THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH PODCAST TRANSCRIPTS

EPISODES 136 - 140

Presented by Kevin W. Stroud

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EPISODE 136: THE REAL ROBIN HOOD

Welcome to the History of English Podcast – a podcast about the history of the English language. This is Episode 136: The Real Robin Hood. In this episode, we're going to look at the legend of Robin Hood – and the oldest ballads that survive to tell the story of the famous outlaw. Those ballads were written down in the mid 1400s, but Robin Hood was already a well-known figure by then. There are passing references to Robin Hood extending all the way back to the 1300s. And some scholars believe that the legend goes back even further than that. But in the mid-1400s, the ballads and stories were finally preserved in writing for the first time. So this time, we'll explore this early medieval version of Robin Hood, and we'll examine those earliest ballads. We'll also look at the language of the poems which includes evidence pointing to the early stages of the Great Vowel Shift. So we have a lot to cover.

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.

A quick note about those transcripts. I started posting a transcript of each new episode at Patreon shortly after I set up the Patreon feature a few years ago. So those transcripts go back to around Episode 85. And for a while, I have been including citations to sources in those transcripts. Within an actual episode, it interrupts the narrative to constantly stop and mention a source. So I've just started putting those citations in the transcripts. And I mention that in case you want access to those citations for any reason.

I also wanted to mention that the Intelligent Speech Conference is going to be held online this year. The theme of the conference is 'Hidden Voices,' and I'm going to be giving a couple of presentations about the Indo-Europeans. A lot of other podcasters will also be presenting topics related to their podcasts, so if you're interested, go to intelligentspeechconference.com for more information.

Now, let's turn our attention to one of the most enduring literary figures of the Middle Ages. He was an outlaw who lived in Sherwood Forest and was surrounded by a band of merry men who stole from the rich and gave to the poor. Of course, that figure was Robin Hood, and in terms of medieval literary figures, his fame is rivaled only by King Arthur. But King Arthur and Robin Hood had very different origins, and they appealed to different audiences early on. Arthur was a legendary king whose story evolved out of Welsh, Latin and French before it was ever recorded in English. So the Arthurian legends appealed to the literate upper classes of England. But Robin Hood was a commoner and an outlaw whose legend passed in songs and ballads long before they were ever written down, and those songs and ballads were sung in English from the very beginning. His stories were never translated into French in the Middle Ages, and the evidence suggests that his stories were very popular among the common people of England. So in that respect, Robin Hood was a more inherently English figure than Arthur himself.

But the medieval Robin Hood wasn't the Robin Hood made famous by later writers and by Hollywood and Walt Disney. He wasn't a noble like the later stories suggest. There was no love interest – no Maid Marian. And there was no robbing from the rich and giving to the poor. The original Robin Hood was a true outlaw. He stole from people, and they weren't always rich, and he didn't necessarily give the stolen property to the poor. And he wasn't above killing someone if they got in the way.

The word ***outlaw*** literally means someone who lives outside of the law. It's is a very old word in the English language going all the way back to Old English, but it's not a native English word. It's actually a Norse word borrowed from the Vikings.

Outlaws were people who had been banished from society either because they were convicted criminals or because they were accused of a crime and didn't show up to answer the charges. Since outlaws lived outside of the law and outside of the protections of the law, they could be killed on the spot if they were captured. So that meant they had to go into hiding, and in medieval England, that usually meant they headed into the forest. In the Middle Ages, England had much more forest land than it has today. Many of those wooded areas hadn't been cleared yet. So outlaws could take refuge in the forest, and they could survive by living off the land and stealing from people who might be traveling through. The local sheriff had a duty to round up outlaws, but it was so difficult to find and capture them in the forest that the authorities often just let them be. [*SOURCE: 'Robin Hood: The True History Behind the Legend,' Nigel Cawthorne, p. 196.*]

Now sometimes those outlaws were truly violent people – robbers, murderers and the like. But in other cases, they were simply people who had run afoul of the authorities for financial, or political or personal reasons. And there must have been a sense that some of the outlaws had been unfairly treated and didn't deserve their banishment.

Several real-life outlaws actually became folk heros in the Middle Ages, and their stories certainly influenced the early songs and ballads about Robin Hood. In an earlier episode of the podcast, I mentioned the Anglo-Saxon rebel named Hereward the Wake who led an early resistence movement against the Normans in northern England. Hereward became an outlaw, and since he was fighting against the Norman authorities, he also became a folk hero. In the early 1100s, an account of his life was composed in Latin. It mixed fact and fiction, but some of those stories match some of the earliest accounts of Robin Hood. Hereward lived in the forest, and he surrounded himself with a band of fugitives, and in one story, Hereward disguised himself as a potter and infiltrated the king's court to discover their plans. Well, as we'll see, an early Robin Hood poem has Robin switching clothes with a potter so he can go into town in disguise, and once he is there, he encounters the Sheriff of Nottingham. These similarities suggest that some of those older stories about Hereward the Wake fed into the legend of Robin Hood.

There were also stories about other real-life outlaws that probably contributed to the narrative. There was a well-known French story about a French nobleman named Eustache the Monk who had his lands seized unjustly and was outlawed. He took refuge in the forest and donned disguises in order to take revenge on the local count. In one part of the story, he captured the count and later released him, which parallels an early Robin Hood story where Robin captures

the Sheriff of Nottingham and then releases him. Eustache also detained people and asked them questions. If they lied, he robbed them. If they told the truth, he let them keep their money. Again, this parallels some of the early accounts of Robin Hood where Robin does the same thing. [*SOURCE: 'Robin Hood and Other Outlaw Tales,' Stephen Knight and Thomas Ohlgren, p. 2-3*.]

There was also a well-known story about an English nobleman named Fulk fitz Warren. His story survives in a version written in Anglo-Norman – the early French dialect spoken in England. It tells of a man from a prominent family who had his lands taken away, and most interestingly, the lands were taken away by Prince John before he became 'Bad' King John. Once again, Fulk retreats to the forest with a band of followers, where they engage in trickery, deception and open warfare against the authorities.

Perhaps the most significant thing about the Fulk story is that it is set during the time of Prince John and his brother Richard the Lionheart. And that ended up being the same time frame used for most of the modern versions of the Robin Hood stories. Now that wasn't the case early on. The earliest Robin Hood ballads actually refer to the king as King Edward. It isn't clear which Edward it was, but all of the Edwards came after King John. So the story of this earlier outlaw Fulk fitz Warren pre-dated the original ballads about Robin Hood. But in the 1500s, a Scots writer named John Major set his account of Robin Hood during the time of Prince John, and many scholars think he borrowed that time frame from the account of Fulk fitz Warren. And that ended up being the setting used by most modern writers in their versions of the Robin Hood legend. [*SOURCE: 'Reading Robin Hood,' Stephen Knight, p. 70.*]

So those are some of the historical outlaws who may have influenced the legend of Robin Hood. But where did the story of Robin Hood actually begin? Well, no one really knows for certain. It's hidden in the murky history of England after the Norman Conquest. Some scholars think there was actually a real life Robin Hood who sparked the legend. That has led many historians to pour through the criminal records of medieval England to find an actual outlaw named Robin Hood.

