losing.’ So a *jeopardy* was a game that could go either way. And when Chaucer’s knight said that he wished that he had learned the jeopardies, he meant that he wished he had studied those strategic points in the game of chess to make sure that he made the right decisions and moves. But unfortunately, he made the wrong move, and Fortune captured his queen which sealed his fate. This also helps to explain how the word *jeopardy* evolved within later English. It later came to refer to any risky or perilous situation where there was a danger of loss. And even today, many of you may still associate the word *jeopardy* with games, especially if you’re a fan of the TV game show called *Jeopardy!* which has aired on American television for several decades.

Chaucer wasn't the first English writer to use the word *jeopardy*, but he was one of the first. Most of the earliest uses of the word listed in the Oxford English Dictionary are attributed to him.

Now the rest of the poem follows a very traditional courtly style and uses the standard themes of romance and longing. The knight describes how he first met the woman who stole his heart. In very poetic terms, he describes her loveliness and beauty. He recalls her dancing, and singing, and laughing and playing. He then describes her physical beauty. Again, all of this is in keeping with the courtly romance poetry of the period.

After the knight's description of the lady, he finally mentions her name. And in case there was any doubt, the name makes it clear who the lady in the poem represented. The knight says that the lady's name was *White*. So Chaucer names the lady *White* – not *Blanche*. But the courtly audience would have been familiar with French, and they would have known that the name *Blanche* is derived from the word *blanc* – the French word for 'white.' So *White* is basically an English translation of the name *Blanche*.

The poem concludes with the knight revealing that his lover had not merely left him. She had in fact died and can never return to him. The poet says that he expressed his condolences and acknowledged the sorrowful news.

And with that, the poet says that horns blew to mark the end of the hunt. The king who was taking part in the hunt rode home. Chaucer writes that the king:

Begun swiftly homeward to ride
Unto a place quite near beside,
Not far from us, would there alight:
A long castle with walls white,
By Saint John, on a rich hill,
So I dreamed, and this befell.

Or in the original Middle English:

Gan quikly hoomward for to ryde
Unto a place ther besyde,
Which was from us but a lyte,
A long castel with walles whyte,
Be seynt Johan! on a riche hil,
As me mette; but thus it fil.

Now to a modern audience, nothing may stand out in that passage. The king went home to a 'long castle' on a 'rich hill.' But those descriptions are actually an intentional play on words. Chaucer wanted to make it clear to his audience that the knight in the poem represented John of Gaunt who was the Duke of Lancaster and the Earl of Richmond. 'Long castle' was a play on the name Lancaster. The *caster* part of Lancaster is actually derived from the Latin word *castrum*

which meant castle. And most people in England would have understood that *caster* meant castle. The first part *lan* is actually derived from the name of a river, but it sounded similar to the word *long*, so a lot of people thought of the name *Lancaster* as ‘long castle.’ And Chaucer intentionally makes that connection for his audience here at the end of the poem. He then says, ‘Be seynt Johan! on a riche hil’ – ‘By Saint John, on a rich hill.’ Well, Saint John is another allusion to John of Gaunt. Here Chaucer actually uses his first name. And that concluding reference to a ‘rich hill’ is a play on the John’s earldom of Richmond. Of course, *Richmond* is literally a ‘rich mound’ or ‘rich hill.’ So again, anyone hearing this poem in the late 1300s would have understood that all of those references were to the man whose wife was being mourned and honored in the poem.

With the king’s return to his long castle on a rich hill, a clock bell strikes twelve, and the poet awakes from his dream bringing the poem to an end.

Again, this is oldest surviving original poem composed by Geoffrey Chaucer, at least the oldest which is clearly attributable to him. He was still a young man at the time, and the Book of the Duchess is notable because it shows the greatest poet of Middle English in his formative years. The poem is not as revered as his later works, but it’s interesting because it shows Chaucer working within the framework of courtly poetry of the time. As I noted earlier, it follows the traditional style of that poetry, except that Chaucer substituted English for French, and that is a notable development in itself.

The poem is also interesting because it confirms Chaucer’s close connection to John of Gaunt who was about to emerge as a leading figure in England with the death of the king and the Black Prince.

And for purposes of this episode, the poem is interesting because it shows Chaucer’s interest in games and the language of gaming. He used the loss of the queen in a game of chess as a metaphor for the loss of the Duchess. He also incorporated several terms related to chess and other board games. The poem contains the first known use of some of those terms, and in his other works, he introduced several words and phrases related to dice. As I noted earlier in the episode, he is the first English writer to use gaming and sports terms like *racket*, *raffle*, and the phrase ‘at sixes and sevens’ which also apparently relates to dice. So in that regard, Chaucer was very much a man of his time, reflecting the interests and pastimes of his audience. The king may have preferred for his subjects to practice archery, but Chaucer shows us that the people actually enjoyed playing other games, and that’s probably why the king’s restrictions never had much of an impact on the games that people played in their spare time.

Next time, we’ll move the story forward another decade into the 1370s. We’ll continue to look at developments in the language and literature of England. But we’ll also look at what some of that literature was being written on. There was a brand new writing material in England, and that material was paper. So next time, we’ll see how the introduction of paper shaped the evolution of the English language.

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

EPISODE 123: A MATERIAL CHANGE

Welcome to the History of English Podcast – a podcast about the history of the English language. This is Episode 123: A Material Change. In this episode, we’re going to explore an important development that took place in Western Europe in the 1300s. During this period, we have the first signs of a shift in the way scribes compiled their manuscripts. This change wasn’t a new language or a new script. And it wasn’t a new style of writing. It was actually a change in the material that the scribes wrote on. Around this time, we have the first evidence that paper had made its way to England. This new writing material had its ultimate origin in China, and the introduction of paper reflects a more fundamental change that was about to take place. That change was the transition from animal hides like parchment and vellum to a plant-based material like paper. Over the long term, paper proved to be cheaper and could be mass produced, and it provided the key ingredient for the printing press when it arrived in the next century. So the events of this episode laid the groundwork for the printing revolution that took place a couple of generations later. This time, we’ll explore those developments, and we’ll see how this material change 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 and get bonus episodes and transcripts at Patreon.com/historyofenglish.

Now this time, I want to look at the introduction of paper to western Europe, but I also want to put this topic into a broader context. Up to this point in the podcast, I’ve talked a lot about writing. The evolution of language and the evolution of writing are fundamentally linked. Up until now, most of the documents I’ve discussed were recorded and preserved on animal hides – specifically parchment and vellum. Back in Episode 97, I explored the use of those materials in the Middle Ages. But now, in the mid-1300s, we have evidence that a plant-based material was starting to be used. Of course, that material was paper. And the advent of paper marks a fundamental shift from the use of animal hides to plant-based textiles. So this time, I want to discuss paper, but I also want to explore this more fundamental connection between language and textiles.

So let’s pick up where we left off last time – with the oldest surviving poetry of Geoffrey Chaucer. In the last episode, I noted that at some point during the 1360s, he was one of several writers who worked on an English translation of a French poem called the Romance of the Rose.

The translation survives in three fragments which represents three different parts of the poem. The first fragment represents the first part of the poem, and it is generally believed to have been the work of Chaucer. The other fragments are composed in a different style and are generally thought to be the work of other translators. For example, the second fragment from the middle of the poem has a lot of northern dialect features like the use of the northern ‘th’ pronouns – *they*, *them* and *their* – rather than the southern ‘h’ forms which Chaucer used. The third fragment from near the end of the poem is closer to Chaucer’s style, but modern scholars still think it was the work of a different translator. At any rate, this third fragment contains the following passage:

Sek the book of Seynt Austyn,
Be it in papir or perchemyn,
There as he writ of these worchynges,

In Modern English, it reads:

Seek the book of Saint Augustine
Be it in paper or parchment
There as he wrote of these workings or deeds

I read that passage because it contains one of the first recorded uses of the word *paper* in the English language. And it is specifically used in contrast to parchment. It says to seek out this book, whether written in paper or parchment. Passages like that indicate that paper was starting to be used as an alternative to parchment in the 1360s when the translation was composed.

A few years after this translation, Chaucer composed the Book of the Duchess. That's the poem I discussed in the last episode which was an ode to Duchess Blanche, the late wife of the king's son, John of Gaunt. Last time, I read several passages from that poem. One of those passages describes how the poet had insomnia, but he finally fell asleep while reading a book. When he awoke from his sleep, his chamber was filled with color and light. And the entire text of the Romance of the Rose was written on the walls. So Chaucer once again references that poem which he had translated a few years earlier. Chaucer writes:

And all the walls with colors fine
Were painted, both text and gloss,
Of all of the Romance of the Rose.

That passage is important to this episode because it contains the first use of another common word in English. That word is the word *text*. He wrote that the text of the poem appeared on the walls.

So why is the word *text* important? Well, obviously it can refer to the words set forth in a book or a manuscript. When you read a document, you read the text. And of course, it can also refer to the entire document. A writer might compose a text. And that writer might compose his text on paper which is a textile. And as you might have guessed, the words *text* and *textile* are closely related. They're derived from the same Latin root word.

That original Latin root word was *texere* which meant 'to weave or braid or join.' That literal sense of weaving gave us the word *textile*. It also gave us the related word *texture*. And from a sense of clothing or something woven together, it also gave us the word *text*. In the Middle Ages, the word was extended from the weaving of threads to the weaving of words. The craft of putting words together in a particular way was considered to be similar to the craft of the weaver who spun yarn into cloth. Even today, we might say that a story teller is 'spinning a yarn' as a euphemism for telling a long-winded or far-fetched tale. So that sense of weaving words led to the modern sense of the word *text*.

We also have another common word related to *textile* and *text*, and that's the word *technology*. A text book or treatise that outlined how certain raw materials were turned into a finished product was called a *technology*. That could literally apply to the turning of fibers into textiles, but it could also apply to any industry or craft where raw materials were transformed into an altogether new product. Over time, the word *technology* was extended to the specific mechanical innovations which aided the process. And as we'll see, the story of paper involves a combination of textiles, texts and technological innovations. And all three of those terms are related through both the literal and figurative sense of weaving.

That is what Geoffrey Chaucer was doing when he composed his translation of the Romance of the Rose and his ode to Duchess Blanche. He was weaving words in a particular style and pattern in the same way that a weaver made textiles by literally weaving threads together.

One popular textile made by weavers was linen. It was made from a plant fiber – specifically the plant known as flax. Flax grew throughout Europe and Asia, and its was comprised of long, flexible fibers that extended from its roots all the way through the plant. When extracted, these fibers were several feet in length and they had a hair-like quality. They could be spun into thread which was then woven into the fabric known as linen. Linen is simply flax that has been processed into cloth, and it was one of the most important fabrics of the Middle Ages.

A few episodes back, I talked about the importance of the wool industry in England. Of course, wool was made from the hair of sheep. Well, wool tended to be thick and heavy which was great if you lived in England or other parts of northern Europe which tended to be cold and wet. But in summer months it could be uncomfortable, so people wore linen when it was warmer. Linen was also a soft comfortable fabric, and it absorbed water very well. So people tended to wear linen shirts underneath their heavier outer tunics which were usually made of wool. This use of linen as undergarments produced the word *lining* as in the lining of a coat. It meant the fabric underneath the outer fabric. Again, *lining* comes from the same root as *linen*. And via French, the sense of linen as undergarments or underwear produced the later French word *lingerie*. The pronunciation tends to disguise the connection, but it's right there in the first three letters – L-I-N. All of these words – *linen*, *lining*, and *lingerie* – are derived from the same Latin root word *linum* which meant a flax or linen.

Within Latin, this root word also produced the word *linea* meaning a line or string of linen. We have that root in modern English words like *lineal*, *linear*, and *lineage*. The same root was also borrowed by the early Germanic tribes or the early Anglo-Saxons, and it gave us the word *line* via Old English. But notice that the word *line* takes us right back to that same basic connection between textiles and texts. The word *line* was originally a string or thread like a fishing line or clothes line. Over time, the word evolved from a sense of a thread or line pulled tight, to a straight line, to anything organized in a straight line or row. And that produced a literary sense of the word. A row of letters or words on a page was called a *line* – or *linan* in Old English. Today, we might read a document 'line by line.' If we're looking for a subtle or implied meaning, we might read 'between the lines.' And if you're in a play, you have to memorize your lines. So word pairs like *text* and *textile* and *line* and *linen* illustrate some of the basic connections between language and fabrics. We can 'weave words' and 'spin a yarn' when we tell a story.

And as we develop the narrative, we try not ‘lose the thread’ of the main story. So just as weavers can turn plant fibers into fabric, writers can also turn words into literature. And our language reflects that analogy, but the connection between plants and language is even more fundamental than that.

Let’s consider a tree. What does a tree have to do with the language? Well languages can be organized into family trees, but I’m not talking about that. I’m talking about something much more literal. What do the various parts of a tree have to do with the words we use and the way we use words?

Well words are often organized into a book. And you might remember from an earlier episode that the word **book** is derived from the same root as the word **beech** in a beech tree. In fact, **book** is derived from the early Proto-Germanic word for beech tree. Apparently, those early Germanic speakers carved runes into beech trees or into boards made from beech trees. And the word for the tree became our modern word **book**.

Now today, you might read an old-fashioned book made of paper or you might read a digital book with a tablet. Well, the word **tablet** shows a similar connection to trees. And that connection is more obvious when you consider that **tablet** and **table** are cognate. They’re both derived from the same root word which meant a board or plank. I’ve noted this before, but the Romans also wrote on parts of trees. They took boards and covered them with a thin layer of wax, and then they wrote on the wax with a stylus. A board or plank was called a **tabula** in Latin. So a board used for writing became known as a **tablet**, and a board with legs became known as a **table** – both from that same root word related to trees.

Now the French word for book is **livre**, and it comes from the same Latin root as the word **library** which is a collection of books. Well guess what, both of those words also come from a word that meant part of a tree. The Latin word **liber** meant the inner bark of a tree or a strip of that bark. So again, those strips of tree or tree bark were used for writing, and the word **liber** eventually came to mean a book within Latin. It produced the word **library** which meant a collection of books or a bookseller’s shop. By the way the word **library** is found for the first time in English in the writings of Geoffrey Chaucer. So it also entered the English language around the current point in our overall story in the second half of the 1300s.

Now it appears that the Latin word **liber** meaning the inner bark of a tree, or a strip or peel from a tree, is an old word that goes all the way back to the Indo-Europeans. And many scholars think that that ultimate root word also gave us the word **leaf** via Old English. So if that is true, it means that **leaf** and **library** are cognate.

With respect to **leaf**, it’s obviously a part of a tree, but in Old English it also acquired a meaning related to documents. A page of parchment or vellum was called a **leaf**. And you might still hear the page of an old manuscript referred to as a **leaf**. But that literary sense is more common today as a verb. You might ‘leaf’ through the pages of an old book.

By the way, Latin shows an almost identical development. The old Latin word for a leaf was *folia*. Of course, we have that word today as *foliage*. But it also gave us the word *folio* – also the second part of the word *portfolio*. *Folio* meant a page of parchment or paper. Within English, the word has also come to mean folded paper or a book.

I noted earlier that Romans sometimes used wooden tablets for writing which gave us the word *tablet*. Well, sometimes they put several of those tablets together and tied them at the side. This was an early form of a book, but it was made of wood rather than parchment or paper. Once again, the Romans named this early proto-book after part of a tree. A tree trunk was called a *caudex* in Latin, and since that type of early book was made from wood which came from a tree, they called that type of bound book a *caudex*. And that word passed into English as *codex* – often used to mean a law book. It also gave us the word *code* as in a law code. And an amendment to a legal document like a Will is called a *codicil* from the same root.

So *codex*, *code* and *codicil* all came from a Latin word meaning a tree trunk. But Latin also had another word for a tree trunk, and that was the word *materia*. It meant a tree trunk, and more specifically, it meant the hard inner wood of a tree. By extension, it came to mean the most basic part of something or the thing from which something is made. And that gave us the words *matter* and *material*. And both of those words have a literary sense as well. We might discuss the ‘subject matter’ of a book, and we might compose a document with ‘writing materials.’ *Matter* is first found in English in that old religious guidebook from the early 1200s called the Ancrene Wisse. I discussed that book in an earlier episode. And the word *material* is recorded for the first time in the writings of Geoffrey Chaucer around the current point in our story in the second half of the 1300s.

So in summary, words like *book*, *tablet*, *library*, *leaf*, *folio*, *portfolio*, *codex*, *code*, *codicil*, *matter*, and *material* are all words that have a literary sense and all words derived from parts of a tree. And we sometimes read a ‘line of text’ from a book, and we’ve seen that *line* and *text* are both words related to the weaving of plant fibers – *line* being connected to *linen*, and *text* being connected to *textile*. So hopefully, you can see that many of our words for written documents, and the various parts of written documents, are related to trees and plants. These words point to a basic connection between plants and writing. And that connection is both figurative and literal. We can compare the weaving of words to the weaving of plant fibers, and we can literally use plants as writing materials. And those connections go back to the beginning of writing.

Despite the early use of plants as writing materials, people eventually shifted away from plant-based fibers, and they elected to use animal hides instead. Animal hides were used to make parchment and vellum which were very durable, but also very expensive. Through most of the Middle Ages, parchment and vellum remained the dominant writing materials used in England. But around the current point in our overall story in the 1300s, all of that started to change. Scribes started to return to a plant-based material. That new material was cheaper than parchment, and over the next couple of centuries, it largely replaced parchment. Of course, that plant-based material was paper.

Now paper may have been a new material in England and northern Europe, but it had been around for a long time. In fact, by this point, it had been around for over a thousand years. So paper actually has a long history, and to find the ultimate source of paper, we have to go all the way back to ancient China.