The problem is that ***Robin*** was a common nickname for ***Robert***, and ***Robert*** was a very popular name in England. So there were a lot of 'Roberts' and 'Robins.' The surname ***Hood*** was also widespread. So the records have revealed a lot of suspects and criminals with the name 'Robin Hood,' 'Robin Hode,' 'Robert Hode,' or something similar. Most of them were charged with minor crimes, but one of them is actually listed as an outlaw. His name was Robert Hod, and he lived in Yorkshire in the early 1200s. He incurred a large debt, and then failed to appear when he was called to answer for it. He was declared an outlaw, and he avoided the authorities for several years. In one year, he was listed in the criminal records as 'Hobbehod.' [*SOURCE: 'Robin Hood: The True History Behind the Legend,' Nigel Cawthorne, p. 39-40; and 'Robin Hood,' J.C. Holt, p. 53-4.*] ***Hobbe*** and ***Bob*** were both nicknames for ***Robert***. So 'Hobbehood' literally meant 'Rob Hood' or 'Robert Hood' or 'Robin Hood.' So was this the original Robin Hood? Well, he was a Robin Hood, but there is nothing specific to connect him to the later stories.

The same is true for the other criminals that bear the same name or a similar name. It is intriguing though that records from the 1200s and 1300s also reveal several criminals that bear the surname ***Robinhood***. So these aren't people with the first name ***Robert*** or ***Robin*** and the last name ***Hood***. These are people that have a distinct first name – like ***William*** or ***John***, and they have ***Robinhood*** as a surname. Since surnames during that period were often descriptive or occupational, the surname ***Robinhood*** implies that the person had some characteristic that reminded people of the legendary outlaw. So maybe the person was a thief or criminal or trickster. Again, some scholars think the existence of that surname implies that Robin Hood was a well-known character or figure in England by that point in the 1200s and 1300s.

The first known person with that surname – a William Robehod – is identified as a robber in two different sets of government records, one from the year 1261 and another from the following year. In the first record, he is identified by reference to his father. He is listed as "William, son of Robert le Fevre." But in the second record a year later, he is listed as a fugitive, and he is identified as'William Robehod." It appears that a scribe who was responsible for keeping the records gave William the surname ***Robehod*** to reflect his fugitive status, and that implies that the legend of Robin Hood was in place by that point in the mid-1200s. [*SOURCE: 'Robin Hood: The True History Behind the Legend,' Nigel Cawthorne, p. 38-9; and 'Robin Hood,' J.C. Holt, p. 188-9*.] Historians have discovered references to at least seven other people with the same or similar surname in the late 1200s, and five of them were connected to criminal activities, including murder and robbery. [*SOURCE: 'Robin Hood,' J.C. Holt, p. 188.*]

All of that suggests that stories and ballads about Robin Hood existed in the late 1200s and early 1300s. But there is no hard evidence – just an assumption based on the use of that unusual surname. But near the end of the 1300s, we finally get our first clear and undeniable reference to the legendary outlaw. And that reference came in the poem by William Langland called Piers Plowman. Back in Episode 124, we looked at that poem, and I noted that it contained this first specific reference to the songs and ballads about Robin Hood.

Landland represented the sin of sloth as a lazy and ignorant monk named Sloth. In one passage, Sloth says, "I can nouȝte parfitly my pater noster as þe prest it syngeth, But I can rymes of Robyn hood," literally '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.' This passage was composed around the year 1377, and it confirms that stories featuring Robin Hood were well-known by that point.

There's also another possible link between Piers Plowman and Robin Hood. Back when I covered that poem in the podcast, I discussed it in the context of a major peasant uprising of that period called the Peasants' Revolt. You might remember that one of the leaders of the Peasants' Revolt was a radical preacher named John Ball. He wrote a letter calling his followers to action, and I read part of that letter in that earlier episode. The letter instructed his followers to "biddeþ Peres Plouȝman go to his werk and chastise wel Hobbe þe Robbere," literally 'bid Piers Plowman go to his work and chastise Hobbe the Robber.' It's that reference to 'Hobbe the Robber' that's so intriguing.

A moment ago, I noted that a Yorkshire outlaw named Robert Hod has been suggested as an early inspiration for the Robin Hood legends. And I noted that he is mentioned in one of the surviving records as 'Hobbehod' – ***Hobbe*** being an old nickname for ***Robert***. So 'Hobbehod' meant 'Rob Hood' or 'Robert Hood.' Well, here, we have the radical priest John Ball making reference to 'Hobbe the Robber,' literally 'Rob or Robert the Robber.' Now many scholars interpret this name as a reference to one of the government officials targeted by the rebels. He was the country's Treasurer named Robert Hales, and he was later executed by the rebels. So that may have been the Robert who was referred to as 'Hobbe the Robber.' But another popular theory is that it was a reference to Robin Hood, or perhaps, a reference to robbers in general. [*SOURCE: 'Robin Hood,' J.C. Holt, p. 157.*]

They suggest that the name ***Robert*** and its related nickname ***Hobbe*** were often used as synonyms meaning a 'robber.' In the 1300s, robbers were sometimes referred to as 'Robert's Men.' And an Act of Parliament in the year 1331 actually refers to robberies and other felonies committed by 'Roberdesmen.' [*SOURCE: 'Robin Hood,' J.C. Holt, p. 157.*] So there was this apparent association between robbers, criminals and the name Robert.

It's possible that the name ***Robert*** was associated with robbers because ***Robert*** and ***robber*** sound very similar. Another possibility is that the connection was derived from the Robin Hood legends. Perhaps Robert Hood or Robin Hood was such a well-known outlaw by that point that people just associated the name ***Robert*** or ***Robin*** or ***Hobbe*** with thievery. Or perhaps, it worked the other way. Maybe the name ***Robert*** was already associated with robbers and thieves, so this new fictional outlaw who lived in the forest was given the name ***Robert*** or ***Robin***. And since robbers might wear a hood when they robbed someone, maybe that explains the surname ***Hood***. Again, the linguistic links between ***robber***, ***Robert***, and ***Robin Hood*** are fascinating, but like so many aspects of the early legends, it's mostly just speculation. The actual connections are elusive. All we can say for certain is that names like ***Robert*** and ***Robin*** had an association with robbers, and the most well-known robber was Robert Hood or Robin Hood. And we can also say for certain that Robin Hood was a well-known figure in England by the late 1300s because the 'rhymes of Robin Hood' are specifically mentioned in Piers Plowman.

As we turn from the 1300s to the 1400s, we start to find more and more references to Robin Hood. There is a collection of religious works from the first decade of the 1400s called 'Dives and Pauper,' and it contains a reference very similar to the one found in Piers Plowman. A poor preacher speaks about people who prefer to hear a tale about Robin Hood than to hear mass. In the actual wording of the text, he refers to those who 'gon levir to heryn a tale or a song of Robin Hood or of sum rubaudry than to heryn masse or matynes' – literally those who prefer 'to hear a tale or a song of Robin Hood or of some such ribaldry than to hear Mass or the Matins.' [*SOURCE: 'Reading Robin Hood,' Stephen Knight, p. 18.*]

Around the same time as that passage, in the first decade or so of the 1400s, a short verse was scribbled in a manuscript at Lincoln Cathedral. [*SOURCE: 'Robin Hood,' J.C. Holt, p. 141.*] Here's the passage in Modern English:

Robin Hood in Sherwood stood, hooded and hatted and hosed and shod
Four and twenty arrows he bore in his hands.

Now here's the same passage in the original Middle English:

Robyn hod in scherewod stod, hodud and hathud and hosut and schod
Four and thuynti arowus he bar in hits hondus.

Notice that the passage uses the word ***shod*** which meant 'shoed' or 'wearing shoes.' It was derived from the word ***shoe***. It also gave us the word ***slipshod*** which originally referred to someone wearing slippers or very loose shoes. That led to a sense of something slippery or loose or untidy, and from there we got the modern sense of ***slipshod*** as something careless or shabby. But it all goes back to that earlier sense of the word ***shod*** as 'shoed' or 'wearing shoes.' And here, we're told that Robin Hood was 'hooded, hatted, hosed, and shod' in the early 1400s.

A decade or so later, we find another reference to Robin Hood in a chronicle composed in Scotland. The author was a Scotsman named Andrew Wyntoun, and his historical chronicle appeared in the year 1420. It was a yearly chronicle, and for the years 1283-1285, he included the following entry – first in Modern English, and then in the original Middle English:

Little John and Robert Hood
As forest outlaws were commended good,
In Inglewood and Barnsdale
All this time they practiced their trade.

Litil lohun and Robert Hude
Waythmen war commendit gud;
In lngilwode and Bernnysdaile
Thai oyssit al this tyme thar trawale.

So here we have a Chronicle in Scotland referring to the legends of Robin Hood. And interestingly, it refers to 'Little John and Robert Hood.' Little John was a major character in the stories from the very beginning, and here we see that he was closely associated with Robin Hood even before we have a surviving Robin Hood text. And note that the chronicle refers to Little John and Robin Hood as ***waythmen***, which meant 'mean who lie in wait,' so it was a common term for outlaws or bandits. And the passage says that they were "commendit gud," literally 'commended good,' but it meant highly regarded or well-renowned or well-praised. So that implies that they were considered folk heroes even though they were robbers.

The passage also says that they lived in "lngilwode and Bernnysdaile," which was Inglewood in the far north of England and Barnsdale which was a wooded area in north central England located directly north of Sherwood Forest. This points to another important aspect of the early Robin Hood tales. They weren't always set in Sherwood Forest. Many of the early stories specifically mention Barnsdale or Barnsdale Forest.

Now Barnesdale north of Sherwood wasn't actually a royal forest and the wooded area was so sparse that it never really attracted bandits, so modern scholars aren't entirely sure why it was mentioned in so many of the early references. But there was also another Barnesdale Forest south of Sherwood that was a royal forest, even thought it was smaller and further away. So there may have been some confusion about the two Barnesdales. *[SOURCE: 'Reading Robin Hood,' Stephen Knight, p. 45.*] But again, we see this older connection to Barnesdale in this early chronicle from Scotland.

A couple of decades after that chronicle entry, we get another reference to Robin Hood, this time in a petition to Parliament in the year 1439. The petition came from Staffordshire, west of Nottingham in the Midlands of England. A man named Piers Venables helped a prisoner escape from jail, and together, they both escaped into the forest. Venables was apparently part of a larger gang engaged in criminal activity in the region, and the petition expressed concern about their activities. The petition specifically said that Venebles 'gathered and assembled unto him many misdoers dressed in similar clothing and, in the manner of insurrection, went into the woods of the country, as if they had been Robin Hood and his men,' or in the original Middle English, he "gadered and assembled unto hym many misdoers beynge of his clothinge and, in manere of insurrection, wente into the wades in that contre, like as it hadde been Robyn Hode and his meyne." [*SOURCE: 'Robin Hood: The True History Behind the Legend,' Nigel Cawthorne, p. 52, and 'Robin Hood and Other Outlaw Tales,' Stephen Knight and Thomas Ohlgren, p. 21*.] So by this point, even petitions to Parliament were making reference to Robin Hood.

In the following decade – the 1440s – we got another historical chronicle out of Scotland. This time, it was composed by a man named Walter Bower. The manuscript was really an expansion of an earlier chronicle, and Bower's updated version contains annual entries. For the year 1266, he including the following passage, translated from Latin into Modern English:

> Then arose the famous murderer or cut-throat, Robert Hood, as well as Little John, together with their accomplices from among the dispossessed, whom the foolish populace are so inordinately fond of celebrating both in tragedy and comedy, and about whom they are delighted to hear the jesters and minstrels sing about above all other ballads. [*SOURCE: 'Robin Hood: The True History Behind the Legend,' Nigel Cawthorne, p. 35.*]

So here we get confirmation that these stories were being passed along in the form of ballads and songs. In other words, they were being spread in the oral tradition. Also, note that Bower is much more critical that his fellow Scots historian Andrew Wyntoun, who wrote his chronicle a couple of decades earlier. Wyntoun had described Robin Hood and Little John as ***waythmen*** or 'men lying in wait,' but Bower described Robin Hood with the Latin word ***siccarius*** which meant 'cut-throat' or 'murderer.' And whereas Wyntoun said that Robin Hood and Little John were held in high regard by the people, Bower said that the ballads were sung to a 'foolish' audience who were 'inordinately fond' of celebrating the outlaws. So we get a sense that some people like Bower didn't understand the fascination with robbers and murderers.

Bower followed the entry I just read with a short anecdote in which described Robin Hood celebrating Mass in the forest while being pursued by the 'viscount' or sheriff. Rather than fleeing, Robin Hood remains and finishes Mass before attacking his pursuers. Much like Wyntoun a couple of decades earlier, Bower places these events in Barnsdale, not Sherwood Forest. So we see that Barnsdale features strongly in these early stories, especially the versions that came from Scotland. And note that both of those Scots writers placed Robin Hood in the mid to late 1200s, not the late 1100s during the time of Prince John and Richard the Lionheart. So the time frame hadn't been moved back to that earlier century yet.

Now around the same time that Bower's chronicle was released in the 1440s, there was a small uprising against a local nobleman in Norfolk in the east of England. According to reports from the year 1441, a group of laborers blocked the streets of one town and chanted "We are Robynhodesmen, war war war!" [*SOURCE: 'Reading Robin Hood,' Stephen Knight, p. 18*.]

That takes us to the current point in our overall story of English in the mid-1400s. By this point, we've seen that there were several manuscripts that made reference to Robin Hood and his band of outlaws, but we haven't encountered any actual ballads or tales. But that finally changed around the year 1450. That was the same general time period when Gutenberg was inventing his printing press in Germany, and the Hundred Years' War was coming to an end in France. And around that time, the oldest surviving Robin Hood ballad was written down and preserved for history. It's called 'Robin Hood and the Monk,' and it's found in a manuscript that has been dated to the mid-1400s. [*SOURCE: 'Robin Hood: The True History Behind the Legend,' Nigel Cawthorne, p. 55*.]