According to Chinese legend, a man named Ts'ai Lun first discovered how to make paper in the early part of the second century. Supposedly, he noticed some rotting rags and tree bark floating on water. He retrieved the scraps with a screen and then let the material dry in the sun. As it dried, the fibers fused together, and it turned in a thin flexible material. This man Ts'ai Lun was a member of the Chinese royal court, so he wrote down how to make this material in a report. And that report is the origin of this legend. It's a good story, and Ts'ai Lun apparently did know how to make paper, but archaeologists have discovered paper fragments in Chinese tombs that are a couple of centuries older than Ts'ai Lun's report. So it seems likely that he took an existing technology and just documented it for the first time. And that report led to the legend that he was the one who actually discovered how to make paper.

The process of making paper was actually pretty simple. You began with plant fibers. The Chinese typically used the fibers of the mulberry tree, but it was often mixed with flax or other fibers as well. These fibers were beaten and mashed so that they broke down completely. The fibers were then mixed with water to create a thick milky pulp. The pulp was then poured into a mold with wire mesh on the bottom. That wire mesh allowed a lot of the water in the pulp to drain out. And that left a thin layer of wet pulp on top of the mesh. That layer of pulp was then pressed to squeeze out much of the remaining water. That left a thin sheet of partially dried pulp which was then hung up to finish drying out. The resulting material was paper.

Paper is considered to be one of the four great inventions of ancient China. The other inventions were the magnetic compass, gunpowder and moveable type used for printing – all of which I've mentioned in earlier episodes. Of course, moveable type and paper are fundamentally connected. But that connection was never fully exploited by the Chinese. The full potential of moveable type combined with paper wasn't realized until Joannes Gutenberg invented his printing press in the 1400s.

For the Chinese, paper wasn't just a writing material. It was a multi-purpose material. It was used for lots of things like wrapping paper, kites, fans, lanterns, playing cards, and even toilet paper which was another Chinese innovation. In the 800s, they also started using it for money.

[SOURCE: *'Cathedral, Forge and Waterwheel,' Giles*]

It appears that there was a shortage of metals like copper and gold, so they looked for another type of currency. Since notes and IOUs were written down on paper and passed back and forth between merchants, the government took this idea and started issuing paper currency. And the Mongols embraced the idea when they conquered China. In an earlier episode, we saw that Marco Polo was fascinated by the use of paper money during his travels in China in the 1200s.

Now over time, paper made its way to the West, but whereas the Chinese used paper for a lot of different purposes, the people to the west of China were mainly interested in writing on it.

The next stop for paper was the Arab world. In the mid-700s, Chinese forces and Muslim forces encountered each other along the Silk Road at the city of Samarkand in modern-day Uzbekistan. This contact soon led to a military confrontation between the two sides. In the year 751, the two sides fought a great battle, and the Muslim army emerged victorious. In the process, they took several Chinese prisoners. According to legend, two of the prisoners were paper-makers, and the Muslim captors offered to release the two men if they agreed to explain how paper was made. Supposedly, the men agreed, and the Arab world acquired the ability to make paper through this event. Again, this is the legend. And whether or not the Arabs actually learned to make paper from two prisoners-of-war, they definitely acquired the knowledge around this time. A few decades later in the year 794, the first paper mill in the Arab world was established in Baghdad.

This first paper mill corresponded with the beginning of that scholarly movement in the Near East which I discussed back in Episode 90. It was a period when the Arab World was starting to emerge as a major academic center. A lot of ancient Greek manuscripts were being translated into Arabic and preserved. A lot of Greek literature was discovered in Europe via these Arabic translations. It was also a place where mathematical innovations were taking place. Words like *algorithm* and *algebra* have their roots in the Arab world during this period. Also, the massive Muslim empire which extended from the Near East across north Africa and the Mediterranean required a large bureaucracy and extensive record-keeping. So there was a great demand for a cheap and abundant writing material. So paper was embraced and became somewhat common in the Arab world during this period.

Now I said that paper gradually replaced the alternatives. So what were the alternatives? Well, in the early Middle Ages, the alternatives were parchment and vellum just like in Europe. But again, parchment and vellum tended to be quite expensive. There was also another alternative which was one of the most common writing materials throughout the Mediterranean. And like paper, it was also made from plants. That material was papyrus. And it had been a common writing material in the Near East for centuries, and it was still being used when paper was introduced from China. So let's look a little closer at papyrus.

Papyrus is the name of both the writing material and the plant from which it is made. The plant is a reed-like plant, and it was once common throughout the Mediterranean. The key part of the plant was the stalk. The stalk was made up a series of inner layers which could be peeled apart sort of like the layers of an onion. To make the writing material, these stalks were cut – and the layers inside were peeled or sliced into thin strips. The strips were laid side by side vertically on a flat surface. A second layer of strips was then placed on top horizontally. Then another vertical layer on top of that, and another horizontal layer, and so on. So the strips were not actually woven together. They were just laid on top of each other in a criss-cross pattern. The sap from the freshly cut papyrus actually served as a glue binding the layers together. Sometimes an additional glue or binding agent was added. When the layers were thick enough, they were pressed and left to dry. As the material dried, the layers would bind together and form a flat material that could be used for writing. When finished, it was typically rolled into scrolls. And those papyrus scrolls were the primary writing material used by many ancient people of the Near East. In fact, it was so common in ancient Greece and Rome that the language of both cultures had several words for papyrus. And not surprisingly, many of those words have filtered into

Modern English. We use those words all the time without realizing that they ultimately meant papyrus.

For example, the Romans called a strip of papyrus *scheda*. It was derived from an old Greek word that meant ‘to split.’ After paper was introduced, the word *scheda* came to refer to a piece of paper, and it started to acquire the sense of an additional page added to a document with supplemental information. English later borrowed that word as *schedule* – or /shed-ule/ – depending on your pronunciation. We still have that original sense when we attach a separate page as an appendix or exhibit to the back of another document. We might do that with a tax form, or a legal document, or some other technical document. We might label it ‘Schedule A’ or ‘Schedule B.’ Well, that was the sense that the word had in Late Latin. It wasn’t until the 1800s that the word came to mean a time-table or specific plan of events that was written down. The word was first borrowed into English in the late 1300s, and when it first appeared, it was still used in the sense of a scroll of parchment or a piece of paper.

By the way, I discussed the alternate pronunciations of that word back in Episode 51. In case you forgot, the word was apparently pronounced as /sed-ule/ throughout Middle English and early Modern English. It was originally spelled S-E-D-U-L-E or C-E-D-U-L-E, but it was one of those words where later scholars changed the spelling to reflect the original Latin spelling. So in the 1500s, it started to be spelled with its modern S-C-H at the beginning. And that spelling change apparently led to the confusion in pronunciation with American English going with /sked-ule/ and British English preferring /shed-ule/. But again, regardless of pronunciation, the word originally meant a strip of papyrus.

Another common word for a strip or layer of papyrus was the Greek word *khartes*. We’ve actually seen this word before. It was borrowed into Latin as *carta* where it continued to mean a piece of papyrus. It later came to refer to any type of formal document. That is the sense we have in the term Magna Carta. The word then passed through French into English as *charter* and as *card*. *Card* originally meant a playing card, but later came to mean any kind of thick or stiff paper. We also have that sense in the word *cardboard*. It also gave us the word *carton* meaning a container made from thick paper or pasteboard. By the way, *carton* also gave us the word *cartoon* which was originally a drawing made on thick paper.

The Latin word *carta* produced the French word *carte*, and that word has several related meanings in Modern French. One of those meanings is a menu which has been borrowed into English in the phrase ‘a la carte.’ It also exists in English as the phrase *carte blanche* which literally means ‘white paper.’ Last time, we looked at Geoffrey Chaucer’s poem about Duchess Blanche, and he gave her the name ‘White’ in the poem because ‘white’ was the literal translation of Blanche. Well in the phrase *carte blanche*, we have the same word, and that’s why it translates as ‘white paper.’ If we give someone *carte blanche*, we give them free rein to do as they please. So what does white paper have to do with free rein? Well, the French word *blanche* also gave us the word *blank*, and that’s probably a more accurate translation. *Carte blanche* is literally a ‘card blank’ – or a ‘blank card’ – or a blank piece of paper. It referred to an authorization that was signed at the bottom, but the details were left blank. And the person who received the authorization or blank document was allowed to fill in his or her own terms. So the

recipient effectively had permission to do as he or she pleased. We have that same sense in the English phrase ‘blank check.’ If you give someone a blank check, they can write in any amount they choose, and it came to mean a free pass. So *carte blanche* is the same idea, and it’s another term derived from the French word for paper, and ultimately from the Latin and Greek word for papyrus.

Also, in earlier centuries, guns fired bullets using a specific amount of gunpowder wrapped in paper. And that gave us the word *cartridge* which originally meant a gun cartridge, but today the word has a much broader sense as a small container

Again, these are all common English terms derived from a Latin and Greek word that originally referred to a strip of papyrus.

Now much of the papyrus used throughout the Mediterranean was exported from the ancient Phoenician port of Byblos. And over time, the name of the city also became synonymous with papyrus, so much so that the Greeks sometimes referred to papyrus as *biblion* from that city name. From the original sense of papyrus, the word *biblion* came to mean a document or book made from papyrus, and then it came to mean any type of book. *Biblion* ultimately gave us the word *Bible*. And it passed through Latin and French and gave us the word *bibliography* which is a list of books or resources. The word also produced the French word *bibliothèque* and the Spanish word *biblioteca* meaning a library or collection of books. Of course, English uses the word *library* which as I noted earlier comes from a word meaning the inner bark of a tree. So *library*, *bibliothèque* and *biblioteca* all have the same meaning, as well as similar origins as words for plants.

Another Greek word for papyrus was the word *papyrus*. It comes from Greek and apparently has its ultimate origins within the ancient Egyptian language. As I noted earlier, the word referred to both the plant and the writing material made from the plant. It was borrowed into Latin, and within Late Latin, it came to mean any kind of writing material made from plants – not just papyrus, but any plant. And then the word passed into French, where it became *papier*, and then it passed into English as *paper*. So the word *paper* itself is ultimately derived from *papyrus*. And as I noted at the beginning of the episode, it first appeared in English in the mid-1300s, and Geoffrey Chaucer was one of the first English writers to use the word in his poems.

So over time, paper replaced papyrus, both as a writing material and as a common word to refer to writing materials made from plants. And that process really began when the Chinese introduced paper to the Arab world in the 700s. But if the Arabs already had papyrus, why were they so curious about paper? And why were they so quick to embrace it? Well, the answer lies in the way papyrus was made.

As it turns out, even though papyrus plants grew throughout the Mediterranean, not all papyrus could be used to make the writing material. It took papyrus with a very thick reed so that the layers were firm enough to be pressed together to make a writing material. And the main place where that type of thick papyrus grew was along the Nile. That meant that Egypt had a virtual monopoly on the production and export of the writing material. And the limited supply,

combined with the fact that one particular region controlled the price, meant that papyrus tended to be expensive – if you could get it. There was only so much papyrus that could be made from the reeds that grew along the Nile. So the demand was high and the supply was always limited, and those two factors guaranteed high prices. So that's why the Arab world was looking for a cheaper alternative. Parchment was also used in the Arab world, but again, it was expensive. And that's why the Arabs were so intrigued by paper. Paper was cheaper. It wasn't necessarily cheap at this point, but it was cheap enough to compete with papyrus and parchment. And paper could be made from plants other than papyrus. So paper broke the monopoly of the Egyptian papyrus makers. [SOURCE: 'Paper: Paging Through History,' Mark Kurlansky]

Interestingly, the Arab paper makers didn't just look for local plants other than papyrus. They actually came up with another innovation. Chinese paper relied heavily on the bark of the mulberry tree which was common in the Far East, but those trees didn't grow in the Arab world. So Arab paper makers had to look elsewhere. And the innovation they developed became the standard way to make paper in the western world until the 1800s. Rather than using raw plant fibers, they actually used old rags. Now today, we think of paper as coming from trees, but that didn't become common until the 1800s. So that's actually a recent innovation. Until then, the Arab world – and later Europe – primarily used old rags. [SOURCE: 'The Written Word,' Martin Puchner]

The rags were soaked and beaten until the fibers completely broke down. Those fibers turned into pulp which was then strained and pressed and hung out to dry. The reason why rags were preferred over raw materials is because cloth fibers had already been processed. The fibers had already been partially broken down when they were turned into thread. So old rags tended to rot and deteriorate very quickly.

This process allowed the Arab world to produce a type of paper that was relatively cheap and abundant. The shift to paper was further encouraged by Arab political leaders who insisted on the use of paper in government offices. When ink was placed on paper, it soaked into the paper and became permanent. On parchment, the ink could be scraped off and the writing changed. So paper actually discouraged fraud, and that's why political leaders preferred paper for many tax and legal documents. [SOURCES: 'On Paper,' Nicholas Basbanes; 'The Arabs in History,' Bernard Lewis, p. 94]

Now Arab scribes didn't completely abandon parchment. They still used animal hides for important books and manuscripts like the Quran, but by the year 1000, even the Quran was being written on paper.

The importance of paper in the Arab world is still reflected in the word *ream* – R-E-A-M. It means a bundle of paper, and it is the basic unit used for the bundling and sale of paper. Today, it generally means 500 sheets of paper. The word *ream* in an Arabic word which can be traced back to the Mediterranean paper trade in the Middle Ages.

Now, like so many other things we've explored in the podcast, paper eventually found its way to southern Europe. Remember that much of Spain was also under Muslim rule during this earlier period. So a lot of these products and innovations entered Europe via Spain. And that's what happened with paper as well.

Paper apparently reached Spain by the 11th century. The first paper mills in Europe were built there. In fact, the first reference to a paper mill in the region is one constructed on the east coast of Spain in the year 1056. [SOURCE: 'On Paper,' Nicholas Basbanes]

A short time later, the paper industry spread to Sicily and southern Italy. From there it spread to the central Italian city of Fabriano which became a major center of paper production in the 1200s. The local craftsmen shifted from the manufacture of clothing to the production of paper. And their paper was of such high quality that it rivaled some of the parchment being used at time. The paper mills of Fabriano used water power to operate a drop hammer which helped to create the pulp needed for the paper, and that process allowed them to produce a very high quality paper at a relatively low price. It was cheaper than imported paper from the Arab world and far cheaper than the parchment used throughout Europe. [SOURCE: 'Paper: Paging Through History,' Mark Kurlansky] So paper now had both a foothold and a competitive advantage in southern Europe.

The paper-makers of Fabriano also came up with another innovation – the watermark. Remember that the pulp was poured into a mold with screen on the bottom to let the water drain out. Well, in Fabriano, they took a piece of wire and formed a specific design with it and then laid it over the mold. That wire left an imprint or mark on the pulp as it dried. And thus, that imprint came to be known as the watermark. The watermark usually indicated where the paper was made, and it was visible when the paper was held up to the light. It was an early case of commercial branding – a type of early trademark. Those marks were being incorporated into the paper of Fabriano from around the year 1276. [SOURCE: 'Paper: Paging Through History,' Mark Kurlansky] And to this day, Fabriano is still well-known for the high quality paper produced in the city.

From Italy, paper production spread northward into the heart of western Europe. In those regions, scribes had come to rely almost exclusively on parchment and vellum. As paper was introduced, many people apparently thought of it as a type of papyrus since it was made from plant fibers. They didn't really appreciate the distinctions between papyrus and paper, and apparently that's how the word *papyrus* evolved into the word *paper* within the languages of western Europe.

It's amazing that it took about five centuries for paper to make its way from the Arab world to northern Europe. At a time when so many innovations from the Near East were reaching Europe through trade and through contact during the Crusades, it seems like paper would have been embraced much sooner. But there were a couple of factors which made Europeans reluctant to switch to paper.

First, scribes, and book makers, and book buyers were concerned about the durability of paper, especially compared to parchment. It was still a common belief that an important and valuable

document needed to be written on parchment so that it would last for a long time. I mean, if you were going to spend a lot of money on a book – maybe the only book you owned – you wanted it to last as long as possible, hopefully for your lifetime and a long time thereafter. And it was thought that paper would break down very quickly. But as people became more familiar with paper, and as production techniques improved, they realized that paper could be an effective alternative to parchment. Paper might not have been as durable as parchment, but it was durable enough. It wasn't going to just crumble and fall apart as many people had feared.

The other reason why paper was slow to enter northern Europe is because it was still being made with rags, and there were only so many rags available at the time. That limited how much paper could be made, and the limited supply tended to keep the price up. So there wasn't a clear economic benefit to paper at first.

In order for Europeans to fully embrace paper, something had to happen make the price of paper so cheap that scribes and book-makers couldn't afford to ignore it. And that something was a sudden increase in linen production around the same time that paper was introduced to Europe. All of that new linen meant there were lots of rags lying around. And those rags gave those paper mills the raw material they needed to produce lots of paper – lots of cheap paper. So why was there a sudden increase in linen cloth and rags?

Well, the answer was a new technology. Actually, two new technologies. The first was a new type of loom. Prior to the 1100s, the loom used in Europe was vertical and weaving was a tedious process. The vertical loom consisted of a frame that stood upright. Lines of string hung down vertically, and the weaver passed a new line of thread horizontally back and forth through those vertical strings using an alternating pattern. So the weaver would go over one vertical string, then under the next. Over, under, over, under, all the way to the end. It was tedious and time-consuming. Then at some point in earlier centuries, someone had invented a horizontal bar that was tied to every other vertical string. That bar could be pulled forward and pushed backward to raise and lower every other vertical string. That made it easier to weave the horizontal thread through, but it was still slow and tedious.