It survives in the form of a relatively short poem about 350 lines long. It's composed in a Midlands dialect, and it gives us an early look at Robin Hood and Little John, but it's not the version we're accustomed to today. There's none of the lighthearted fare that we associate with the modern stories. Robin Hood's band of outlaws commit murder without much of a second thought.

In the story, Robin is deeply devout, and he decides to leave the forest and go to Nottingham to attend Mass, despite the risk of being caught. Robin makes his way to the church, and once inside, he is recognized by a monk who leaves to tell the sheriff. The sheriff's men arrive and sword fight ensues. And this points to the fact that most of the fighting is done with swords in these early ballads, not bows and arrows. During the sword fight, Robin kills 20 of the sheriff's men, but then his sword breaks, and he is captured and thrown in jail.

The monk is then sent out to deliver a letter to the king informing him that Robin Hood has been captured. The king isn't named, so the time frame of the story is left vague.

Now Robin's band of outlaws soon get word that Robin has been captured. Little John and another outlaw named Much the Miller's son head to Nottingham to rescue him. Along the way, they run into the monk who is carrying the letter to the king. The monk is accompanied by a young page. Little John kills the monk, and the other outlaw kills the page. Then they seize the monk's letter so they can take it to the king themselves.

Here's that passage where Little John and Much confront the monk and his page – first in Modern English and then in the original Middle English. It begins with Little John addressing the monk about Robin Hood:

> "He was my master," said Little John,
> "That thou has brought to jail;
> Thou shall never come to our king,
> For to tell him the tale."
>
> John smote off the monk's head,
> No longer would he dwell;
> So did Much to the little page,
> For fear that he would tell.
>
> There they buried them both,
> In neither moss nor heather ling,
> And Little John and Much together
> Bore the letters to our king.

Now in the original Middle English:

> "He was my maister," seid Litull John,
> "That thou hase browght in bale;
> Shalle thou never cum at oure kyng,
> For to telle hym tale."
>
> John smote of the munkis hed,
> No longer wolde he dwell;
> So did Moch the litull page,
> For ferd lest he wolde tell.
>
> Ther thei beryed hem bothe,
> In nouther mosse nor lyng,
> And Litull John and Much in fere
> Bare the letturs to oure kyng.

So Little John and Much head to the king with the letter informing him that Robin Hood has been captured, but they disguise their identity. They meet with the king, and the king instructs them to return to Nottingham to retrieve Robin Hood and bring him back to the royal court. The king gives them the royal seal which authorizes them to take possession of Robin. When Little John and Much arrive in Nottingham, they are welcomed by the sheriff. And when the sheriff falls asleep, they go the jail and kill the jailer. They free Robin, and all three of the outlaws return to Sherwood. And that's the end of the ballad.

So this short little poem racks up quite the body count. Robin, Little John and Much kill twenty-three different people over the course of 350 lines. And none of the victims really did anything wrong other than trying to capture an outlaw or simply finding themselves in the wrong place at the wrong time. So we can see why some writers of the period didn't really appreciate the public's affection for Robin Hood and his band of outlaws.

Also, unlike some of the other early accounts which place the outlaws in Barnsdale Forest, this poem specifically mentions Sherwood Forest. So both locations appear early on, but Sherwood eventually became the usual setting. And again, the poem mentions the king in several passages, but the king is never identified. So it's not clear when the events were supposed to have taken place.

So that's the oldest surviving Robin Hood story – 'Robin Hood and the Monk.' A short time later, a different Robin Hood story was also preserved in writing. Both of these poems were probably derived from ballads that were being sung at the time. The second poem is called 'Robin Hood and the Potter.' And like the other poem, it's a little over 300 lines long, so that gives us a sense of how long these early ballads were. It is also composed in a Midlands dialect.

The date of this second poem is somewhat uncertain. Some scholars place it in the 1460s and others place it a few decades later. [*SOURCE: 'Reading Robin Hood,' Stephen Knight, p. 17, and 'Robin Hood,' J.C. Holt, p. 15*.] Either way, it probably existed in ballad-form in the mid-1400s. This particular ballad harkens back to those earlier legends about the Anglo-Saxon rebel Hereward the Wake. Just like Hereward, Robin Hood disguises himself as a potter to spy on his pursuers.

The story begins when Robin ambushes a potter who is passing through the forest. The name of the forest isn't given in the poem, but Little John mentions that he had seen the potter before in 'Wentbridge.' Wentbridge is a small village in Yorkshire, and that puts it in the Barnsdale region. So it is generally assumed that the forest setting here is Barnsdale rather than Sherwood. But again, we see that early geographical split in these first two ballads with the first ballad set in Sherwood Forest and this second ballad apparently set in Barnsdale.

Now, Robin approaches the potter and demands that he pay a fee for safe passage though the forest. The two men start fighting, and the potter actually gets the better of Robin. With the fight concluded, Robin suggests that they exchange their clothes. Robin wants to travel to Nottingham, and he offers to take the potter's pots with him and sell them when he gets there. The potter agrees and Robin dons the potter's clothing and travels into town. While selling the pots, Robin meets the Sheriff and the Sheriff's wife. The Sheriff invites Robin to an archery contest, not realizing who he is really is. At the contest, Robin displays his skill with a bow and arrow, and when asked how he acquired such skills, he lies and says that he was taught by Robin Hood himself. That comment grabs the Sheriff's attention. The Sheriff asks Robin if he can take him to the famous outlaw, and Robin agrees. When they arrive at the forest, they're ambushed by Robin's men, and the Sheriff realizes that he has been tricked. Here's the passage – first in Modern English:

And when he came in to the forest,
Under the leaves green,
Birds there sang in their nest,
It was great joy to see.

“Here it is merry to be,” said Robin,
“For a man who has anything to spend;
By my horn you shall discover
if Robin Hood dwells within.”

Robin set his horn to his mouth,
And blew a blast that was full good:
It was heard by his men who were gathered,
Far down in the wood.
“I hear my master blow,” said Little John,
They ran like they were fools.

When they came to their master,
Little John did not spare;
“Master, how did you fare in Nottingham?
Did you sell your wares?”

“Yes, by my truth, Little John,
Look thou take no care,
I have brought the Sheriff of Nottingham,
For all our merchandise and wares.”

“He is very welcome,” said Little John,
“These tidings are very good.”
The Sheriff would have paid a hundred pounds
To have never met Robin Hood.

Now the same passage in the original Middle English.

And when he cam yn to the foreyst,
Under the leffes grene,
Berdys there sange on bowhes prest,
Het was gret goy to se.

"Here het ys merey to be," seyde Roben,
"For a man that had hawt to spende;
Be mey horne ye schall awet
Yeff Roben Hode be here."

Roben set hes horne to hes mowthe,
And blow a blast that was foll god;
That herde hes men that there stode,
Fer downe yn the wodde.
"I her mey master blow," seyde Leytell John,
They ran as thay were wode.

Whan thay to thar master cam,
Leytell John wold not spare;
"Master, how haffe yow fare yn Notynggam?
How haffe yow solde yowre ware?"

"Ye, be mey trowthe, Leytyll John,
Loke thow take no care;
Y haffe browt the screffe of Notynggam,
For all howre chaffare."