Then in the 1100s and 1200s, a new loom appeared. This was a horizontal loom that resembled a table. It probably had its ultimate origins in China where it had been used in making silk. But in Europe, it was applied to native fabrics. In this new horizontal loom, the strings were stretched from the near side of the loom where the weaver sat to the far side of the loom on the other side. And every other one of those strings was raised and lowered just like with the old vertical loom, but in this case, the bars that raised and lowered the strings were controlled by foot pedals. So sitting down, the weaver could raise the even numbered strings by pressing the left pedal. He could then pass the thread through the gap from one side to the other using a shuttle. The shuttle was a weight that the thread was tied to, and since both hands were now free, the weaver just tossed the shuttle from left to right through the gap created when the even-numbered strings were raised. Then the weaver pressed the right pedal which raised the odd-numbered strings. He then passed the shuttle back through the gap in the opposite direction from right to left. And you can start to see how quickly the process worked with this new loom. Press the left pedal, toss the shuttle one way. Press the right pedal, toss the shuttle the other way. Left foot, right foot. Passing

the shuttle and thread back and forth from one hand to the next. Over and over again. Using this process, an entire sheet of linen cloth could be produced in no time.

In fact, it was so efficient that the spinners and spinsters who made the thread couldn't keep up. They could barely produce enough thread or yarn to satisfy the demands of the weavers with new horizontal loom. But that problem was solved with the second technological advance which I mentioned in that earlier episode about the wool industry. That new device was the spinning wheel. It made it much easier to produce thread and yarn from raw fibers. So the spinning wheel increased the production of thread, and the horizontal loom turned that thread into linen quicker and more efficiently than ever before. The two inventions were the perfect complement to each other. And during the 1200s and 1300s, they allowed for a major increase in the production of woven fabrics. Estimates suggest that there was a ten-fold increase in cloth production in Europe as a result of the horizontal loom and the spinning wheel. [SOURCE: 'Connections,' James Burke, p. 94]

Now this cloth included linen, and linen was in very high demand. It was comfortable and relatively cheap – especially with the increase in production. So people started to buy linen in large quantities, not only for clothing, but also for other products like bed sheets, table cloths, towels, veils, and so on.

It also became common during this period for people to wear linen underwear. Underwear as we know it today started to become common. I noted earlier that the word *lingerie* is derived from the word *linen*. And we also have another word which can be traced back to medieval linen cloth. That word entered English around the current point in our story in the mid-1300s. During that period, you might have heard a linen tablecloth referred to as a *diaper*. The word *diaper* in the sense of a linen cloth is first recorded in English around the year 1350. The word was borrowed from French, and it referred to a type of linen cloth made with a specific weave or pattern. It happened to be soft and absorbent, and by the 1600s, it was being used as underwear for babies which is of course the modern sense of the word *diaper* – especially in North America.

Now I've talked a lot about linen, but linen wasn't the only fabric made from plants. Europeans also made fabric and textiles from hemp.

Now today, you may associate hemp with cannabis or marijuana. And in fact, all three terms can refer to the same type of plant, but there are actually different types of cannabis. Some are high in THC which is the narcotic that gets people high. Others are very low in THC, and that is the type that was commonly used to make fabrics. This plant was known as *hemp* in Old English. It was actually similar to flax in that it produced long strands of fiber which were ideal for weaving, but it tended to produce a much coarser fabric than linen. Because it was coarse, it tended to be used for things like rope and twine.

As I noted, *hemp* is an Old English word. The original Old English version was *hænap*. Now this word is an ancient word found throughout the Germanic languages. And as we know, the Germanic languages are distinguished from the other Indo-European languages by the sound shifts known as Grimm's Law. We covered those changes early on the podcast series, and two of

those changes are at work in the word *haenap*. The Germanic ‘h’ sound evolved out of an older Indo-European ‘k’ sound. And the Germanic ‘p’ sound evolved out of an older Indo-European ‘b’ sound. So if we apply those two sound changes in reverse, that would convert *haenap* into *caenab*. And of course, we have that word *cannabis* from the same root. *Cannabis* was the Greek and Latin version of the word, and it was borrowed into English in the 1600s. So *hemp* and *cannabis* are cognate.

Now even though the word *cannabis* was borrowed in the 1600s, English already had a version of the word which had been borrowed at an earlier date. That earlier version of the word *cannabis* had passed through French, and the ‘b’ sound in the middle had shifted to a ‘v’ sound which was a common sound change within early French. So *cannabis* became *canevaz*. And in the 1200s, English borrowed that word as *canvas*. And of course, *canvas* still refers to a sturdy or coarse cloth. So believe it or not, *canvas* is just a variation of the word *cannabis*, and both words are also cognate with *hemp*. All three words are derived from the same root word.

Now given that Greek had this word and the Proto-Germanic language had this word, you might assume that the word can be traced back to the original Indo-Europeans. But most scholars think that both the Greeks in the south of Europe and the pre-Germanic tribes in north of Europe both borrowed the same root word from a nomadic people who lived in the Eurasian steppe region called the Scythians. They lived in the same general region as the original Indo-Europeans north of the Black Sea and Caspian Sea, and they had a very similar nomadic culture, but the Scythians lived in the first millenium BC, so more than a thousand years after the original Indo-Europeans.

One of the reasons why scholars think the word was borrowed from the Scythians is because the Scythians apparently encountered that form of cannabis that was high in THC somewhere in south-central Asia. That is the variety that is known today a marijuana. And they apparently realized that it could get you high. In fact, The ancient Greek historian Herodotus spent time with the Scythians, and he wrote about them placing cannabis on hot coals inside of a tent. He wrote that they breathed in the smoke and they would laugh and have good time while doing so. It seems that the Scythians introduced this variety of cannabis to western Europe. And it also seems that they called it something like **canab* which was borrowed by both the pre-Germanic tribes and the Greeks. It also passed into other languages of central and eastern Europe. It isn’t clear if the Scythians coined this word or acquired it from somewhere else, but one theory is that they borrowed the word from the Assyrian language in Mesopotamia because the Semitic languages have a very similar word which may be derived from the same root.

At any rate, whatever the ultimate source of the word, it gave us the modern words *hemp*, *cannabis* and *canvas*.

As I noted, hemp was popular for things like rope. It also produced a coarse fabric like canvas. Since it tended to be coarse, people didn’t wear much pure hemp. But hemp fibers could be combined with flax fibers when making linen. So linen was often a combination of both of these materials.

So now, let's put all these pieces together. We have hemp and flax which were both grown throughout western Europe. And both of those plants had long fibers which were ideally suited for making textiles. The spinning wheel appeared and made it much easier to turn those fibers into thread. And the horizontal loom appeared which made it much easier to turn that thread into cloth – like linen. And that increase in linen production meant that it became cheaper for people to buy linen. And linen was thin, comfortable and versatile, so people consumed a lot of it. And when it wore out, they threw it away. And voila! By the 1300s, there were linen rags and scraps everywhere. And all of those rags fueled the new paper industry that was starting to be introduced into central and northern Europe.

Those new paper mills became one of the first major recycling industries. Old rags were turned into paper, and that meant that paper was suddenly abundant – and cheap. In fact, paper production increased so much in Europe that Europeans were soon exporting paper back to the Arab world where they had originally learned how to make it.

All of this was dependent on the collection of those rags. And that also led to a new occupation – the rag collector. It had been common for centuries for people to travel door to door collecting certain scrap materials, usually bones which were ground into fertilizer. But now those scrappers started to collect linen rags as well. Over time, they became known as 'rag and bone collectors' or 'rag and bone men.' By the 1800s, that term was being used to describe someone who collects old clothes and then resells them. And it's still used today.

Another term used for these rag collectors in 1300s was *raggeman* – literally 'rag man.' It first appeared as an occupational surname in the late 1200s. In the mid-1300s, a variation of that term appeared – *ragamuffin*. Again it first appeared as a surname. It isn't clear where the '-muffin' part came from at the end or what it originally meant. It may have been an Anglicized version of a French word that mean a scoundrel or demon. At any rate, *raggamuffin* eventually came to mean a boy who was ragged, dirty or disreputable.

A much later term for a rag collector was the word *guttersnipe*. It first appeared in the 1800s, and it referred to a person who gathered rags and papers from gutters.

Again, these rag collectors were early recyclers. They gathered old rags and linens and sold them to the paper mills that were starting to pop up around western Europe.

During the 1300s, paper mills spread across continental Europe. By the late 1300s, paper mills had spread northward to France, Austria, Germany and Flanders – but not England. The first paper mill appeared in England in the middle of the next century.[*SOURCE: 'On Paper,' Nicholas Basbanes*] So at the current point in our overall story in the late 1300s, the rags that were being collected around England were being exported to paper mills across the Channel to be turned into paper. And then the paper produced on the continent was being imported into England to be used by scribes and bookmakers.

The oldest surviving paper document in England is a record book maintained in a local registry in the town of King's Lynn on the eastern coast of England. It's called the King's Lynn Red Register, and it was compiled in the year 1307. Presumably, the town had access to paper because it was a seaport, and some early paper was starting to arrive on ships from across the Channel in the early 1300s. It's fascinating that such a small local registry was keeping records with paper at that early date. The people who made that decision were definitely ahead of their time.

Even though paper was introduced to England in the 1300s, most scribes continued to use parchment and vellum. But over time, economic forces encouraged the shift to paper. By the early 1300s, paper was already six times cheaper than parchment in northern Italy. [*SOURCES: 'CONNECTIONS,' James Burke (p. 100-101); 'ON PAPER,' Basbanes, p. 63*] And it continued to get cheaper across Europe over time.

Since paper became more and more affordable, you might think that the common people across Europe could suddenly afford to buy cheap books, but that wasn't really the case. There was still one more barrier that had to be overcome for books to reach the masses, and that barrier was the cost of the labor to produce the books. It still took scribes to copy the books. There had always been a limited supply of educated scribes who could do that, and the Black Death made that problem even worse. So just as peasants were able to demand higher wages on the farm after the plague, the same was true for scribes. And that kept the price of books high even though paper was relatively cheap.

That problem wasn't solved until the scribes were replaced by machines – in other words, until automation arrived and allowed book-makers to produce books with few if any scribes at all. That type of automation arrived in the next century when Joannes Gutenberg introduced his printing press. And that final piece of technology is really the key to this story.

Paper was an important innovation. But paper alone didn't cause a revolution in book-making or record-keeping. That revolution had to wait a few more decades for the printing press to appear. The printing press gets most of the credit for the printing revolution that followed. But to be fair, the full impact of the printing press would never have been realized without cheap, abundant paper. We should really put those two innovations together.

And in fact, just as paper enabled the printing press to flourish, the printing press also allowed paper to flourish. As people demanded cheaper books produced with the press, that meant that there was a corresponding increase in the demand for paper. And paper finally reached its full potential in the 1500s and 1600s. It soon replaced parchment for most printing purposes. Some permanent records and manuscripts continued to use parchment, but by the end of the 1600s, paper was the most common writing material in western Europe. [*SOURCE: 'In the Beginning,' Alister McGrath*]

The combination of cheap paper and automated printing brought books to the masses. For the first time, many people could afford to buy their own books because books were relatively cheap. They were no longer luxury items possessed by the upper classes. The spread of books – and the spread of the knowledge contained in those books – changed European civilization.

We'll cover those developments in much more detail when we get to the printing press itself. But for now, it's worth noting how these developments impacted the English language. First, with many commoners able to buy books for the first time, they wanted books in their own language – not Latin or French. So that encouraged the production of books in English. And by the same token, for authors who wanted to compose their works in English, there was now a built-in audience willing and able to consume it. So that encouraged writers to use English rather than Latin or French. And these factors also led to the mass translation of Latin and French manuscripts into English. And as I've noted before, these developments also served to standardize English since most books printed in England were printed in London in the local dialect of London. So that became the accepted standard for the language in early Modern English. And of course, the printing press and paper combination also helped to standardize English spellings as printers adopted certain spellings to ensure consistency among their publications.

So paper, in combination with the printing press, had a tremendous impact on the evolution of English. In fact, that combination, combined with the Great Vowel Shift, are the two major events that mark the transition from Middle English to Modern English.

Despite the overall impact of paper and the printing press, there was still one problem that required a more permanent solution. And that was the supply of rags used to make all that paper. There was such a high demand for old linen rags that people were discouraged from throwing them away. Laws were passed that banned the use of linen for burial garments. That way the linen was preserved so that it could be used at a later date for paper.

Even as late as the early 1800s, a paper maker in Massachusetts used as its watermark the words "Save Rags." But then, in the mid-1800s, paper makers figured out how to make paper using wood pulp obtained from trees. And that was the innovation that eliminated the supply problems associated with rags. And it also led to the modern paper industry.

And interestingly, that development also takes us back to where we began – with the connection between trees and books. As we saw earlier, words like *book*, *library*, *codex*, *code*, *material* are all derived from words that originally referred to part of a tree. And that circle was completed in the mid-1800s when wood pulp ensured that most modern books were once again made from trees.

I'm going to conclude this episode on that note. I hope you've enjoyed this look at the history of paper and the way paper has impacted the English language. Next time, we'll continue our story as we move deeper into the period of Middle English. Over the next few episodes, we'll explore many of the great works of this period like *Piers Plowman*, John Wyclif's English Bible, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and more of the great works of Geoffrey Chaucer.

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

EPISODE 124: PIERS PLOWMAN AND PEASANT REVOLT

Welcome to the History of English Podcast – a podcast about the history of the English language. This is Episode 124: Piers Plowman and the Peasant Revolt. In this episode, we're going to explore one of the most important pieces of Middle English literature – the poem known as Piers Plowman. It actually survives in several different versions which are all presumably the product of a cleric named William Langland. The poem is highly revered by scholars, and at one time, it rivaled Geoffrey Chaucer's poetry in popularity. In fact, it was so popular that it was cited as inspiration by the leaders of a massive peasant revolt in the late 1300s. So in this episode, we're going to explore the connections between this important Middle English poem and the events that led to the first peasant uprising in England.

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 this time, I want to talk about peasants. I've actually mentioned some important developments related to peasants over the past few episodes. In some respects, the peasants were experiencing a social and economic boost in the late 1300s. The labor shortages stemming from the plague actually created a lot of opportunities for peasants – allowing them to demand more money for work and allowing some of them to accumulate a modest estate.

The rise of the peasant class is important to the story of English because the peasants were part of the traditional English-speaking class of England. So the rise of the peasants actually meant that there was also a corresponding rise in the value of English. In the second half of the 1300s, English made a lot of gains. It became the official language of Parliament and the Courts, and it started to be used in the schoolrooms for the first time since the Conquest. And as we'll see, more and more writers were choosing to compose their literature in English.

So as we look at the late 1300s, we can see that both the peasants and their language were on the rise. But that rise was met with fierce resistance from the upper classes. Much of peasants' gains came at the expense of the nobles and the gentry. So the upper classes used their power and influence in Parliament to push back and to try to keep the peasants in their place.

In an earlier episode, we saw that they passed a law during the Black Death which limited what the peasants could charge for their labor. It actually rolled back wages to the rates that existed prior to the plague. King Edward also outlawed most sports other than archery. The sports that were banned mostly consisted of ball games which were mostly played by commoners. It was more important for them to practice for war than to play football. Again, to an extent, this restriction was aimed at peasants and commoners.

In the same year that Edward tried to restrict the sports played by commoners, Parliament took it a step further and actually tried to restrict what they ate and what they wore. The year was 1363, and this law was called the Statute Concerning Diet and Apparel. The law divided English society into several distinct classes from lords at the top to farm laborers at the bottom. In

between, in descending order, were knights, esquires, yeomen and servants. Most of these classifications and divisions were based on a person's land holdings or annual income received from those land holdings.

The law is interesting because it represents yet another attempt by the upper classes to control the rising tide of the lower classes after the Black Death. Peasants were starting to acquire a degree of wealth, and many of them spent their money on clothes that were typically worn by the nobles and the gentry. Before the Black Death, a person's social class could be roughly determined by the clothes they wore. But now, those old distinctions were starting to break down. Peasants were starting to dress like lesser nobles. So the nobles in Parliament tried to put a stop to that. And they did that by regulating what the lower classes could wear.

This law had a lot of specific provisions which aren't really important to this episode, but in general, it said that the fabric that could be worn within a particular class was limited to a specific value. The lower the class, the lower the value of the cloth that could be worn. The poorest peasants – the plowmen, herders and other farm workers – could wear cheap fabrics that could be made locally. That included the fabrics I've talked about in earlier episodes of the podcast like wool, linen and hemp. But the upper classes were permitted to wear clothing made from very expensive fabrics like silk.

Silk had its origins in the Far East, and the word *silk* was borrowed from Latin and Greek during the Old English period. Even though the Anglo-Saxons were familiar with silk, very few of them actually used it or wore it. It was rare and expensive, and only the wealthiest nobles had access to it and could afford it. By the current point in our story in the 1300s, the production of silk had spread to Italy, and there was even some limited silk production around Paris, but it was still a very expensive fabric in England.

Silk was smooth and luxurious. It was easy to dye and it held its color very well, so it tended to be more vibrant and colorful than other fabrics. That's why nobles loved it so much.

Europeans also discovered other types of fabric made from silk like satin and velvet. These related fabrics were discovered by northern Europeans during the Crusades, and by the 1300s, they were also reaching England. The words *satin* and *velvet* were both borrowed into the English in the 1300s, with *satin* appearing for the first time in the writings of Geoffrey Chaucer.

Another common material regulated by the statute was fur. Fur was worn as clothing, and it was often used as a trim and lining for other clothing. Under this new law, the higher quality furs could only be worn by the upper classes. The lower classes were limited to cheaper furs made from common animals like lambs, rabbits, foxes and even cats.

So only the upper classes were allowed to wear expensive furs along with silk, and satin and velvet. They were also allowed to wear expensive jewelry. The word *jewel* was borrowed from French in the 1200s, and many of the words for precious stones were borrowed in the 1300s like *emerald*, *diamond*, *ruby* and *pearl*. Again, these stones were mostly associated with the upper

classes. And even during a period when some peasants were able to afford them, the law now prevented the peasants from wearing them.

This law regulating clothing was only on the books for one year, but it was an early indication of a growing class conflict that was about to come to a head.

For the peasants, there was no better symbol of the affluent upper class than the king's son John of Gaunt. As we've seen in recent episodes, the English royal family was experiencing a collective health crisis during the period. The queen died. And the king largely retreated from public life due to old age and senility. Their eldest son Edward, known as the Black Prince, became sick during his campaigns in northern Spain. He retired to England and lived in seclusion as his health declined. The next oldest brother Lionel also died during this period. That left the third brother John of Gaunt as the most powerful noble in England. He was already one of the richest men in the country after he inherited the massive Lancastrian lands in the north from his wife's family.

His wife was Blanche, and as we saw a couple of episodes back, she also died during this period, and her death was commemorated by Geoffrey's Chaucer's poem called the Book of the Duchess. Chaucer remained very close to John of Gaunt during this period. In fact, during this period, Chaucer's wife and her sister were both attendants in the royal court. In the early 1370s, Chaucer's wife was working in Gaunt's massive palace in London known as the Savoy. And I mention that palace because it exemplified Gaunt's wealth, and it was yet another source of resentment by the peasants and commoners. The palace was located on the banks of the Thames west of the city, and it was filled with beautiful and expensive items. It was a symbol of wealth and excess.

The people also blamed Gaunt for the English losses in France. The Hundred Year's War raged on, but from the late 1360s through the early 1370s, France racked up one victory after another, reclaiming almost all of its territory from the English forces. In 1373, Gaunt launched a new military campaign in France in an effort to stem the tide, but it was a complete failure. The French avoided a direct battle, and half of Gaunt's soldiers died of disease and hunger. This failure, combined with all of the other prior losses, left England with control of Calais on the northern coast of France and a small narrow strip along the southwestern coast. And that was it. All of the other English gains in France had been lost. Not all of that was due to Gaunt, but as the leading noble, he got a lot of the blame.

In the year 1376, all of this came to a head with the Parliament that met that year. The Commons took a leading role in that Parliament which became known as the Good Parliament. They focused much of their attention on what they considered to be abuses by leading nobles and government officials. It was partly an attempt to curtail some of Gaunt's influence over the government. They impeached several government officials close to Gaunt. Impeachment was a new proceeding, and this parliament established the procedure by which future impeachments were conducted. The Commons formally accused the officials of wrong-doing, and the Lords acted as judges in the matter. This procedure became standard in England, and was later adopted in the US Constitution where the lower chamber – the House of Representatives – formally

accuses a government official of wrongdoing, and the upper chamber – the Senate – tries the matter and can remove the official from office. All of this has its origins with the Good Parliament in 1376.

Now while the Good Parliament was engaged in those impeachment proceedings, the Black Prince died. After several years of declining health, he finally succumbed to his illness. The old king was still alive, but with the prince's death, it meant there was a potential issue concerning the succession. The Black Prince had a young son named Richard, and he was technically next in line to the throne. But many in Parliament thought John of Gaunt was going to try to usurp the throne. It was probably an unfounded fear, but nevertheless, they declared young Richard to be the duly authorized heir.

Despite all the accomplishments of the so-called Good Parliament, they were ultimately for naught because early the following year, John of Gaunt called a new Parliament known to history as the Bad Parliament. Gaunt carefully selected the representatives so that he ended up with a very friendly assembly this time. And this new Parliament proceeded to declare almost all of the actions of the Good Parliament to be illegal.

This new Parliament didn't just revoke the actions of the prior Parliament. It also issued some new legislation of its own. One of the things it did was to pass a new tax in part to help John of Gaunt continue the war with France. But it wasn't just any tax. It was a new kind of tax called a poll tax. This was a tax on every person in England over 14 years old.

Now previously, the taxes were levied on property – either land or livestock or other property. So the tax burden mostly fell upon the nobles and the gentry, but this new tax was levied on everybody – even the peasants. And the poorest peasant paid the same tax as the richest noble. In fact, it was worse than that. Since it was levied by person and not by property, a married peasant couple had to pay the twice as much as a single person. If they had an adult child living with them, it was triple the tax. If an elderly in-law lived in the household, it was four-times the tax. Needless to say, this was not a popular idea – at least not among the peasants. So the hatred of Gaunt and his supporters grew even more intense. We have to keep in mind that the government had already passed laws that limited the wages that peasants could charge for their labor. So now, on top of that, they were being hit with a brand-new personal tax. So they were getting hit from both ends. And this was only the first poll tax. The government would levy two more versions of the tax over the next four years.

Now you may be wondering why this tax is known as a poll tax. Well, the word *poll* appears to be an early loanword from Dutch, and it meant 'head.' So a poll tax was literally a 'head tax' because it was a tax on every head or every person. The word *poll* soon came to refer to the process of counting every head or every vote, and that produced the modern sense of the word – as in a poll to determine public opinion. But that original sense of the word as head also survives in another interesting word – the word *tadpole*. A tadpole is very young toad or frog that has left its egg and still resembles a small fish. It hasn't developed any legs yet, so people once thought of it as nothing more than a frog's head with a tail. Thus, it was called a *tadpole*. *Tad* is an early

form of *toad*, and *pole* meant head. So a *tadpole* is literally a ‘toad head.’ So if anyone ever asks you what the connection is between frogs and voting, now you know.

Again, this poll tax – or ‘head tax’ – was levied by Parliament with the consent of John of Gaunt – who was essentially ‘the man behind the throne.’ But a few weeks later, his father King Edward III finally died after several years of declining health. He had reigned as king for 50 years – one of the longest reigns of any English king. And with Edward’s death, the throne passed to his grandson Richard – the young son of the Black Prince. Richard was only 10 years old, and since England had a prior king named Richard the Lionheart, the young boy became King Richard II.

Many people still thought that the boy’s uncle John of Gaunt would try to usurp the throne, but that never happened. Gaunt recognized and supported his nephew. Nevertheless, given the hatred that many people had for Gaunt, and given that the new king was just a child, many people continued to perceive Gaunt as the man behind the throne – the person pulling the strings in the background. And that perception lingered, even when it wasn’t necessarily the case.

Now around the time that Richard II became King of England, and perhaps the very same year, a priest from West Midlands named William Langland was completing a long, extended poem which became one of the most popular works of English literature in the late Middle Ages. That poem is known as ‘Piers Plowman’ – or ‘Williams’ Vision of Piers Plowman.’ Now to be accurate, the version of the poem that appeared around this time was actually a revised and extended version of a poem which Langland had begun a few years earlier. But the version that appeared around the year 1377 is considered by many scholars to be the definitive version of the poem.

Over 50 copies of the poem survive from the Middle English period which indicates popularity of the poem at the time. That’s a lot of copies, but none of them are the original version of the poem. All the surviving copies were made from earlier versions. And in fact, scholars have determined that there were actually three different versions of the poem – each composed at different times. The earliest draft was composed sometime in the 1360s or early 1370s. That earliest draft is the shortest version and is known today as Text A. It appears that it was essentially a first draft and wasn’t finished at the time.

Then around the current point in our story in the late 1370s, the text was revised and significantly expanded. This second version is known as Text B, and it is twice as long as the original version. Most scholars think it was composed early in the reign of Richard II because one of the passages appears to allude to him as the new king. This second version appears to be more of a complete version, and it is the one that has attracted most of the attention of scholars over the years.

Then in the following decade – the 1380s – it was further revised. The overall length remained about the same, but many of the provisions were rewritten. And that later version is known as Text C.

Now most scholars believe that all three versions were composed by the same author who kept modifying the text over the years, but there is a competing line of thought that other people were responsible for some of the revisions. There's no way to know for certain.

Now I said the author – or primary author – was William Langland. But like most poems of this period, the name of the author is not clearly stated. The name William Langland actually comes from notes contained in two of the surviving copies which identify the author by that name. The poem also makes repeated references to a 'Will' throughout the poem who appears to be the author.

Very little is known about Langland, apart from a few autobiographical statements in the poem. It is assumed that he was a priest from the southwest Midlands in part because the poem begins in Malvern Hills which is located in that region.

One thing that stands out about the poem is the fact it does not use rhyming verse which had become somewhat standard by this point. It actually uses alliteration in the style of Old English poetry. Now this isn't the only poem from this period to harken back to that older style. Sir Gawain and the Green Knight also adopted that style. In fact, there was a general revival of that style in the second half of the 1300s. Rhyming poetry was common in Late Latin and early French, and that style had been adopted in England after the Norman Conquest. So it had an basic association with French poetry. And one theory is that during this period when English was in the ascent and poets were returning to English for their poetry, there was a sense that they had to revert back to the poetic style of the Anglo-Saxons. In other words, if you were going to compose proper English poetry, you had to do it in the traditional style of the Old English poets.

This idea appears to have been strong in the north and west of England. Most of the poems that use alliteration during this period come from those regions. Meanwhile, in the south and east – especially around London – poets mainly used rhyming verse. And as we've seen, that was true for Geoffrey Chaucer who was basically a London poet. In fact, Chaucer actually alluded to this difference in poetic styles in the Canterbury Tales.

In the Parson's Tale, Chaucer gives the following lines to the Parson:

But trusteth wel, I am a Southern man,
I can not geste – rum, ram, ruf – by lettre.

In Modern English, it reads:

But trust well, I am a Southern man,
I can not recite poetry – rum, ram, ruf – by letter.

So Chaucer is essentially mocking this style of alliteration by referring to it as 'rum, ram, ruf.' And he says that he doesn't use that style because he is from the south of England.

At any rate, Piers Plowman does use that traditional style of alliteration. It's possible that Langland was intentionally trying to compose a uniquely English poem and that he was rejecting French influences.

The poem is a very Christian poem, but it is also a rebuke of the Church and most Church officials who are depicted as corrupt and mostly interested in money and wealth. The poem embraces a poor peasant named Piers Plowman as the ideal Christian.

The poem also rails against Church officials who sold pardons and indulgences. That was considered to be a way for wealthy people to buy their way out of sin or shorten their time in purgatory, and it was considered by many to be a money-grab by the Church.

Beyond the Church, the poem also goes after most other elements of society who are depicted as lazy and corrupt and too consumed with material wealth. So in this regard, the poem taps into the resentment that the peasants had for the upper classes – especially a figure like John of Gaunt who seemed to personify all that they thought was wrong with the nobility.

In fact, Langland had criticism for just about everybody. He saw corruption everywhere, and he condemned it throughout his poem. In many respects, the poem is a long, protracted sermon. Almost all of the characters are allegories. They appear in human form, but they represent specific concepts. So we encounter characters like Truth and Conscience and Reason and Patience. These characters interact with each other and often debate and argue with other. Along the way, they deliver messages about theology and philosophy, even though the intended messages are sometimes difficult to discern. In fact, the word 'difficult' is often used to describe this poem because it's complex and philosophical and doesn't always follow a single storyline or narrative. But let me give you a quick overview of the poem and, along the way, I'll focus on what the poem has to say about the life of peasants and the state of their language in the late 1300s.

First of all, the poem is dream vision – or actually a series of dream visions. That was a popular literary style in the Middle Ages, and we saw Chaucer use the same basic approach a couple of episodes back in his early poem called *The Book of Duchess*. In *Piers Plowman*, the poem begins with the poet falling asleep by a stream. Here are the opening lines – first in Modern English:

In a summer season, when the sun was soft
I dressed myself in shrouds as if I were a shepherd
in a habit of a hermit unholy of works
and wandered in this world hearing wonderful events.
But one May morning on Malvern Hills
out of the unknown a marvelous thing happened
I was very tired and went to rest
under a broad bank beside a stream.
And as I lay down and leaned back, and looked on the waters,
I slumbered and slept, it sounded so merry.

Here's the same passage in the original Middle English – and notice the alliteration:

In a somer seson · whan soft was the sonne
I shope me in shroudes · as i a shepe were
In habite as an heremite · vnholý of workes
Went wyde in þis world · wondres to here
Ac on a May mornýng · on Maluerne hulles
Me byfel a ferly · of fairy me thouȝte
I was wery forwandred · and went me to reste
Vnder a brode banke · bi a bornes side
And as I lay and lened · and loked on þe wateres
I slombred in a slepyng · it sweyued so merye.

The poet then describes a dream in which he awoke and saw a tower on a hill and a deep, dark valley below. Between the tower and the valley was a beautiful field full of people – both poor and rich all working and wandering about. There were plowmen and farm workers who worked hard at planting and sowing. The poet says that they earned what selfish men destroy with their greed.

In addition to the plowmen, there were merchants and minstrels. There was a pardoner selling indulgences, and the poet says that ignorant people put their trust in him.

There were also other clerics of varying degrees – many of whom complained to the bishops that their parishes were depleted since the plague.

Then came the king preceded by his knights. The poet says that the king, together with his knights and the clergy, arranged it so that the common people worked the them and provided their living for them.

We then get a fascinating passage where the poet describes over a thousand rats and mice coming together to discuss a dilemma they faced. There is a cat at court who appeared from time to time and pounced on them and tossed them around. If they complained to the cat, the cat would scratch and claw and terrorize them. One of the rats proposed a solution. He said that they should find a collar with a bell on it and place it around the cat's neck. That way they could hear the cat coming, and they could avoid his wrath. The rats all agreed that this is a good idea, so they found a collar with a bell on it. But there was one problem. As the poet writes:

But when the bell was brought and on the necklace hanged
There was not a rat among them for all the realm of France
That was willing to bind the bell about the cat's neck

Here's the original Middle English passage:

Ac þo þe belle was ybouȝt · and on þe beiȝe hanged
Pere ne was ratoun in alle þe route · for alle þe rewme of Fraunce
þat dorst haue ybounden þe belle · aboute þe cattis nekke

So no rat was bold enough to carry out the plan. Another rat stepped forward and acknowledged that even if the cat was killed, another would take its place. So it was better to just leave the cat alone.

Now this passage is interesting for a couple of reasons. First, most scholars think this passage was an allusion to the English Parliament at the time. The rats and the mice were the Commons and the Nobles, and the cat that was threatening them was John of Gaunt. This connection becomes much more obvious in the next passage which reads:

“It’s a pretty miserable court where the cat is a kitten.”
Scripture, If you care to read it, would support him
“Woe to the land where the king is a child!”

That last sentence is from Ecclesiastes in the Bible, and in the poem it seems to be a clear reference to the new boy-king Richard II. He was a child, and using the analogy to a cat, he was also a kitten. That’s part of the reason why scholars think this B version of the poem was composed around the time that Richard became king in 1377.

Now this passage about the bell around the cat’s neck is also the first reference we have to a phrase that you may be familiar with – “to bell the cat.” It usually refers to a situation where a person undertakes a risky endeavor or has a good idea but can’t complete the mission without great harm. It stems from this story or fable about a group of mice trying to place a bell around a cat’s neck. The fable is actually much older than Piers Plowman, but Piers Plowman is the first time that the fable and the phrase were presented in an English document.

The passage then goes on to say that the mice should focus on their own business and not try to bother the cat. This gets to one of the underlying themes of the poem – that people should work hard and do their jobs as required by God’s law and not harm or take advantage of other people. That’s why the plowman is such an ideal character. He works the land very hard every day and doesn’t get involved in political intrigue or corrupt activities.

In the next part of the poem, the poet is approached by a beautiful woman who identifies herself as the Holy Church. She explains that the tower on the hill is Truth which is an essential aspect of God. And the valley below the hill is the place where the devil resides. The people occupy the place in the middle – what the Anglo-Saxons called the Middle Garden or Middle Earth.

The poet asks her to show him the way to Truth, and she launches into a theological discussion about the nature of Truth and God. She says that it is important to act properly, and that the wealthy and powerful should have pity on the poor and treat them with humility. Here’s a passage from the slightly older A Text of the poem – first in Modern English:

For you may be someone truthful with your tongue, and profit honestly
And you may be as chaste as a child that weeps in a church;
But unless you really love and lend to the poor
a goodly share of the goods that God gives you
you have no more credit in attending mass and saying prayers
than a peasant girl desired by no man has in keeping her maidenhood
for James the gentle judged in his books,
that faith without actions is worth absolutely nothing,
It's as dead as a doornail unless followed by deeds.

Now the same passage in Middle English:

Forthy beth trowe of your tonges, and trewlyche wyne,
And ek be chast as a chylde that in the cherche wepys;
But ye love lely and lene the pore,
Of such gode as God sent goudlyche departyn,
Ye have no more meryte in masse ne in houres
Than Malkyn of hire maydynhede, þat no man desyres
For Jamys the gentyl jugyd in his bokys,
That feyth withoute fet is febelere than noughth,
And ded as a dorenayl, but yif the dede folwe.

Now not only does this passage emphasize the importance of doing good deeds, especially for the benefit of the poor, it also contains the first recorded use of the phrase 'dead as a doornail' in an English document.

I mentioned that phrase a few episodes back about occupational surnames. It's a phrase associated with blacksmiths, and it refers to a bent nail. A bent nail was useless, so it was essentially dead. And bent nails were commonly used to fasten the boards used to make doors. So 'dead as a doornail' referred to a bent nail used in making a door, but it was also a way to emphasize that something was useless. And notice that it also uses alliteration – 'dead as a doornail.' That's probably why the phrase became so popular because it rolled off the tongue. And it also meant that it was perfect to use in a poem based on alliteration.