"He ys foll wellcom," seyde Lytyll John,
"Thes tydyng ys foll godde."
The screffe had lever nar a hundred ponde
He had never seen Roben Hode.
(Ll. 246-271)

So the Sheriff of Nottingham realizes that he had been tricked and the potter was Robin Hood all along. Robin's men take the Sheriff's horse and his gear, and they make him walk back to Nottingham on foot. The original potter had remained in the forest, so he is paid for his pots and allowed to go on his way. And that's the end of the ballad.

Note how this poem contrasts with the other poem. This time, we don't have any murders – just deception, trickery and theft. The sheriff is tricked and robbed, and the innocent potter is paid for his wares and is allowed to continue on his way. So Robin does steal from the rich, but he doesn't really give to the poor. Nevertheless, the Robin of this second poem is a little closer to the modern Robin Hood that we know today.

This second poem concludes with the following passage which reflects a very interesting development within the language. Here's the passage first in Modern English – and then in the original Middle English:

Thus parted Robin, the Sheriff, and the potter,
Underneath the green wood tree;
God have mercy on Robin Hood's soul,
And save all good yeomanry!

Thes partyd Robyn, the screffe, and the potter,
Ondernethe the grene wod tre;
God haffe mersey on Roben Hodys solle,
And saffe all god yemanrey!

So that final passage concludes with the request to save all good ***yeomanry***. We are told through all of these early poems that Robin Hood is yeoman. In later stories, he is often depicted as a fallen noble. But early on, he wasn't a noble, nor was he a poor peasant. He was somewhere in between – among the rising middle class that emerged in the century after the Black Death. And this particular poem concludes with a specific reference to Robin's status as a yeoman.

But what's more interesting from a linguistic point of view is that the passage rhymes that word ***yeomanry*** with the earlier word ***tree*** – 'Underneath the green wood tree – And save all good yeomanry.' Now you're probably saying, 'So what? There's nothing wrong with that rhyme.' Well, that's true today, but it wasn't true in Middle English. And this type of rhyme points to something that was happening in the language at the time. And that 'something' was the Great Vowel Shift.

Now I'm going to delve into the Great Vowel Shift in some detail about two or three episodes from now, but we can see some of the early stages of the vowel shift in this type of rhyme, which is actually common in these early Robin Hood poems. Notice that ***yeomanry*** ends with a Y and ***tree*** ends with a double E, but it usually had a single E in Middle English – spelled T-R-E. So a word ending with Y rhymes with a word ending in E. The same poem also rhymes the word ***yeomanry*** with ***me*** (M-E). And it rhymes ***Trinity*** with ***me.*** The other poem – Robin Hood and the Monk – rhymes ***Christianity*** with the word ***tree***. And it rhymes the name ***Mary*** with the words ***be*** and ***see***.

Again, none of this is surprising to us today, but we have to keep in mind that the letters Y and E represented completely different vowel sounds in Middle English. In most of England, the sound of letter Y had merged with the sound of letter I, and they were both pronounced as /ee/. As I've noted before, those letters still have that sound in recent loanwords from other languages like ***pizza***, ***spaghetti***, ***linguini***, and even the word ***ski*** (S-K-I). And the Y at the end of many words represents the same sound – ***any***, ***many***, ***baby***, ***city***, ***easy***. Again, that is the same sound that the letter Y would have had in most of England in the Middle English period. And in the early Robin Hood poems, we hear that sound at the end of words like ***yeomanry***, ***Trinity***, ***Christianity***, and ***Mary***.

But the letter E had a completely different vowel sound. It was used to represent the sound /ay/. Again, we sometimes find the letter E representing that sound in Modern English in recent loanwords like ***café***, ***fiancé***, ***resume***, and ***saute***, as well as the vowel sound at the end of words like ***ballet***, ***buffet***, ***beret***, and ***gourmet***. That's the traditional sound of letter E, and its still the sound of that letter in most languages of continental Europe, which is why we find it those recent loanwords from other languages.

So since the letter Y was pronounced /ee/, and letter E was pronounced /ay/, words that ended in those respective vowel sounds didn't rhyme, and therefore, they were almost never used with each other to create rhyming verses in Middle English. But all of sudden, in the 1400s, we start to see poets using them together for the first time in rhyming poetry.

Shortly after the two poems that we've looked at in this episode, another Robin Hood poem appeared called A Gest of Robyn Hode. That title meant the acts, or deeds or exploits of Robin Hood. It's a very long poem, and it has generated a lot of interest from scholars over the years. Again, it appears to be slightly later than the two poems we looked at earlier, but not much later. It is usually dated to the late 1400s.

Well, this other poem, A Gest of Robyn Hode, has a lot of these rhymes where a word ending in a Y rhymes with a word ending in an E. For example, the poem rhymes the word ***treasury*** with words like ***be*** and ***me***. It also rhymes the word ***courtesy*** with words like ***he***, ***see***, ***me*** and ***tree***. The word ***charity*** rhymes with words like ***the***, ***tree***, ***ye*** and ***be***. The word ***country*** rhymes with ***he*** and ***the***. And the word ***company*** rhymes with ***me*** and ***tree***. So you get the idea. All of these words ending in Y were rhymed with words ending in E, just like we might do today, but that was almost unheard of earlier periods of Middle English. So that tells us that the vowel sounds in those words were being pronounced the same way by this point in the mid to late 1400s.

Now there's also something interesting about all of the examples I just gave. The words ending in Y – ***Trinity***, ***Christianity***, ***Mary***, ***treasury***, ***courtesy***, ***charity***, ***country*** and ***company*** – are all French or Latin loanwords. The word ***yeoman*** is a native English word, but ***yeomanry*** uses a French suffix – 'R-Y.' Meanwhile, all of the words ending in E are native English words – ***be***, ***me***, ***see***, ***tree***, ***he***, ***ye*** and ***the***. And that distinction helps to explain what happened to cause those vowel sounds to merge together during the Great Vowel Shift.

First, let's consider those short little native English words like ***be***, ***me***, ***see***, ***tree*** and ***he***. They're all spelled with an E, and they were spelled with an E in Middle English. But remember that that E was pronounced /ay/ in Old and Middle English. So those words were originally pronounced /bay/, /may/, /say/, /tray/ and /hay./ Now let's focus on that /ay/ sound. It's pronounced in the front of the mouth. You can try it yourself. As you can tell, it's right up front, but there is a vowel sound that is pronounced slightly higher in the mouth, and that's the /ee/ sound. If you say /ay/ and then /ee/, you can feel how the sound moves slightly higher.

Well, that's what happened to most of the long vowel sounds during the Great Vowel Shift. They moved slightly higher in the mouth. So words that had been pronounced with an /ay/ sound started to be pronounced with an /ee/ sound. The vowel was slightly raised. But the spelling didn't really change. The letter E was retained. So B-E – pronounced /bay/ – became ***be.*** And M-E – pronounced /may/ – became ***me.*** And S-E or S-E-E — pronounced /say/ – became ***see***. You get the idea. And that's how the letter E came to represent the /ee/ sound in Modern English. In fact, that's why we call it the letter ' in English because that's the long vowel sound that it represents today.