We're then introduced to Lade Mede – a central figure in the early part of the poem. In Old and Middle English, the word *mede* meant a reward or payment or compensation. But it also had a secondary sense as a bribe or corrupt payment. And in this poem, Lady Mede represents both concepts. She first appears in the guise of a wealthy woman dressed in a robe trimmed with fur, and a dress of made of expensive scarlet cloth, and wearing rings inset with diamonds, rubies and sapphires. If we think back to that law that defined what the various classes of people could wear, Lade Mede definitely represented the highest class of society. We're told that she had done a great deal of harm and had told many lies. She is engaged to marry to the character known as False who is enamored with her wealth. The character of Theology intervenes and declares that God intended that Lady Mede marry Honesty – not False. This is because God intended that

honest laborers should receive the reward of Lade Mede. It is decided to take the dispute to the king's court where all disputes are ultimately decided.

The King hears the dispute and eventually calls in Reason to provide his testimony. Reason sides against Lady Mede and she is dismissed from the court.

Reason then goes out to the field described at the beginning of the poem and begins to preach to the people gathered there. The people listen to his message and decide to repent. This includes the Seven Deadly Sins. One by one, the characters representing each of the Seven Deadly Sins come forward and confess.

The character of Repentance encourages the confessions. When Greed confesses, we get the following exchange between Repentance and Greed – first in Modern English:

Repentance asked Greed, “Have you ever repented or made restitution?”
Greed replied, “Yes, once I was staying at an inn with a group of merchants and I arose when they were resting and rifled their bags.”
“That was not restitution,” said Repentance, “that was a robber’s theft. You deserved to be hanged for that more than for any other sin you’ve shown.”
“But I thought rifling was restitution,” said Greed, adding “I never learned to read a book, and I do not know a word of French. No one does who comes from the farthest end of Norfolk.

Here’s the same passage in the original Middle English:

Repentestow euere quod repentance · ne restitucioun madest
“Ȝus, ones I was herberwed,” quod he · with an hep of chapmen
I roos whan þei were arest · and yrifled here males
That was no restitucioun quod repentance · but a robberes thefte
þow haddest better worthy · be hanged þerfore
þan for al þat · þat þow hast here shewed
I wende ryflynge were restitucioun quod he · for I lerned neuere rede on boke
And I can no frenche in feith · but of þe ferthest ende of norfolke

Now I mentioned that passage for a couple of reasons. First, it tells us something very interesting about the state of French in England in late 1300s. Greed implies that he is from Norfolk on the eastern tip of England, and he says that he doesn’t really understand what the word *restitution* means because it’s a French word and no one from Norfolk speaks French. So this passage implies that knowledge of French was mostly limited to urban areas like London. But out in the countryside, most common people didn’t speak French, even though they were often exposed to new French words. And very often, they didn’t really understand the precise meaning of those words. That process helps to explain why loanwords often take on slightly different meanings within a new language.

The other reason why I wanted to mention that passage is because it contains the first recorded use of the word *rifle* as a verb meaning ‘to plunder and steal.’ Just like Greed, we might rifle

though someone's belongings. That word is interesting for another reason because it also gave us the term *riff-raff* which is often used as a derisive term people who are poor or low-class. The word *raff* or *raffle* had a sense of waste or refuse or leftover bits. And sometimes, those two similar sounding words were put together – *rifle* meaning plunder and *raffle* meaning waste – and together, those words meant the process of looking through waste for something valuable. More specifically, it referred to the searching of dead bodies on a battlefield for anything of value. To 'riffle and raffle' or to 'rif and raff' eventually gave us the term *riff-raff* for the people who stole from the bodies of dead soldiers. And since those people were considered the dregs of society, the term came to mean any type of trashy person. For the nobles and gentry, the term *riff-raff* was often used as a general term for peasants and the lower classes.

The tendency to associate the lower classes with crime and bad behavior is reflected in several other words from this period as well. An unfree peasant was called a *villein* – V-I-L-L-E-I-N – from a Latin word meaning a farmhand. But since peasants were perceived as having no morals and prone to bad behavior, the word *villein* evolved into our modern word *villain* – V-I-L-L-A-I-N meaning a bad or evil person.

The same thing happened with the word *vulgar*. It originally meant common or ordinary. It didn't necessarily have a negative meaning. We still have some of that original sense of *vulgar* in the related word *divulge* which comes from the same Latin root. If you divulge something, you make it common knowledge. And that knowledge becomes *vulgar* in the original sense of the word meaning 'common' or 'commonly known.' You might also remember that the Latin dialects spoken by the common people around Western Europe were called the Vulgar Latin dialects because they were the dialects of the common people. But once again, over time, the word *vulgar* acquired a sense of something dirty or profane.

The same thing happened with the word *lewd*. I've noted before that Middle English documents often used the phrase 'learned and lewed' to refer to all people of society. The 'learned' were the educated people, and the 'lewed' were the common uneducated people. But once again, over time, 'lewed' or *lewd* came to mean something dirty or profane.

So *villain*, *vulgar* and *lewd* have all acquired a negative or pejorative sense over time because they were originally associated with commoners and peasants. And the term *riff-raff* has a similar history. It was originally a negative term for people who plundered the bodies of dead soldiers, but since most of those people were peasants and since peasants were often viewed with derision by the upper classes, it became a more general term for peasants over time.

Now returning to the poem, after Greed confesses and repents, the other Seven Deadly Sins also repent. That includes that character of Sloth who is depicted as a lazy monk. He is filthy and barely awake. He belches then thumps his chest and says 'Bless Me.' Then he stretches, yawns, and falls back asleep, snoring loudly. Repentance tells him to wake up and make his confession. Sloth replies with the following passage – first in Modern English:

If my life depended on it, I couldn't be bothered to open my eyes and look.
I can't say my 'Pater Noster' or Lord's Prayer as the priest sings it,
but I can sing the rhymes of Robin Hood and Randolph of Chester,
However, of Our Lord or Our Lady - I know not the least that was ever made.

Now in the original Middle English:

If I shulde deye bi þis day · me liste nouȝte to loke
I can nouȝte parfitly my pater noster · as þe prest it syngeth
But I can rymes of Robyn hood · and Randolf erle of Chestre
Ac neither of owre lorde ne of owre lady · þe leste þat euere was made.

Now this passage once again illustrates the poet's contempt for many members of the clergy. He uses a monk to represent the sin of Sloth. Sloth is depicted as lazy and ignorant. He doesn't really know the important prayers of the Church, but he knows all about secular songs like the ballads of Robin Hood. And this is actually the first reference to Robin Hood in all of English literature. And the fact that the poem mentions Robin Hood in passing without explanation suggests that everyone knew who he was by that point. So the legend of Robin Hood had spread throughout the country in song in the oral tradition.

I've noted before that there are some fascinating contrasts between the ballads of Robin Hood and the legends of King Arthur. In modern culture, they are probably the two most well-known literary figures of the Middle Ages, but Arthur was a product of the upper classes whereas Robin Hood was very much a product of the lower classes.

Arthur was a king, surrounded by his knights of the Round Table, all bound by notions of chivalry. As we've seen before, his legend was shaped in literature that was mostly composed in Latin and French, so it was read by the educated classes.

At the other end of the spectrum, Robin Hood was an outlaw – a thief who stole from the rich and gave to the poor. He lived in the forest, not a royal court. And his legend was spread in English in the oral tradition among commoners and peasants. By the time the name appeared in literature in Piers Plowman, the ballads and songs were already well-known. And the poem suggests that the songs were even popular among the monks and members of the clergy.

Now after the Seven Deadly Sins confess and repent, the gathered throng of people decide to go searching for Truth which again is an aspect of God, but no one knows the way. They ask a man dressed as a pilgrim assuming that he has traveled far and wide and might know the way, but he doesn't know either. At that moment, a plowman steps forward. This is Piers Plowman who makes his first appearance deep into the poem. He informs everyone that he knows the way to Truth. Here's the passage – first in Modern English:

By Saint Peter, said a plowman, and put forth his head
I know him as well as a clerk knows his books
Conscience and Kind Wit directed me to his place

And they made me ensure them that I would serve him forever
both sowing and planting for as long as I have the strength.

Here's the same passage in the original Middle English:

Peter quod a plowman · and put forth his hed
I knowe hym as kyndely · as clerke doþ his bokes
Conscience and kynde witte · kenned me to his place
And deden me suren hym sikerly · to serue hym for euere
Bothe to sowe and to sette · þe while I swynke myghte

Piers says that he has tended Truth's flock and taken care of Truth's farm for over 40 years, and he can lead the gathered throng to the place where Truth resides, but first he has to plow a half acre of land. To avoid a long wait, many of the people chip in and help. After a few hours, Piers goes to see who is working and who is sitting around doing nothing. Piers becomes irate at the people not working. He yells at them says they can starve to death for all he cares. Some start to make excuses, and others become angry and tell Piers that they can do as they please. Piers says he will make them pay for their laziness, and he calls out for Hunger to appear. The character of Hunger immediately arrives and grabs the layabouts and makes them suffer and starve. Piers eventually tells Hunger to spare their lives, and the lazy men eat and finally start to do some work.

Piers thanks Hunger for coming and teaching everyone an important lesson. He bids Hunger farewell, but Hunger says that he isn't going anywhere until he has his meal for the day. Piers says that he doesn't have very much to eat. He has a few loaves of bread, and little bit of cheese and few greens. But he doesn't have anything that would make a hearty meal. He says:

And I swear on my soul I have no salt bacon
Nor any cock's eggs, by Christ, nor mincemeat to make.

In the original Middle English, it reads:

And ȝet I sey by my soule · I haue no salt bacoun
Ne no kokeney bi cryst · coloppes forto maken

So there was no bacon and eggs with mincemeat. The reason I read that passage to you is because it contains the first recorded use of the term 'cock's eggs' – or in Middle English *kokeney*. *Cock's* was often rendered as *koken* in Middle English, and *ey* – spelled E-Y – was the Old English word for *egg*. You might recall from earlier episodes that this old word *ey* and *egg* are cognate. *Egg* is actually the Norse version of the word borrowed from the Vikings. And it eventually replaced the native English word *ey*. So a 'cock's egg' was a 'koken ey,' or as it's rendered here, *kokeney*. And again, this passage contains the first known use of that term.

Now you're probably wondering why I'm telling you about a 'cock's egg' or *kokeney*. Well, it's because *kokeney* is the original version of the word *cockney* as in a native of East London and also the term for the very distinctive London accent associated with that community. So how did a word first used in Piers Plowman for an egg come to refer to a well-known English accent?

Well, let's look at closer at that term. A cock is a male chicken, so it doesn't actually lay eggs. You have to have a female chicken – or hen – to get eggs. So what is a 'cock's egg' anyway? Well, it apparently had two meanings. One meaning was a very small or deformed egg, so the type of egg produced by a chicken that wasn't supposed to lay eggs at all. Since these eggs were deformed, they tended to be cheap and unwanted. The better eggs might be sold at the local market, but peasants would keep the 'cock's eggs' to eat at home. It also appears that the term was sometimes used a child's term for an egg.

At any rate, an egg was easily broken, so you had to take care of it, and hens nurtured their eggs for a long time waiting for them to hatch. So within English, the term *kokeney* meaning 'cock's egg' came to refer to a young child that was over-nurtured and over-protected. From there, it was extended to an adult who was weak or soft and unable to fend for himself. It often had the sense of an effeminate man. And in the countryside, the peasants thought of themselves as strong and self-sufficient and hard working, but they thought of city dwellers as soft and pampered and unwilling to do hard labor. So *cockney* was extended again to refer to people who lived in cities. It became an insulting term for a city-dweller. And by the 1600s, the term had become restricted to the people who lived in London – the largest city in the country. By the 1800s, the term was being applied to the accent of the Londoner's who spoke the very distinct dialect of the city, especially in the East End. Since this was a non-standard dialect, it was often ridiculed and stigmatized and became associated with the working-class of London. And there's no better example of that class distinction that the musical and movie "My Fair Lady" based on the play Pygmalion by George Bernard Shaw. In that story, we have the phonetics professor Henry Higgins trying to teach Eliza Doolittle how to lose her Cockney accent and speak 'proper' English.

And I wanted to make that connection for you because Cockney still stands in contrast to the standard dialect of England known as Received Pronunciation. Cockney still retains some of that perception as a working-class accent, so it makes sense that it would have its ultimate origin as a peasant term for eggs first used in Piers Plowman.

Now returning to the poem, Piers can't offer bacon and eggs to Hunger, but the poor people gather some peas and beans and apples and feed him what they can. Eventually, the harvest produces enough food to satisfy Hunger and he falls asleep. And as soon as he falls asleep, the lazy men once again stop working, and the beggars and poor peasants will only eat the finest foods no longer content with the basic rations that had been available when Hunger was awake.

Truth hears what is happening and offers Piers and all who help him on the farm a general pardon from all their sins. The pardon is written in Latin, so a priest steps forward and offers to translate it into English for Piers. As it turns out, the pardon consists of only two lines: The first line is "Do well and have well and God will receive your soul," and the second line is "Do evil

and have evil and the devil will take your soul.” Piers rejects the pardon and tears it up – leading to an argument between Piers and the priest. The argument is so loud that it wakes the poet from his dream. Thinking back on his dream, the poet isn’t sure why Piers tore up the pardon, but he thinks about it some more and concludes that to ‘do well’ as stated in the pardon is more important than the pardon itself. On Judgment Day, pardons won’t mean a thing. The only thing that will matter is if you followed the directive to ‘do well.’

Now this basically marks the end of the first version of the poem – Text A. And many scholars think that version ends here because it wasn’t finished yet. When the second version appeared around the current point in our story in the late 1370s, it contained an extended section after this point which essentially doubled the length of the overall poem. In this extended section, the poet goes on a search to understand the true meaning of what it means to ‘Do Well,’ as well as the related concepts of ‘Do Better’ and ‘Do Best.’ These are the sections that many scholars find most challenging because they are very loosely structured with lots of digressions and Biblical analysis and theological discussions.

Ultimately, the poet realizes that Piers Plowman epitomizes the concept of ‘Do Well.’ He does as the Bible instructs. He works hard, does his job, is selfless, and is never tempted by wealth or other corruptions. That’s why he knows Truth so well. The poet starts to conclude that Piers is actually Christ. And in the final passages, the poet dreams of the crucifixion of Christ, but Christ appears in the dream as Piers Plowman. The poet realizes that they are in fact one and the same.

Now, from all of that, you may be able to see why this poem gained an audience among the peasants and lower classes of England. In an era when most literature was aimed at the upper classes who were more likely to be literate, this poem was somewhat unusual in that its hero was a poor peasant man. Of course, most peasants were not able to read and write, and very few could afford a book, so it seems that most peasants learned about the poem through others – especially through preachers who picked up the message of the poem. And one of those preachers was apparently a man named John Ball.

John Ball was a ‘hedge priest’ meaning that he didn’t have a specific home or a specific church. He simply traveled from place to place sleeping under the hedges if need be. For many years, he traveled and preached around the country – often to peasants who gathered to hear his sermons. He preached in English to English-speaking peasants. And he delivered a radical message – that the common people were being held down by the lords and nobles who exploited them. He said that there should be no nobility at all other than the king. It harkened back to a time before the Normans arrived and before the Norman ruling class had been imposed. Needless to say, the authorities were not impressed with this radical preacher, and he was thrown into prison on several occasions. But John Ball continued to preach, and he encouraged his followers to bide their time, waiting for the right time to rise up. And that time came in the year 1381.

In that year, Parliament levied the third poll tax on the people of England. The first in 1377 had hit the peasants hard, and many simply didn’t pay it. Two years later, another poll tax was levied, but that tax was based on a person’s wealth, so the peasants didn’t have to pay as much as the nobles. But two years after that – in 1381 – a third poll tax was levied. And like the first, this one

required everyone to pay the same amount. And the more people in the household, the more that had to be paid. Once again, many peasants tried to avoid paying it, so the government sent tax collectors to the countryside to force people to pay, and that sparked a conflict that almost brought down the government.

All of those pent-up frustrations of the peasants came to a head in the summer of the 1381. It began in the southeast in Kent. It was common for parents to avoid paying the poll tax on older children by claiming that they were under the required age for the tax. According to some chronicles, a Kentish man claimed that his daughter was too young to pay, but the tax collector didn't believe him. The collector ripped off her clothes to try to prove that she was old enough to pay. The father was so incensed that he attacked the collector and beat him to death. The father was a roofer or tiler named Wat, and he came to be known as Wat Tyler. A mob soon gathered to support him, and under his leadership, they demanded that the government hear their grievances.

At the time, that radical preacher named John Ball was in prison in the town of Maidstone in Kent, so the crowd headed there and took over the prison and set him free. Ball then sent messengers throughout the country to let people know that the time had come to take action, and small peasant revolts started to break out everywhere – especially in the southeast. One of the fascinating things about John Ball's call to action is that it specifically cited Piers Plowman. A couple of his letters were preserved by chronicles, and here is part of one of those letters – first in Modern English:

John Schep (*which was a secret code name for Ball himself*), sometime Saint Marie priest of York, and now of Colchester, greeteth well John Nameless, and John the Miller and John Carter, and bid them that they be wary of guile or deceit among those who pledge loyalty, and stand together in God's name, and bid Piers Plowman go to his work and chastise Hobbe the Robber (*apparently a nickname for the country's Treasurer Robert Hales*), and take with you John Truman, and all his fellows, and no more, and look sharp and obey only one head or leader, and no more.