That is one of the basic sound changes of the Great Vowel Shift. But there is one important caveat here. There were already a lot of words with a vowel sound that was pronounced as /ee/. And as I noted earlier, that /ee/ vowel sound was traditionally represented with the letters I or Y. Again, we have lots of modern loanwords that still work the same way like ***pizza*** and ***ski***. But now people were starting to raise that lower /ay/ sound up to /ee/. So did all those vowels just crash together? Well, no. Remember that the Great Vowel Shift was like a game of musical chairs. All the long vowels shifted around. So at the same time that people were raising /ay/ up to /ee/, they were also shifting /ee/ as well. So all those words that had an /ee/ sound now were getting a new sound. But people couldn't raise /ee/ up any higher. Phonetically, that's as high as you can go in the front of the mouth. So they shifted that sound back towards the center of the mouth, and it became a diphthong, initially pronounced /eh-ee/ and over time it shifted back even further and became /ah-ee/. And that's how the letter I came to represent the /ai/ sound in Modern English. And that's why we call it the letter I in English because that is the long vowel sound that it represents today.

So these two vowel changes go together. And many linguists think that that high /ee/ sound shifted first – from /ee/ at the top of the mouth back to /ai/. I actually discussed that shift back in the episode about Sir Gawain and the Green Knight because there is evidence of that shift in that poem. Then next, the /ay/ sound shifted up to fill the gap that was left behind. As a result, /ay/ shifted up to /ee/, and /ee/ shifted back to /ai/. Thus, the word spelled B-E went from /bay/ up to modern ***be***. And the word spelled B-Y went from /be/ back to modern ***by***. That's why all of those words remained distinct from each other even though the vowel sounds were shifting around.

So that's a lot, and it explains a lot. It explains why all of those words ending in letter E were now being pronounced with an /ee/ sound. Because the old sound was raised up slightly. But it doesn't explain what happened with all of those early French loanwords like ***courtesy***, and ***charity***, and ***country*** and ***company***. Why didn't they follow along with native English words like B-Y where the /ee/ sound shifted back and became /ai/, thus shifting from /bee/ to /by/? So why didn't we end up with /courtesai/ and /charitai/ and /countrai/ and /companai/? Well, the answer lies in the fact that they were French loanwords, and they were actually pronounced with a slightly different sound at the end in Middle English. It wasn't the pure /ee/ sound found in the native English words. It was a slightly different sound.

Those words had entered English from French with a slight diphthong at the end – pronounced /ee-eh/. So ***courtesy*** was originally /cur-teh-see-eh/. That's how it was pronounced in the time of Chaucer, and that's actually how I pronounced in those earlier Chaucer episodes. Then, probably in the early 1400s, the little /eh/ sound at the end disappeared, and those words started to be pronounced with a short /ih/ sound. So it was something like /cur-teh-sih/. But that short vowel hanging on at the end of a word tends to get stretched out by speakers, and over time, it tends to be pronounced long. So /ih/ became /ee/. And that's how we went from /cur-the-see-eh/ to /cur-the-sih/ to ***courtesy***. That process affected all of those early French loanwords.

So at the same time that the vowel sound in words like /bay/, /may/ and /tray/ was being raised up to ***be***, ***me*** and ***tree***, a completely separate process was at work on those French loanwords. The short /ih/ sound at the end was being stretched out to /ee/. And /cur-teh-sih/, /chair-eh-tih/, and

/coun-trih/ were becoming ***courtesy***, ***charity***, and ***country***. Again there were two completely different and separate processes at work. But the end result was the same vowel sound at the end. We ended up with native words like ***be***, ***me*** and ***tree*** and French loanwords like ***courtesy***, ***charity***, and ***country***. And so, for the first time, those English words rhymed with those French loanwords. And we can assume that these changes were widespread by the mid-1400s because we find these types of rhymes throughout these early Robin Hood poems. We find three or four examples in each of the two earliest Robin Hood poems, and then in the slightly later Gest of Robyn Hode, we find over 30 examples. And that's partly because the Gest is a longer poem, but it's also apparently because the merger of these sounds was well-established by the time of the Gest, and it was therefore easier to find examples of French loanwords that rhymed with native English words. So that allowed the Gest poet to use a lot more of those types of rhymes. And today, we rhyme those same words all the time without even giving it a second thought.

So I hope you found that interesting. Again, we'll explore these shifting vowels in more detail in a more comprehensive way in upcoming episodes. I just wanted you to see that these early Robin Hood poems reflect some of those early vowel changes that were taking place in the mid 1400s.

As we've seen, the two earliest ballads, Robin Hood and the Monk and Robin Hood and the Potter, were apparently written down some time in the 1450s or 1460s. That larger third poem, A Gest of Robin Hood, was apparently written down a short time later. The oldest copy survives in a book from the 1490s that was printed shortly after the printing press was introduced to England. Some scholars think it was composed around that same time, but others think it was composed a few years earlier closer to the earlier two poems. *[SOURCE: 'Robin Hood,' J.C. Holt, p. 15, and 'Reading Robin Hood,' Stephen Knight, p. 48-9*.] This third poem does make a reference to "our comely king Edward" which meant our 'handsome king Edward,' but that type of reference was common for both Edward III in the 1300s and Edward IV in the late 1400s. So that reference doesn't help very much to establish the time frame of the poem, other than to provide a setting that is well after the time of Richard of Lionheart and Prince John. So again, we see that these earliest Robin Hood stories were set a little bit closer to the time they were composed, and modern versions have pushed the setting back to the 1100s.

Also, as we've seen, the original Robin Hood was a rougher character – a yeoman, not a noble – more likely to fight with a sword than a bow. It also isn't clear how or why Robin became an outlaw in these early ballads. He and his merry men were much more willing to kill people than in modern versions, and they robbed from the rich, but they didn't necessarily give to the poor.

Also , as I've noted, the early ballads aren't clear about the location of the forest where the outlaws live. Some refer to Barnsdale and others refer to Sherwood, which were neighboring, but distinct locations. Of course, Sherwood Forest emerged as the preferred setting over time.

The early ballads also feature the Sheriff of Nottingham as a major character, but he is not given a name. And the king is often referenced, but again, he is not given a name except for that one reference to 'our comely king Edward.' But even that reference is somewhat vague since there had been four different King Edwards by the late 1400s. None of these ballads mention Richard the Lionheart or Prince John.

Among Robin Hood's band of merry men, some of the well-known outlaws are there from the beginning, and some were added later. Almost all of the early ballads feature Little John as a major character. In fact, he and Robin often seem like joint leaders of the band of outlaws. The outlaws also include Much the Miller's Son and Will Scarlet, even though Will Scarlet's name varies quite a bit in the early ballads.

Friar Tuck also appears in the late 1400s, but he doesn't really emerge as a major character until the following century. It's possible that Friar Tuck came out of a separate outlaw tradition. There are surviving records from Sussex in the early 1400s that show that local authorities were pursuing an unknown forest outlaw who was calling himself Friar Tuck. Two royal writs were issued for the man in the year 1417, and they both state that he had assumed the name 'Friar Tuck' and that the name was widely known in common parlance. The man was later identified as a former chaplain named Robert Stafford. [*SOURCE: 'Robin Hood: The True History Behind the Legend,' Nigel Cawthorne, p. 187-8, and 'Robin Hood,' J.C. Holt, p. 58-9.*] But the fact that he was using the name 'Friar Tuck' as an alias indicates that it was a common name for an outlaw at the time. But none of these early Robin Hood ballads that we've examined mention a Friar Tuck.

However, there is a short fragment from a play about Robin Hood that has been dated to around the year 1475. Again, all that has survived is the short fragment, but it is contemporary with these other ballads that we've examined. And it does refer to a 'ffrere Tuke' who is among the band of merry men who try to rescue Robin from jail after he is captured by the Sheriff of Nottingham. [*SOURCE: 'Robin Hood: The True History Behind the Legend,' Nigel Cawthorne, p. 188.*] So Friar Tuck was apparently added to the Robin Hood legend around that time, even though he may have originated as part of a separate outlaw legend.

The fact that he first appears in a fragment of a play is notable because plays featuring Robin Hood were very common in the 1400s and 1500s. They were usually a part of seasonal festivals like the May Games, which also featured pageants and parades. During those celebrations, people would dress up like Robin Hood and the other characters and act out the stories. *[SOURCE: 'Robin Hood and Other Outlaw Tales,' Stephen Knight and Thomas Ohlgren, p. 5.*] Friar Tuck became a common character in the plays presented at those seasonal festivals. And by the 1600s, he was a regular part of Robin's band of outlaws.

The same thing basically happened with Maid Marian. Robin didn't have a love interest in the early ballads, but the springtime festivals introduced her to the legend, and she became part of the regular cast of characters. It appears that she was adopted from a popular French story called 'Robin et Marion,' but the Robin in that story wasn't Robin Hood. He was a completely different Robin. Nevertheless, it appears that some people in England couldn't help but make the connection with Robin Hood, and over time, she emerged as the Robin Hood's companion in the English plays and stories. [*SOURCE: 'Robin Hood: The True History Behind the Legend,' Nigel Cawthorne, p. 181, and 'Robin Hood,' J.C. Holt, p. 160.*]

In those springtime festivals, Maid Marian and Robin often presided over the games with Marian serving as the queen of May and Robin serving as the king. [*SOURCE: 'Robin Hood,' J.C. Holt, p. 160.*]

Those festivals and plays and dances are also notable for another reason. As I noted, people dressed up like Robin Hood, and Maid Marian, and Little John and the other characters in the Robin Hood stories. And in the plays, it was also common for someone to don a horse costume and play the part of a horse. It was a wicker costume in the shape of a horse that hung from a person's shoulders and was worn around the waist. As the person walked around, it looked like he or she was riding a horse. And that horse costume, or the person wearing that horse costume, became known as a ***hobby horse***.

And that term ***hobby horse*** was then extended to the child's toy that consisted of a stick with horse's head on the end. Small children would pretend to ride that toy hobby horse in the same way that performers pretended to ride a horse while wearing the hobby horse costume in those springtime plays. The use of the term ***hobby horse*** for both the costume and the child's toy are both documented in the 1500s. In later centuries, toy makers made small wooden horses that children could pretend to ride, and that gave us the more modern sense of the term ***hobby horse***.

Children loved their hobby horses. They spent a lot of their free time pretending to ride them. It was a favorite pastime, and in the 1800s, the term ***hobby horse*** was extended to any favorite pastime or pursuit, whether done by children or adults. And a short time later, the ***horse*** part was dropped from the term ***hobby horse*** when used to refer to a favorite pastime. That left us with the word ***hobby***. And today, most of us have a hobby that entertains us and occupies our spare time. So that word ***hobby*** is actually derived from the term ***hobby horse***, and ***hobby horse*** is a term that originated during the popular festivals and plays held in the late Middle Ages that featured characters from the Robin Hood stories.

But why was that horse costume and that child's toy called a 'hobby' horse? Where did the word ***hobby*** come from? Well, earlier in the episode, I noted that there was an early Yorkshire outlaw named Robert Hode, and he was sometimes referred to as 'Hobbehod.' And the radical preacher John Ball urged the peasants of England to chastise 'Hobbe the Robber.' And the word ***Hobbe*** itself was sometimes used to mean a robber or a bandit. Well, believe it or not, those uses of the word ***Hobbe*** have the same root as the word ***hobby*** in '***hobby horse***' and in your favorite ***hobby*** that you do in your spare time. They are all derived from the name ***Robert*** – or ***Robin***.

As I noted earlier in the episode, the name ***Robert*** had a lot of variations. ***Robin*** was a variation. And it was often shortened to just ***Rob***, and then other names that rhymed with ***Rob*** were coined as nicknames. Those nicknames included ***Bob*** and ***Bobby*** which we still use today. Other rhyming names included ***Hob*** and ***Hobby***. All of these variations acquired an association with robbers in the Middle Ages as I noted earlier, and that association may or may not have a connection to Robin Hood.

But for some unknown reason, some of the nicknames for Robert also became associated with horses. It may have been peasants who started the practice, but it become more and more common over time. Another nickname of ***Robert*** formed in the same manner as the others was ***Dobbin***. And you may know that a draft horse or a farm horse is still sometimes called a ***dobbin***. And for similar reasons, a small horse was sometimes called a ***hobby*** or a ***hobyn***. That usage

appeared in the 1400s, and that's why those small horse costumes and those small toy horses were called a '***hobby horse***.' It literally meant a 'small horse horse.' And as I noted, it also gave us the word ***hobby*** for a pastime.

So all of that means that ***hobby***, ***hobby horse***, ***dobbin***, and ***Robin*** are all words derived from the name ***Robert***. And thanks to those springtime festivals, ***hobby horses*** and ***hobbies*** have a direct historical connection to the legend of Robin Hood.

Next time, we're going to move our story forward to the second half of the 1400s. With the Hundred Years War now over, England suddenly found itself mired in an altogether new war – a civil war known as the Wars of the Roses. So next time, we'll explore that fascinating civil war, and we'll see how it impacted the English language.

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

EPISODE 137: A ROSE BY ANY OTHER NAME

Welcome to the History of English Podcast – a podcast about the history of the English language. This is Episode 137: A Rose By Any Other Name. In this episode, we're going to turn our attention to the origins of civil war that divided the nobility of England in the late 1400s. At the time, it was called the 'Cousin's War,' but later writers called it the 'Wars of the Roses.' And they called it that because the war was fought between two branches of the Plantagenet family, each of which was represented by a rose – one red and one white. As we'll see, the real story isn't quite that simple, but roses were very important symbols in the Middle Ages. They were grown in gardens throughout England, and during the period when the Wars of the Roses were getting underway, a guide to gardening was composed in the English language for the first time. So this time, we're going to turn our attention to roses and gardening in the late Middle Ages. And we'll explore the origins of a war named after one of the world's most popular flowers.

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.

Before we begin, let me also mention that the Intelligent Speech Conference will be held on Saturday, June 27. It is entirely online this year, and I'm going to be joining a lot of other podcasters who will each be giving presentations and appearing on panels together. I'm going to be talking about the original Proto-Indo-European language. Specifically, I'm going to look at the true nature of that language. What it is and what is isn't. Whether it was actually spoken by real-life people or whether it is just a theoretical concept invented by linguists. So if you're interested in checking out that presentation and the many other presentations and panels, go to intelligentspeechconference.com for more information.