Now here's the same letter in its original Middle English:

Iohon Schep, som tyme Seynte Marie prest of 3ork, and now of Colchestre, greteth wel Iohan Nameles, and Iohan þe Mullere, and Iohon Cartere, and biddeþ hem þat þei bee war of gyle in borugh, and stondesth togidre in Godes name, and biddeþ Peres Plou3man go to his werk and chastise wel Hobbe þe Robbere, and takeþ wiþ 3ow Iohan Trewman, and alle hiis felawes, and no mo, and loke schappe 3ou to on heued, and no mo.

So the preacher, John Ball, specifically called his followers to 'bid Piers Plowman go to his work.' This was apparently a call to action. He then concluded the letter with another cryptic reference to the poem. He writes:

And do well and better, and flee or avoid sin,
And seek peace, and hold you therein...

So he makes specific reference to ‘Do Well’ and ‘Do Better’ – the specific concepts introduced in *Piers Plowman* as the way of finding Truth. And all of this shows that the peasants were familiar with the poem and considered *Piers Plowman*’s message to be a rallying cry.

The rebellion soon spread to Essex east of London. The road between London and Canterbury was famous as a pilgrimage route, and it would soon become even more famous thanks to Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*. But now, in June of 1381, it was teeming with peasants who were joining the rebellion. And they soon acquired a slogan – “With King Richard and the true Commons.” This was the idea that there should be no nobles standing between the king and his people.

Tens of thousands of peasants soon converged on London. They gathered south of the Thames and starting burning and looting and releasing prisoners from jails.

John of Gaunt was actually in the north of England at the time negotiating with the Scots, but the young King and the government officials and the Archbishop of Canterbury were all in London. To avoid the approaching mob, they headed to the Tower of London for safety.

When the crowd crossed London Bridge into the city, they continued to burn and loot. They soon headed down to John of Gaunt’s massive palace called the Savoy which I mentioned earlier in the episode. Everyone knew that it was Gaunt’s palace and what it represented. They still blamed him for the poll tax and all of the other abuses of the peasants. So the mob burned the palace to the ground. By the way, the palace was never re-built, but a hotel and theater stand on the site today – appropriately called the Savoy Theatre and the Savoy Hotel.

Now King Richard was only 14 years old at the time, but he agreed to meet with the rebel leader Wat Tyler outside of the city walls to hear the peasants’ demands. At the meeting, the rebel leader demanded freedom for all peasants. They should no longer be required to provide unpaid labor. The peasants should be paid for their work and should be permitted to pay rent for their land. They should also be able to freely buy and sell their land. In order to stop the riots, Richard agreed to the terms, and charters started to be drawn up to satisfy the peasant leaders.

But meanwhile, back at the Tower of London, the mob broke in and retrieved the Treasurer Robert Hales. He was the person alluded to in that letter written by the radical priest John Ball. They also retrieved the Archbishop of Canterbury, who was a political ally of John of Gaunt, and who had been critical of peasant concerns over the years. Both men were removed from the Tower and were beheaded by the mob.

The rioting continued in the streets, and the mob started to target foreigners – basically anyone who couldn’t speak English. At this time, there were a lot of people from Flanders living in London. As I’ve noted before, England had a very close trading relationship with Flanders thanks to the wool industry. But during this uprising, many of those Flemings were killed in the streets. A chronicle called the *Chronicles of London* contains the following entry for the year 1381:

In this same year, the 11th day of June after Trinity Sunday was the Rising of the Commons of England against the lords; at which time they beheaded the Archbishop of Canterbury at the Tower hill; and sir Robert Hales, prior of Saint Johns, and many Flemings lost their heads at that time, and namely they that could not say ‘Bread and Cheese,’ but ‘Case and Brode.’

So in other words, the mob would approach people who were thought to be Flemings, and if they used the Dutch word *case* for cheese or *brode* for bread, they were killed on the spot.

Since the violence continued in the streets, young King Richard demanded a second meeting with the peasant leaders. At this second meeting, in an open field outside of town, Richard wanted to know why the revolt was continuing and why the city continued to burn. This time, Wat Tyler – the rebel leader – was apparently drunk. He didn’t show the king any courtesy as he approached him. Tyler also insisted that there were new demands. All Church land was to be confiscated, and the nobility was to be outlawed. There was to be no one standing between the king and his people. So the demands went from aggressive to radical. With this, an argument ensued between Wat Tyler and the London mayor who accompanied the king. Tyler pulled out a dagger and tried to stab the mayor, but one of the soldiers protecting the king struck Tyler with a sword killing him. The peasant mob started to approach when they saw Tyler fall, but King Richard quickly rode out to the crowd to calm them down. He told them that he would be their leader from now on, and he would promote their cause. It was a risky move, but it worked. According to the chronicles, Richard spoke with the peasants in English. He listened to their concerns, and calmed them down, and told them to return home while he worked on carrying through with their demands. Over the next few days, the peasant revolt disbanded, and most of the peasants returned home.

By all accounts, the teenage king acted with bravery and confidence, but he never followed through on his promises. The reforms were never implemented, and there was a severe crackdown on those who had participated in the revolt. About 7000 peasants were soon hanged. The radical priest John Ball was also captured, and after a quick trial, he was hanged, drawn and quartered. A brutal death reserved for traitors.

Nevertheless, many of the peasants’ concerns were alleviated over time. The demands of the market continued to weaken the old feudal system. Peasants continued to leave the manors where they were forced to provide work, and they moved to the cities or to other manors where they were paid for their labor. Over the following century, almost all peasants became free tenants paid for their work with money and paying rent for their land in exchange. Forced bondage gradually disappeared in England. And the threat of another peasant revolt subsided. There wouldn’t be another major working-class movement in England for another three centuries.

Throughout this episode, we have seen that there was a simmering conflict within English society between the peasants and the upper classes, but there was also a simmering conflict within the Church. Many clerics, and many outside the Church, felt that Church officials had become too consumed with wealth and political power. These concerns were laid out in *Piers Plowman* and given further voice by radical preachers like John Ball. But John Ball was an extreme case.

There were also other reformers within the Church who were a bit more measured in their demands. One of those reformers was John Wyclif, and he was also active during this period. And he gave us the first complete translation of the Bible into English. Now that may not seem like a big deal today, but it was a radical idea at the time. So next time, we'll explore the history behind the first English Bible, and we'll see how it impacted the English language.

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

EPISODE 125: THE FIRST ENGLISH BIBLE

Welcome to the History of English Podcast – a podcast about the history of the English language. This is Episode 125: The First English Bible. In this episode, we’re going to explore the events leading to the first version of the Bible to be composed in the English language. This particular Bible is over two centuries older than the King James Bible. It was composed at the direction of the medieval cleric and scholar named John Wycliffe. The extent of Wycliffe’s role in the translation remains a matter of some debate, but there is no debate over the popularity of the translation. The large number of surviving copies confirms its popularity, especially given that it was composed prior to the printing press, and also given the fact the Church later cracked down on it and declared it a heresy to possess it or even read from it. So this time, we’ll explore the events leading to this important piece of medieval literature, and we’ll also see how it 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 and get bonus episodes and transcripts at Patreon.com/historyofenglish.

Also, in case you missed the announcement a couple of weeks ago, I will be attending a conference in New York City on June 29 called the Intelligent Speech Conference. It will feature a lot of history podcasters like Mike Duncan, and David Crowther, and lots of others. There will be talks and panels and just a general opportunity hang out with some of your favorite podcasters. I think there is also a dinner which you can attend if tickets are still available. At any rate, go to intelligentspeechconference.com for more information.

Also, I recently spoke with Jennifer Moss of the Baby Names Podcast about the history of English names. So if you get chance, check out that episode. It’s available wherever you listen to podcasts.

So with that, let’s turn to this episode about the first English Bible. And I want to begin this episode with a song. This piece of music is called *Tempus Adest Floridum*. It’s a Latin song, and the title translates as ‘It is Time for Flowering.’ It was apparently composed sometime in the 1200s, and it would have been sung to herald in the springtime around the current point in our overall story of English in the late 1300s. Here’s a performance of the song which has a melody that may seem a little familiar.

[SONG CLIP]

Now if that song seems vaguely familiar to you, it’s probably because an English songwriter named John Mason Neale wrote new lyrics to the music in the mid-1800s. The resulting song was the well-known Christmas carol ‘Good King Wenceslas.’ It’s a song about a Bohemian king who observes a poor peasant gathering winter fuel at Christmas time. So the good king and his page decide to brave a harsh winter storm to take the poor man some food and wine.

As it turns out, there really was a Good King Wenceslas of Bohemia, and he was considered such a pious and good leader, that he was recognized as a saint after he died. The name was so revered that a series of Bohemian kings in the 1300s also bore the name Wenceslas, including the man who served as king at the current point in our overall story of English in the year 1382.

Now, by this point, you're probably wondering why I'm telling you all of this stuff about this later Bohemia King named Wenceslas. Well, it's because he had a sister named Anne – actually a half-sister. And in the year 1382, she married the King of England – the young boy-king Richard II.

When we left Richard at the end of the last episode, he was busy negotiating the end of the peasant revolt in England. At 14 years of age, he was a very eligible bachelor, and the marriage to Anne of Bohemia had actually been delayed by the Peasant Revolt. But now, in the aftermath of the revolt, Anne finally arrived in England for the arranged marriage.

Like most visitors from the continent, she crossed the Channel by ship and arrived in Dover in the southeast. From there, she and her entourage mounted horses and headed to Canterbury – the next stop on the way to London. When Anne mounted her horse, she did something that the people of England had apparently never seen before. She had a specially designed saddle that extended from the side of the horse so she could sit with both legs on the same side of the saddle – what we could 'side-saddle' today. But the people of England had never really seen that before. Up until this point, women rode horses just like men – straddling the horse with one leg on each side of the saddle. But according to legend, it was Anne of Bohemia who made it popular for women to ride side-saddle in what was considered to be a more feminine manner.

Anne not only brought her unusual saddle from Bohemia, she also apparently brought something else with her that was unusual, and that was a copy of the Gospels – the books of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Actually, she apparently brought three different versions of the Gospels with her. So why was that so unusual? Well, we're told by later sources that she loved to read her Bibles, and when she arrived in England, she had a copy of the Gospels in three different languages. One was written in the traditional Latin used throughout Western Europe. Another was a German translation, and the third was a translation into her native Bohemian language, which was basically an early form of Czech.

At the time, it was somewhat unusual to have a Bible – or portions of the Bible – in multiples languages. Translations into the common languages of the people were frowned upon by the Church in the late Middle Ages. So these types of translations were rare, but that had not always been the case. Several centuries earlier, in the early Middle Ages, translations had been much more common, and it appears that Anne's German and Bohemian Bibles were descended from some of those earlier translations.

Of course, the Latin Bible itself was a translation. It had been translated from the original Hebrew and Greek texts in the late 300s and early 400s about a thousand years earlier in our story. The Latin Bible was also known as the Vulgate Bible, and it was largely the work of St. Jerome. At the time, Latin was the common language of the people of Rome. So the idea that the

average person could read the Bible was actually considered to be a good thing at the time. It was part of the way in which the Christian message was spread – by translating the Bible into the languages of the people who being converted.

Way back in Episode 14, we saw that a Gothic priest named Wulfilas translated the Bible from Greek into the early Germanic language of the Goths. That translation was made around the same time as the Latin translation – maybe a little before. And large portions of that Bible translation still exist.

Several centuries later in the 800s, Charlemagne directed the Bible to be translated into the early Germanic language spoken east of the Rhine to help convert the Germanic-speaking people in those regions. And that translation was probably the origin of Anne’s German version of the Gospels. Around the same time, missionaries further east in the Slavic regions composed a Slavic translation of the Bible to help convert the Slavs. And that translation appears to be the origin of Anne’s Bohemian version of the Gospels. Bohemia was basically the region we know today as the Czech Republic, and the old Bohemian language became modern Czech, but it was descended from that early Slavic language.

Around that same time, the Anglo-Saxons also translated parts of the Bible into Old English. Bede – the great Anglo-Saxon scholar and monk – apparently translated the Book of John into English. Contemporary accounts mention that translation, even though no copies have ever been found. Around the same time, the Book of Psalms and other devotional materials were translated into Old English by an Anglo-Saxon bishop named Eadhelm. Alfred the Great translated the Ten Commandments into English and attached a copy to his ‘Book of Laws.’ We’re also told that he was translating the Psalms at the time of his death, though again, no copy survives. Other English versions of the Psalms also appeared throughout the late Anglo-Saxon period.

During this period, there were also several glosses of the Gospels into Old English. Glosses were literal word-for-word translations usually written in the margins. For example, the Lindisfarne Gospels are composed in Latin, but they also have an Old English gloss. So there is an English translation of each Latin word next to the original text. But these glosses aren’t really a proper English translation. If you’ve ever tried to translate a passage in a foreign language one word at a time, you often end up with a bunch of random English words. The grammar and syntax may be so different that a word-for-word translation doesn’t really make sense in English. And that’s why the English glosses of the Latin Gospels aren’t really considered to be proper English translations.

However, some Anglo-Saxon clerics did put together proper English translations of parts of the Bible. There is an Old English translation of the Gospels known as the Wessex Gospels or the West Saxon Gospels. It was composed in the late 900s. There were also a few other piecemeal translations of other books of the Bible, but there was never a complete English translation of the entire Bible.

All of these early English fragments point to the fact that there was a time when the Church allowed these types of translations without too much fuss. They were a way to spread the message to the people. But as the early Middle Ages gave way to the late Middle Ages, all of that changed. By the current point in our story, most of Europe was firmly converted to Christianity. And Latin had long since ceased to be a being a living language that people spoke from birth. It had become a learned language, and in the process, it also became a language of the elite. And that meant that direct access to the Bible became limited to the relatively small group of clerics and scholars who could speak Latin. The ability to read the Bible became a specialized skill. And in the process, the language became revered, only to be accessed by those who had extensive training. That gave the Church almost complete control over the Christian message. It was virtually impossible for lay persons to challenge the Church's interpretation of the scriptures. Most people didn't have access to a Bible, and even if they did, they probably couldn't read the Latin text. Again, that gave the Church tremendous power over the message. The Church eventually came to view the Latin Bible as the only acceptable version to be used in Western Europe, and any local translation had to be approved by the Church. There was an authorized translation of the Bible into French in the mid-1200s, but that was a rare exception, and it was only because French was such an important literary language at the time. There were no authorized translations into English.

But all of that changed around the time that Anne of Bohemia arrived in England to marry the young English king Richard. In the same year that that marriage occurred – 1382 – the first English Bible made its appearance in England. It wasn't authorized, and in fact, it was soon condemned by the Church, but it shows the increasing power and influence of the English language in the late 1300s.

This Middle English Bible was the work of an Oxford priest named John Wycliffe and a small group of followers who shared the same goal of making the Bible accessible to the common people of England. In its own way, it was an attack on the authority of the Church, and in fact, it was part of a larger anti-clerical movement that was taking place throughout England in the late 1300s. It was pro-Christian, but anti-Church. We saw some elements of that in *Piers Plowman* and the Peasants' Revolt in the last episode. In *Piers Plowman*, Church officials were routinely described as corrupt and lazy and indifferent to the concerns of the peasants. And when peasant mobs took over London in 1381, the Archbishop of Canterbury was one of their targets. He was captured and beheaded outside of the Tower of London.

So why was the Church held in such low regard at the time? Well, it was really the result of a series of events that had taken place throughout the 1300s. And these events provide an important backdrop for the composition of the Wycliffe Bible. So let's take a moment and examine why the Church as an institution had become so controversial.

The story really begins in the early 1300s. About 75 years earlier, in the year 1305, the entire papal court had moved from Rome to Avignon in southern France, and they remained there for much of the century. This may actually come as a surprise to you if you've always assumed that the popes have resided in Rome. But they haven't. For much of the 1300s, they lived in southern France while the Church buildings in Rome decayed and fell apart. During this time, all of the

popes were French by birth. By virtue of the fact that the popes were French, and the papacy itself was located in France, there was a very close link between the papal court and French royal court. They were basically tied together at the hip. And that was a source of great frustration for France's rivals, especially England which found itself mired in a long, extended war with France for much of the century. In England, there was a sense that the Church itself was on the side of France. And it was widely believed that the English money paid to the Church ended up in the French coffers, and was used to support the French war effort. So by supporting the Church financially, England was indirectly funding the war against itself.

Also during the 1300s, the sale of indulgences reached a peak, and that was considered by many to be an abuse by the Church. Indulgences were basically official pardons or remissions of sin that could be purchased from the Church. By this point, there were even specific Church officials called pardoners who traveled around selling them. If you had enough money, you could effectively buy your way out of punishment for any sin. These indulgences were designed to raise money for the Church, but they were the subject of severe criticism by many people who painted the Church as a corrupt institution that was more interested in money than salvation.

The Church also implemented other changes that were designed to enhance its revenues. That included a series of fees and taxes payable to the Church. As money poured in the Church's coffers, Avignon became an opulent papal court. An enormous papal palace was built there, and lots of courtiers and attendants flocked to the city. Prominent visitors to the city described it as extravagant and corrupt.

Then in the mid-1300s, the Black Death arrived in Europe. As we saw in an earlier episode, it wreaked devastation and death across the continent – and there was nothing the Church could do to stop it. No one had ever seen death on that scale. People prayed, but largely to no avail. The Church seemed to be impotent in face of the massive loss of life. And as I noted in that episode, priests and monks actually died at higher rates than the rest of society. They tended to the sick and dying, and the monks lived together in crowded monasteries. So they were especially vulnerable to the disease. For people who saw the plague as a type of divine punishment for society's sins, it seemed that God had saved his most severe wrath for the clerics.

In the midst of all of this, stories spread about priests who deserted their congregations when plague arrived. And there were also stories of priests who demanded money for their services during the outbreak. [Source: *"Life During the Black Death," John M. Dunn*] All of this contributed to the declining authority of the Church.

Adding to all of these problems was the fact that the Church was one of the largest landholders in England, especially in the south of England. The older monasteries had become very rich and were largely self-sufficient. The monks spent most of their time living in relative comfort while the peasants often struggled to get by. This led to the common stereotype of the fat, lazy monk which we saw in *Piers Plowman*. In that popular poem, the sin of sloth is depicted as a lazy monk who can barely be bothered to stay awake.

You might recall that *Piers Plowman* depicted the lazy monk as semi-literate. He didn't know the Lord's Prayer or other important religious passages, but he knew the songs of Robin Hood by heart. That was another common complaint at the time. Even though the Bible was only available in Latin, many of the monks and clerics couldn't actually read Latin and didn't know what the Bible said. The Bishop of Gloucester surveyed over 300 deacons, archdeacons, and priests in his diocese. He found that about half of them couldn't repeat the Ten Commandments, and one in ten didn't know where to find the ten Commandments in the Bible. Forty of them couldn't even repeat the Lord's Prayer. [Source: "*The Adventure of English*," Melvyn Bragg, p. 80]

The common people relied upon the priests to interpret the Bible for them, but many priests couldn't read Latin and therefore didn't actually know very much about the Bible.

All of this generated a lot of criticism – both from lay people and from clerics and religious scholars. We saw evidence of that in *Piers Plowman* with its pointed attack on the clergy. And we saw how radical hedge preachers like John Ball fired up the peasants by attacking the Church authorities.

There were also other respected voices offering criticism. One of those voices was John Wycliffe, an Oxford scholar and teacher who wrote and lectured about Theology. He was also a priest, and throughout the 1360s and 1370s, he garnered a lot of attention for his works on philosophy and religion. And a fair reading of his career also suggests that he was a bit of a nationalist. He championed the rights of the English government in its conflicts with the King of France and the papacy in Avignon. He also championed the English language and the right of the English people to read the Bible in their own language.

Wycliffe believed that religious authority came from the Bible itself – not the priesthood. In his mind, the feudal hierarchy of the Church couldn't be justified with the Bible. The Scriptures said nothing about a pope, and Christ and his apostles never took any official titles. Furthermore, the Bible spoke of people being charitable, but in his opinion, the Church had no right to force or compel people to make contributions to the Church. All donations should be voluntary. He felt that the Church itself should not be one of the wealthiest institutions in Europe. It should possess the basic property it needed to carry out its religious mission and no more. It should take care of poor people – not take from them. He agreed with other critics that the selling of indulgences was a fundamentally corrupt practice because only God could remit sin. And he felt that priests should focus on delivering God's message. That meant that they should stay out of government affairs and they shouldn't hold secular offices.

Now if you're familiar with Martin Luther and the Protestant Reformation, a lot of this will sound familiar, but John Wycliffe lived almost a century and half before the Reformation got underway on the Continent. For this reason, Wycliffe has been called the 'Morning Star of the Reformation' by many scholars. In a sense, he was leading the way for later reformers who had many of the same criticisms and concerns that he had.

In England, Wycliffe found a receptive audience in the 1300s. By the 1370s, there were a lot of people listening to what he had to say, and he found supporters throughout many elements of

English society. His views reflected ideas that were widely held in England at the time, and he gathered many supporters who became known as Lollards. The name was apparently derived from a Middle English word meaning ‘mumblers’ – as in ‘mumblers of prayers.’ It probably started as a derogatory term, but it was adopted by Wycliffe’s followers over time. Many of those early followers were graduate students at Oxford who took his message out to the countryside. Many Lollard manuscripts were composed to outline and explain their views, and many of those manuscripts were written in English.

Wycliffe not only found support among the common people, he also found a sympathetic ear at the highest level of the English government. As we know from prior episodes, John of Gaunt was the most powerful noble in England and he took a liking to Wycliffe and his views. The competition between church and state shaped this period. And as we’ve seen, many important government positions were held by Church officials. So the idea that clerics should tend to the Church and stay out of government business appealed to people like Gaunt. And it was really Gaunt’s protection that allowed Wycliffe to flourish in the 1370s, even as the Church was becoming more irritated with his views.

In 1377, Wycliffe had advised the royal court that it didn’t need to pay money that was being demanded by the papacy. He wrote that England should keep its treasure for its own defense. [Source: “Chaucer’s People,” Liza Picard, p. 228-9]

That same year, Wycliffe was hauled before a convocation of bishops at St. Paul’s Cathedral in London. He was called to answer for his teachings. The exact charges aren’t actually known for certain, but clearly the patience of the bishops had worn out. The council was attended by a large group of people including John of Gaunt. The whole proceeding got off to a rough start when there was dispute as to whether Wycliffe should stand before the council as an accused criminal or sit before the council to defend his arguments as a scholar would do before an academic council. When the presiding bishop insisted that Wycliffe stand before the council as a criminal, Gaunt stood up and threatened the bishop. The two exchanged words, and Gaunt threatened to drag the bishop out of the church by his hair. The whole thing devolved into a melee as fighting broke out in the church. The assembly scattered, and nothing ultimately came of the meeting. [Source: “Wide as the Waters,” Benson Bobrick, p. 40-1]

Three months later, the pope issued five bulls or formal edicts condemning Wycliffe and his teachings. The Pope ordered the Church officials to investigate Wycliffe further, and if found guilty, he was to be arrested and forced to confess. But those orders were issued at the same time that the old king Edward III died. And with Edward’s death, and young Richard’s succession, the papal orders were largely lost in the mix and fell by the wayside.

Now there is something very interesting about the place where the pope issued those five papal bulls against Wycliffe. They weren’t issued in Avignon in southern France. They were actually issued in Rome. A few months earlier, Pope Gregory had returned to Rome. For 70 years, the popes had lived at the opulent court in southern France, but Gregory decided to head back to Rome where the Church buildings had fallen into ruin and disrepair. He remained in Rome until he died about a year later. With the death of the pope, the assembled cardinals had to select a

new pope. At the time, there were 16 cardinals in Rome, and 11 of them were French. It is very likely that the French cardinals would have headed back to Avignon to select the new pope, and they probably would have selected another Frenchman, but the people of Rome converged on the conclave and demanded that the new pope be chosen there. They chanted “A Roman Pope! A Roman Pope!” With no way to escape the mob, the cardinals decided to select the pope there in Rome. They eventually settled on an Italian cleric who took the name Urban VI. But shortly after the selection, the French cardinals quickly left Rome and declared that the election was invalid because it was made under duress. They then elected their own pope who became known as Clement VII. And he returned to Avignon. That left the Church with two competing popes – one in Rome and one in Avignon. That division split the Church, and it also split the countries of Western Europe.

Naturally, France and its allies supported the pope in Avignon who became known as the anti-pope. And most of France’s enemies supported the rival pope in Rome. That included England and the Holy Roman Empire. That also helps to explain why the young English king Richard II married Anne of Bohemia. At the time of this division, her father was the Holy Roman Emperor. So the marriage helped to forge that alliance between England and the Holy Roman Empire. It was an alliance against France and the anti-pope in Avignon.

Therefore, this religious dispute very quickly became a political dispute. The competing popes excommunicated each other and then went to war. They each hired mercenaries who fought each other across Italy and southern Europe. All of this further eroded the reputation of the Church.

This division is sometimes called the Western Schism. Now I said /skiz-em/, but you may pronounce that word differently. The Oxford English Dictionary says that /skiz-em/, /siz-em/ and /shiz-em/ are all acceptable pronunciations. It’s one of those words where the spelling has contributed to the confusion over the years. And the reason I’m mentioning this word is because it was first used in English in the Wycliffe Bible. The word referred to the divisions within the Church. It began as the Greek word *skhisma*, then passed through Latin and French where it apparently lost the ‘k’ sound. It first appeared in English in the Wycliffe Bible as S-C-I-S-M-E – probably pronounced /siz-em/. But in the 1500s, scholars started to add the ‘h’ back into the word to reflect the original Greek and Latin spellings. The new spelling was S-C-H-I-S-M.

In the 1700s, scholars started to argue that the word should be pronounced /skiz-em/ instead of /siz-em/ based on the original Greek and Latin pronunciations. In other words, it should mirror the pronunciation of words like *school* and *scheme*. Today both pronunciations exist – /skiz-em/ and /siz-em/ – alongside /shiz-em/ which is derived in part from the modern French pronunciation of the word.

Note that the history of this word is very similar to the history of the word *schedule* (/sked-ule/) – or /shed-ule/. It also begins with S-C-H and has Greek roots, and it also has differing pronunciations in Modern English. It was originally /sed-ule/ when it first entered English, but /shedule/ and /skedule/ have evolved over time – in part based on the differing pronunciations of the S-C-H letter combination.

At any rate, regardless of how you pronounce it, there was a great schism (skiz-em) – or /siz-em/ – in the Western Church in 1378. The two popes spent most of their energies trying to destroy the other. And the entire legitimacy of the Church was threatened by that division. It was a spectacle that appalled many Christians.

Like many observers, John Wycliffe openly criticized the split in the Church. And his views became even more extreme in the late 1370s. During this period, he criticized the Eucharist. The Eucharist is the ceremony where bread and wine are consecrated and consumed. The Church taught that the bread and wine were literally turned into the body and blood of Christ during this ceremony – a process called transubstantiation. Wycliffe denied this belief, and suggested that there was no literal transformation. This may seem like a technical point, but it went right to heart of Church doctrine.

In his writings during this period, Wycliffe wrote sermons and theological discussions in both Latin and English, and those works contain the first known use of several English phrases.

In a collection of his writings called “Select English Works” (1380), he gave us the first recorded use of the phrase ‘Rob Peter to Pay Paul.’ The idea behind the phrase is that you are taking something intended for one purpose and using it for another. Latin had an early version of the phrase in the 1100s. The Latin phrase was, “As it were that one would crucify Paul in order to redeem Peter.” Wycliffe renders his version of the phrase as “Lord, hou schulde God approve þat þou robbe Petur and gif þis robbere to Poule in þe name of Crist?” In Modern English, it reads “Lord, how should God approve that you rob Peter and give this robbery to Paul in the name of Christ?” Other variations of this phrase also appeared over the next few centuries with different verbs like ‘Unclothe Peter to clothe Paul,’ but the version with *rob* is the one that has endured.

The same collection also uses the term ‘high horse’ for the first time in an English document. If you refer to someone as being on their ‘high horse,’ it usually means that the person is arrogant and looks down on the people around him or her. So to be on a ‘high horse’ means that you are up high looking down on others. Well, in its original sense, it had a much more literal meaning. It literally meant a person who was riding a high horse – specifically a royal procession where people of high rank were mounted on very large or ‘high’ horses.

Those large horses were the ones usually used for heavy charges in a battle or a tournament. The knights or nobles who rode them were often considered to be arrogant, and they felt that they were superior to others. And that led to the more modern sense of someone being on their ‘high horse.’ Wycliffe used the term in its original sense as a royal procession when he wrote, “Þe emperour..made hym & his cardenals ride in reed on hye ors” – literally ‘The emperor made him and his cardinals ride in red on high horses.’

His writings during this period also contain the first recorded use of the phrase ‘by hook or by crook.’ He used the phrase several times in regard to people being compelled to buy sacraments ‘with hook or crook’ meaning ‘by all possible means.’ In one selection he writes, “Þei sellen sacramentis..and compellen men to bie alle þis wiþ hok or crok” – literally ‘They sell sacraments

and compel men to buy all of this with hook or crook.’ I noted in an earlier episode that hooks and crooks were both hook-shaped tools used by peasants and farm workers. Peasants were generally restricted from cutting wood in the commonly-held lands or the lands of their lords, but they were allowed to use hooks and crooks to collect limbs and branches as long as they could reach up and pull them down. So that appears to be the ultimate origin of the phrase ‘by hook or by crook.’ It meant obtaining something by any means necessary. And even though the phrase was probably common in English before this point, Wycliffe is the first known writer to use it in his writings.

It was during this same period – around the year 1380 – that Wycliffe decided to begin an English translation of the entire Latin Bible. As I’ve noted, Wycliffe and his followers felt that the Bible was the ultimate source of Christian authority – not Church councils and papal decrees. So he wanted to bring the Bible to the common people of England. To make his case, he noted that there had been a long history of translating the Bible into other languages. So why shouldn’t English have its own version? Around the year 1380, Wycliffe composed a document called *De Officio Pastoralis* which means ‘The Pastoral Office.’ He wrote one version in Latin and another in English. Here’s an excerpt from the English version where he made his case for an English Bible – first in Modern English then in his original Middle English:

Saint Jerome travailed and translated the Bible from diverse tongues into Latin so that it might be afterwards translated to other tongues, and thus Christ and his apostles taught the people in that tongue that was most known to the people. Why shouldn’t men do the same now? Also the worthy realm of France, notwithstanding all hindrances, has translated the Bible and the Gospels with other true sentences of doctors out of Latin into French, why shouldn’t Englishmen do the same? As the lords of England have the Bible in French, so it isn’t against reason that they should have the same sentence in English, for thus God’s law would be better known and more believed for common understanding, and for more accord between realms.

Now the same passage in the original Middle English:

seynt ierom trauelide & translatide þe bible fro dyuerse tungis into lateyn þat it myȝte be aftir translatid to oþere tungis. & þus crist & his apostlis tauȝten þe puple in þat tunge þat was moost knowun to þe puple; why shulden not men do nou so? Also þe worþy reume of fraunse, not-wiþ-standinge alle lettingis, haþ translatid þe bible & þe gospels wiþ oþere trewe sentensis of doctours out of lateyn in-to freynsch, why shulden not engliȝsche men do so? as lordis of englund han þe bible in freynsch, so it were not aȝenus resoun þat þey hadden þe same sentense in engliȝsch; for þus goddis lawe wolde be betere knowun & more trowid for onehed of wit, & more acord be bi-twixe reumes.

Now we should also keep in mind that this was a time when English was on the rise. English was once again the language of Parliament, and the courts, and the schools. And this was the time of Chaucer and William Langland and other writers who were composing their poetry in English –

not French or Latin. So the overall rise of English was another factor that fed this desire for an English Bible.

Around the time that Wycliffe composed the provisions I just read, so around 1380, he and a small group of followers began the process of translating the Bible. Of course, they didn't have permission from the Church to do that, so the translation was completely unauthorized. But they were willing to take the risk. Within a couple of years, the translation was complete. And it appeared in the middle of 1382.

Modern scholars are not entirely sure how much Wycliffe himself actually contributed to the translation. At one time, it was thought that he was the primary translator. But the modern view is that much of the work was done by a small group of his followers. The group may have been as small as five or six people. It appears that his primary assistant was Nicholas de Hereford. Hereford and Wycliffe knew each other from their time at Oxford, and according to notes in some of the surviving copies, Hereford translated a large portion of the Old Testament.

Now the original translation was basically an extended gloss of the Latin Bible. In other words, the translators took the traditional Latin Vulgate Bible, and they pretty much translated it word for word – even maintaining much of the original Latin word order and syntax. They did that in order to stay as close as possible to the original Latin version.

So let me give you an example of the language in this first English Bible. And let's begin at the beginning with the very first words of the Old Testament. These are the first five verses of the Book of Genesis. Just so you can hear a comparison, I'm going to read the version from the King James Bible first. That's a Modern English version from the early 1600s. Then I'll read the same passages from Wycliffe's original Bible. So here's the King James version:

- 1 In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.
- 2 And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.
- 3 And God said, Let there be light: and there was light.
- 4 And God saw the light, that it was good: and God divided the light from the darkness.
- 5 And God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And the evening and the morning were the first day.

Now here's the same passage from the Wycliffe Bible which follows very closely with the Latin original:

- 1 In þe firste made God of nouȝt heuene and erþe.
- 2 þe erþe forsoþe was veyn wiþ ynne and void, and derknessis weren upon þe face of þe see; and þe spiryt of God was born upon þe watrys.
- 3 And God seide, Be maad liȝt; and maad is liȝt.
- 4 And God sawȝ liȝt þat it was good, and deuydid liȝt fro derknessis;
- 5 and clepide liȝt, day, and derknesses, nyȝt. And maad is euen and moru, o day.

Now you'll notice that the Wycliffe Bible begins with the phrase "In the first," but the King James Bible begins with the phrase "In the beginning." Also, the Wycliffe version refers to "the face of the sea" whereas the King James version refers to "the face of the deep." And Wycliff uses the Old and Middle English verb *clepe* where the King James Bible uses the more modern word *call*. *Call* is actually an Old Norse word, but it had replaced *clepe* by the Modern English period.

Now that passage I just read doesn't use very many Latin words, but as the translation continued, the translators encountered a lot of Latin words that didn't have a good alternative in English. These were usually words that expressed very specific concepts and ideas. So when there wasn't a good English alternative, they tended to just keep the Latin word. They would often drop the Latin inflectional ending to Anglicize it a bit. But it meant that this first English Bible had a lot of Latin words, many of which were used for the first time in English. It has been estimated that over a thousand Latin words were used for the first time in the Wycliffe Bible. Again, that was probably intentional. As long as the translation stuck with the Latin word, the Church authorities were less likely to object.

So for example, the Wycliffe Bible gives us the first use of the word *agony* from the Latin *agonia* – ultimately from a Greek root word. We also find the first use of the word *interpretation* from the Latin word *interpretatione*. We find the first use of *irrevocable* from Latin *irrevocabilis*. The word *novelty* appears for the first time in the phrase 'novelty of voices' – a direct translation of the Latin 'vocum novitates.' Other words taken directly from the Latin Bible, and used for the first time in English, include *humanity*, *injury*, *transfer*, *excellent*, *ambitious*, and *communication*.

Wycliffe also used the word *problem* for the first time in English. It was a direct translation of the Latin word *problema*. Interestingly, the word was originally used to refer to a riddle. In the Book of Judges, the strongman Samson marries a Philistine girl. At the wedding feast, he makes a bet with a group of men by posing a riddle and challenging them to solve it. Again, the original Latin Bible calls the riddle a *problema* which the Wycliffe Bible translates as *problem* – the first recorded use of that word in English. The later King James version replaced the word *problem* with the Old English word *riddle*.

The Wycliffe Bible also contains the first use of the word *puberty* which was a direct borrowing the Latin word *pubertas*. It meant the time when a young person reached sexual maturity. The translators were apparently concerned that English readers wouldn't know what the word *puberty* meant, so they followed the word with a short explanation defining it as 'the time of marriage.' The passage reads, "puberte, that is, tyme of mariage." So the translators sometimes felt the need to explain what some of those Latin loanwords meant.

Now apparently, some of Wycliffe's followers were unhappy with this original translation. They felt that it was too Latin in vocabulary and structure. So shortly after the first version was released, they began work on a revised and updated version. It appears that this revised version was mostly the work of a close associate of Wycliffe named John Purvey. This second version appeared in the late 1380s – about six years after the original version and a short time after

Wycliffe himself had passed away. This second version was intended to be more user-friendly for English readers. It focused more on English word order and phrasing.

This revised version also contained an extended prologue which explained the process that was used to make the translation. The Prologue even gives an example to illustrate this process. It provides the Latin phrase “Dominum fonnidabunt aduersarii eius.” The passage explains how that phrase should be ‘englisshid’ – or turned into English. The passage actually uses *English* as a verb – ‘to English the Latin sentence.’ It says that a literal word-for-word translation would be “þe Lord hise aduersaries shulen drede” – literally ‘The Lord his adversaries should dread.’ But since that sentence is awkward, the passage says that the better translation would be “þe aduersaries of þe Lord shulen drede him” – literally ‘The adversaries of the Lord should dread him.’ So as this example illustrates, the word order was modified to match English syntax.

But it wasn’t just word order. The revised version also chose to drop some of the Latin words that had been retained in the original version. In their place, the revision often selected a native English word or a French word that had become common in English by that point.

So, for example, the first version of the Wycliffe Bible gives us the first use of the word *pollute* from Latin *polluta*. But the second version changed that word from *pollute* to *defoulyd* which was a common word in the language at the time.

The original version also contains the first use of the word *plague* from Latin *plaga*. You might remember that the Black Death was generally called the ‘Great Mortality’ in English documents from the mid-1300s, but Wycliffe gives us the first use of the word *plague*. A few years later, when the Bible was revised, the wording was changed from *plague* to the native English word *wound*. So again, we see this shift from a Latin word to an English word that was better understood at the time. By the way, speaking of *plague*, I should note that the Wycliffe Bible also gives us the first use of the word *pestilence* from Latin *pestilentiae*.

The first draft of the Bible also gives us the first use of the word *contradicion* from Latin *contradictionem*. Now if we think about that word *contradiction*, it actually combines two Latin elements. We have the Latin prefix *contra-* meaning ‘against.’ We have that root in the word *contrary*. And the second part is *dicion* from a Latin word meaning ‘speech.’ We actually have the word *diction* in English with that same meaning. So if we combine those two Latin elements, we can discern that *contradiction* is literally ‘against speech’ or ‘to speak against something.’ Again, the first version of the Wycliffe Bible used that direct Latin loanword *contradicion*.

But the later translators apparently didn’t like that Latin term, so they opted for a literal English translation. The term appeared in the Book of Psalms in the sentence “I saw wickedness and contradiction in the city.” But the revised version used the phrase ‘wickidnesse and ayenseiying’ – literally ‘wickedness and against-saying.’ So the later version changed *contradicion* to ‘against-saying.’ This is another example of how the later version tried to re-word the Bible to reduce some of the heavy Latin influence and produce something that was more user-friendly for English readers. Obviously, *contradiction* has won out over time.

The original version of the Bible also used the words *liberty* and *civility* for the first time in English. *Liberty* was rendered from Latin *libertas*, and *civility* was rendered from Latin *civilitatem*. In both of those cases, the later revised version substituted the native English word *freedom*.

In the Book of Galatians, the apostle Paul provides a warning to those who fall from grace through the persuasion of others. Wycliffe translates this passage by using the word *persuasion* for the first time in English. He derives it from the Latin word *persuasio*. But the later version of the Wycliffe Bible dropped the new word *persuasion* and replaced it with the more familiar word *counsel*. So it refers to those who lose faith through the ‘counsel’ of others. Interestingly, the King James Version preferred the original translation, and it uses the word *persuasion*.

By the way, we might think of *persuasion* as the use of sweet talk to convince someone of something. Well, believe it or not, the words *sweet* and *persuasion* are cognate. The ‘-suation’ part of *persuasion* comes from the same root as the Old English word *sweet*. The original Indo-European root mean sweet or pleasant. English took the word as *sweet*, and Latin took the word as pleasant with *persuasion* meaning pleasant or convincing words.

Another example is the word *sex*. Now you may be surprised to learn that the word *sex* appeared for the first time in English in the Bible, but it did. It appeared in Wycliffe’s translation of the story of Noah’s Ark from the Book of Genesis. The word was used in the sense of gender. God instructs Noah to bring two of every animal onto the ark. Here’s the passage from the modern King James Bible: “And of every living thing of all flesh, two of every sort shalt thou bring into the ark, to keep them alive with thee; they shall be male and female.” In Wycliffe’s original translation, that passage is rendered as “Of all þingez hauyng soule of eny flesch: two þou schalt brynge in to þe ark, þat male sex and female: lyuen with þe.” So whereas the King James version refers to ‘two of every sort,’ Wycliffe refers one of each ‘sex.’ This was the first recorded use of the word *sex* in the English language, and it was a direct translation of the Latin word *sexus*. Now when the Wycliffe version was revised a few years later, the later version replaced the word *sex* with the Old English word *kind*. It reads “thou schalt brynge in to the schip tweyne and tweyne, of male kynde and female” – or in Modern English ‘thou shalt bring into the ship two and two, of male kind and female.’ So in those passages, we can see how that key word has evolved from the Latin *sexus*, to early Wycliffe *sex*, to later Wycliffe *kind*, to the King James word *sort*.

That passage is also interesting for another reason. The Wycliffe translations contain one of the first – and perhaps THE first – rendering of the word *female* with its current spelling F-E-M-A-L-E. And that is an interesting development because the spelling was altered to mirror the spelling of the word *male* – M-A-L-E. Now you may be saying, so what? Well, the reason why that is notable is because the words *male* and *female* are not actually related. They are not cognate. They’re derived from two completely different root words. We tend to assume that they are related today because they are spelled similarly and they have related meanings. But the word *male* is derived from the Latin word *masculus* which gave us the word *masculine*. As the word passed through French, the pronunciation was shortened and slurred into *male*. Meanwhile, the word *female* is derived from the Latin word *femina* which gave us the word *feminine*. In late

Latin, it acquired the suffix *-ella* which was used to indicate something small. And that produced the word *femella* meaning a girl. Again, within French it was slurred into female spelled F-E-M-E-L-L-E. Both words – *male* and *female* – entered English in the 1300s. *Female* appeared for the first time in the 1350s, and *male* appeared for the first time here in Wycliffe’s Bible in the 1380s. But apparently, people were already assuming that the two words were variations of the same root word. And in Wycliffe’s Bible, we find the two words spelled similarly in the modern fashion as M-A-L-E and F-E-M-A-L-E.

So, despite the later revisions, we’ve seen that the original Bible translators tried to stay as close as they could to the Latin Vulgate Bible. They routinely kept an existing Latin word and simply Anglicized it. And I wanted to make that point because this really marks the beginning of a trend which continued over the next few centuries. And that trend was the increased borrowing of words directly from Latin rather than French. As the importance of French declined in England, Latin remained the language of the Church and language of scholarship. And increasingly, English speakers borrowed words directly from Latin.

There are tons of words in the Oxford English Dictionary, many of which are variations and derivatives of a smaller number of basic root words. The British linguist David Crystal has estimated that there are about 30,000 basic word forms in the OED that come from French. By contrast, there are about 50,000 basic word forms that come directly from Latin. [*Source: “Stories of English,” David Crystal, p. 154, 163*] So there are considerably more words that come directly from Latin than come from French. And that is due to the heavy Latin borrowing that took place beginning around this point into the 1400s.

That has given Modern English several layers of words with the same or similar meanings. Very often, we have a basic common word from Old English, a slightly more elevated word from French, and an even more formal word from Latin. So we might have an English *foe*, or a French *enemy*, or a Latin *opponent*. We might ‘ask’ that person something with the English word *ask*, or we might ‘question’ that person with the French word *question*, or we might ‘interrogate’ that person with the Latin word *interrogate*. Through that process, we might ‘learn’ or ‘understand’ something with the English words *learn* and *understand*, or we might ‘ascertain’ something with the French word *ascertain*, or we might ‘comprehend’ something with the Latin word *comprehend*. When we’re done, we might ‘end’ the inquiry with the English word *end*, or ‘finish’ it with the French word *finish*, or ‘conclude’ it with the Latin word *conclude*. You get the idea.

These layers of words allow us to express very subtle distinctions in Modern English, and they are the product of lots of borrowing over the centuries – borrowing that shifted from French to Latin over time. And we can see the beginning of that process here in the Wycliffe Bible.

I should also note that the Bible not only gave us a lot of new Latin words, it also gave us the first version of several common English phrases. These were usually Latin phrases that were translated into English for the first time.

So for example, we get the first rendering of the term ‘brother’s keeper.’ In the story of Cain and Abel from the Book of Genesis, Cain kills Abel, and when God asks where Abel is, Cain says, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” Wycliffe renders it as “am I þe keeper of my broþer?” – ‘am I the keeper of my brother?’ In later versions of the Bible, including the King James version, ‘the keeper of my brother’ is altered to “brother’s keeper.” This was ultimately a direct translation of the Latin term “custos fratris.”

The Bible also gives us the first use of the term ‘graven image.’ In the Book of Exodus, the original translation refers to a ‘graven thing,’ but the revised version changes the term to ‘graven image.’

The translation of Exodus also gives us the first English rendering of the phrase ‘an eye for an eye.’ The passage reads, “he schal yelde lijf for lijf, iye for iye, tooth for tooth, hond for hond, foot for foot” – literally ‘he shall yield life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, and foot for foot.’

In the Song of Solomon, the Latin term “turris eburnea” is literally translated as ‘ivory tower’ and is therefore the first recorded use of the term ‘ivory tower’ in English.

In the Book of John, the translators provide the first use of the phrase “born again.” It’s rendered as a direct translation of the Latin phrase “natus fuerit denno” with the same general meaning.

From the Book of Matthew, Wycliffe gives us the first English use of the phrase “salt of the earth.” Matthew also gives us the first English version of the phrase “Ye of little faith.”

In the Book of Hebrews, the translation states that the word of God is sharper than any “tweyne eggid swerd” – literally ‘two-edged sword.’ This may have been the origin of the more common phrase ‘double-edged sword.’

In the translation of Ecclesiastes, we’re told, “No thing vnder the sunne is newe” – literally ‘there is no new thing under the sun.’

So as you can see, the Wycliffe Bible was not only an important religious document – it was also an important English document. And it also proved to be very popular. Over a 150 copies of the Bible still survive which attests to its popularity at the time. That means that there were probably thousands of copies at one time. [Source: “*The Last Plantagenets*,” Thomas B. Costain, p. 36-40]

And we have to keep in mind that this was before the advent of the printing press. So each copy had to be made by hand. This is really where Wycliffe was at a disadvantage in comparison to Martin Luther over a century later. Luther expressed many similar ideas and concerns about the Church, but he lived after the printing press had been invented. So his Protestant literature could be mass produced. By contrast, Wycliffe’s Bible and other related writings had to be spread by hand-written manuscripts. And that was probably a major factor in why Wycliffe’s movement lost steam over time, but Luther’s movement spread like wildfire.

Nevertheless, a lot of Wycliffe Bibles were produced, and they were read by people throughout England by all classes of people. And its amazing that we have as many copies as we do today, because the story of the Wycliffe Bible was about to take a major turn. Shortly after the Bible was produced, the Church decided that it was time to crack down on this new innovation before it got out of hand. As the English Bible and the Lollard message spread around the country, the Church soon started to take the matter more seriously. The Peasant Revolt may have also played a role in this crackdown. Many in power blamed Wycliffe and radical priests like John Ball for seeding the discontent that led to the revolt.

In fact, in 1382, the year after the Peasant Revolt and the year that the first draft of the Bible was released, many of Wycliffe's views were condemned by a Church council. Wycliffe himself avoided any major punishment, and he died of natural causes a couple of years later. But many of his colleagues who assisted with the translation experienced a different fate. Nicholas de Hereford was excommunicated for heresy. He was the man who apparently translated a large portion of the Old Testament. He was later imprisoned and tortured. He recanted his Lollard views and died a few years later.

John Purvey was also targeted. He was the man who was apparently responsible for much of the revised version of the Bible in the late 1380s. He was also hauled before the bishops, tortured and forced to recant. However, he soon returned to the Lollard movement and eventually disappeared from history.

In 1394, a bill was introduced in Parliament which outlawed any version of the Bible composed in English. However, John of Gaunt was still around, and he blocked the proposed bill. Supposedly, he rejected the proposed law with the following words: "By God, we will not be the refuse of all other nations; for since they have God's law, which is the law of our belief, in their own language, we will have ours in English whoever it may begrudge." [Source: "*Wide as the Waters*," Benson Bobrick, p. 66]

A few years later, in 1401, England adopted a law called 'Concerning the Burning of Heretics' which, as you can guess from the title, authorized the burning of heretics at the stake. This law was destined to be used a lot over the next few centuries. But initially, it posed the greatest threat to the Lollards. They now had to fear for their lives and the entire movement was pushed underground.

After John of Gaunt died and was out of the picture, the bishops finally got their wish. In 1408, a Convocation sitting at Oxford banned all translations of the Bible into English by any unauthorized person. It also prohibited the reading of any such translations. Anyone caught with an English Bible could be tried for heresy. Wycliffe's Bibles were ordered to be burnt. Nevertheless, many people ignored the order.

Finally, in 1415, the Great Western Schism came to an end as the two competing popes were deposed, and the Church was once again unified under a single pontiff. The council that resolved that split in the Church also took one additional action before it disbanded. It condemned the

long deceased Wycliffe as a heretic, and it ordered his bones to be exhumed and removed from the grounds where he was buried. Several years later, the order was carried out. Wycliffe's remains were dug up and burned. The ashes were thrown into the nearby River Swift, which flows in the Avon, and then into the Severn, and then into the sea. An anonymous poet soon turned this into a prophesy. It read:

The Avon to the Severn runs,
The Severn to the sea,
And Wycliff's dust shall spread abroad,
Wide as the waters be.

The idea was that Wycliffe's bones may have been disinterred and burned and thrown into the river and the sea, but in the same way that his remains were scattered, his message would also spread far and wide over time.

And this takes us back to where we began – with Anne of Bohemia who married young King Richard in the same year that the Wycliffe Bible appeared.

Anne came from Bohemia which is the modern Czech Republic. And as we've seen, she was an avid reader of the Bible. She was also apparently enamored with Wycliffe's teachings. Thanks to Anne, new links were established between England and Bohemia. Scholarships were soon established for Bohemian students who wanted to study at Oxford. One of the Bohemian students who took advantage of that opportunity was Jerome of Prague. While in England, he also became fascinated with Wycliffe's teachings, and he returned to Bohemia and took those teachings with him. A short time later, the great Bohemian reformer named Jan Hus picked up the mantle and spread the message throughout Bohemia. He translated some of Wycliffe's writings into the early Czech language, and his mission ultimately helped to establish the first Protestant state in Europe in the 1400s.

Now it's tempting to trace this movement from Bohemia northward to Germany and the Protestant Reformation in the 1500s. Despite that temptation, there's little evidence that Martin Luther was directly influenced by John Wycliffe or Jan Hus, but Luther did acknowledge their contributions to the overall Reformation movement. In 1529, Martin Luther wrote, "I have hitherto taught and held all the opinions of Hus without knowing it.... We are all Hussites."

Of course, Hus's views were largely Wycliffe's views, and they can be traced back to England in the 1380s. And that is also why Martin Luther's Reformation ideas found such fertile ground when they reached England in the 1500s. The groundwork for the Reformation had already been laid by Wycliffe and the Lollards in the 1300s.

This connection is even more apparent in a Bohemian Psalter prepared in the year 1572. The manuscript contains a page, with a hymn dedicated to the Bohemian reformer Jan Hus. It's adorned with three drawings arranged in a vertical row. The first picture depicts John Wycliffe striking a spark; below him, Jan Hus is shown using the spark to light a candle; and at the bottom, Martin Luther, is shown holding a blazing torch. The idea is that the beliefs associated

with the Reformation could be traced back to John Wycliffe and the Wycliffe Bible in the 1300s in England.

Now at the same time that Wycliffe and his translators were working on the first Wycliffe Bible and the later revision, a London poet named Geoffrey Chaucer was working on a manuscript of his own. That manuscript was a collection of stories told by pilgrims on their way to Canterbury Cathedral. Of course, that work of literature was the Canterbury Tales. It was the last great work of Chaucer's career, so next time, we'll fill in the middle part of Chaucer's career and take the story up to the Canterbury Tales. Along the way, we'll see how the literature of this period reflects the overall development of English into an early form of the language we speak today.

So next time, we'll take the road to the Canterbury Tales. Until then, thanks for listening to the History of English Podcast.