Now this time, I want to talk about gardens, and especially one particular flower that is often found in gardens – the rose. And I want to begin this discussion by making note of a very old name for the island of Britain – a name that was sometimes used more specifically for England itself. That name was Albion. The name was coined by the Romans during the period when Rome controlled most of the island. It isn't entirely clear where the Romans came up with the name, and even some Roman writers were confused by the name. It may have been based on a Celtic name for the island, but most scholars think it was probably derived from the Latin word ***albus*** meaning 'white.' But what was the connection between Britain and the color white?

Well, the Roman writer Pliny the Elder speculated about the name. He thought that it might have been based on the prominent white cliffs found along the southeastern coast of Britain which the Romans would have encountered as they crossed the English Channel. But he also suggested an alternate theory – that the island got its name from white roses. He wrote that "The isle of Albion is so called from its white cliffs washed by the sea, or from the white roses with which it abounds." [*SOURCE: 'Albion: the Origins of the English Imagination,' Peter Ackroyd*].

Now modern scholars aren't sure if the white rose was common in Britain when the Romans arrived or if the Romans themselves actually introduced it to the island. What is known for certain is that it was a very popular flower, and it was a favorite among gardeners in both the British Isles and continental Europe. In fact, various varieties of roses were grown throughout Europe and the Near East.

Wild roses are native to the northern hemisphere, and historically they could be found throughout much of that hemisphere from China to Europe and all the way to North America. [THE ROSE, Jennifer Potter, p. 3]

Now those are wild roses, which were tall, thorny bushes almost like small trees. They had small flowers with a much more subtle fragrance that most modern roses. But at some point, humans learned to cultivate roses, and they gradually began to evolve into the roses we know today, even though most of the roses of the Middle Ages resembled the wild variety more than the rose you would buy in a modern florist. The earliest reports of rose cultivation can be traced all the way back to the ancient Persians. And even though the word ***rose*** was borrowed from Latin, some scholars have suggested that the word may have even older Persian roots.

Whatever the ultimate source, if you love roses, then you probably consider a rose garden to be paradise. And the ancient Persians also considered it to be a paradise because the word ***paradise*** is an ancient Persian word for a garden. And at one time, it was also common within English to use the word ***paradise*** as a synonym for garden.

Today, we associate the word ***paradise*** with a state of supreme beauty or perfection, and that's because the original Greek translation of the Bible used the word ***paradise*** in reference to the Garden of Eden. It was a word that had been borrowed into ancient Greek, and from there, many Europeans came to associate the word ***paradise*** with the Garden of Eden. And thus, they came to associate it with a state of bliss or beauty or perfection. But the word ***paradise*** originally had a much more basic meaning.

If we look a little closer at that word ***paradise***, we find something very interesting. The word reflects a very basic and fundamental fact about a traditional garden – that it's an enclosed area. It was the enclosure that separated a traditional garden from the fields and open land that surrounded it. Let's keep in mind that the Persian language was also an Indo-European language. And the 'para-' part of ***paradise*** referred to a border or edge that extends around a particular area. It comes from the same Indo-European root found in Latin words like ***perimeter*** and ***periphery***. The '-dise' part of ***paradise*** comes from a root word meaning 'to form or build.' So a ***paradise*** was literally an area with a wall or barrier that had been built around the perimeter.

People built those barriers to keep out animals, and maybe more importantly, to keep out people who might want to take something for themselves. So gardens provided a degree of privacy and seclusion. Those barriers separated the garden from the surrounding fields or forest, and they represent one of the most fundamental aspects of a traditional garden. It was a small controlled natural area within a larger uncontrolled natural area.

This idea can be traced all the way back to the original Indo-Europeans. As we saw in the early episodes of the podcast, the original Indo-Europeans were nomadic herders on the Eurasian steppes. But that didn't mean that they were always on the move. From time to time, they apparently settled down for a while in a fixed location. And that can be discerned because the original Indo-European language had a word that meant 'to enclose.' And it apparently referred to the process of enclosing a plot of land within a fence or other fixed barrier. That word was something like ****gher***, and that ancient root word has filtered down into English in many different ways from many different sources. In fact, we've acquired this word in so many different ways that the various forms of the word within Modern English reflect all of the major influences on the early history of the language. Yet, in almost every case, the various words have retained their original meaning as an enclosed piece of land.

That word ****gher*** passed into the Germanic languages as something like ****gard***, and it then passed into the Old English language of the Anglo-Saxons. As we saw in the earlier episodes of the podcast, the hard 'G' sound at the beginning of many Old English words shifted to a softer 'Y' sound. So within Old English, that word evolved from ****gard*** to ***yard***.

Now back on the continent, the Franks spoke a Germanic dialect that was closely related to Old English. And the Franks retained that hard 'G' sound at the front of the word. That Frankish version of the word passed into the northern French dialects as ***gardin***, which later passed into Middle English in the 1200s as our modern word ***garden***. So ***garden*** and ***yard*** are ultimately derived from the same Germanic root. ***Garden*** has the original hard 'G' sound preserved by the Franks, and ***yard*** has the softer 'Y' sound used by the Anglo-Saxons. But both words originally referred to an area enclosed by a fence or barrier.

I should note that those words have evolved within modern British English, and today, American English and British English use those words in slightly different ways. In American English, a ***yard*** is the open area surrounding a house, and a ***garden*** is an smaller enclosed area – usually within a yard or adjacent to a yard. Within British English, the word ***garden*** generally refers to the open area surrounding a house – what Americans would call a ***yard***. And in British English, the word ***yard*** tends to refer to either a paved area or an area used for some type of commercial activity like a shipyard, or junkyard or lumberyard. Again, those are broad generalizations, but when I use the word ***garden*** in this episode, I'm using the word in its more traditional sense as an enclosed area where plants are grown and cultivated.

So the English words ***yard*** and ***garden*** are both derived from the same Germanic root word. Modern German also inherited that word, and it produced the German word ***Garten*** with the same general meaning. English has borrowed that word in the term ***kindergarten*** – literally a 'child's garden.'

The same Germanic root word also passed into the Norse language of the Vikings. There the word became ***garðr***, and that word passed into the Danelaw region of England as the word ***garth***. Again, it meant an enclosed garden. It isn't very common in modern standard English, but it can still be found in some regional dialects around England, especially in the north of England.

So via the Germanic languages, this old Indo-European root gave us ***yard*** from the Anglo-Saxons, ***garden*** from the Franks, and ***garth*** from the Vikings. That root also passed into Russian where it produced the word ***grad*** meaning 'a group of houses enclosed in a wall or other fortification.' So there, it came to mean a town or city, and it's still a common suffix in Russian place names like the old Soviet-era names Leningrad and Stalingrad.

That root also passed into Latin. But in Latin, the initial sound shifted to an 'H' sound. We've encountered that Latin sound change before. You might remember from an earlier episode that the words ***guest*** and ***host*** are cognate. ***Guest*** is the native English version and ***host*** is the Latin version. The Indo-European 'G' sound shifted to an 'H' sound in Latin. Well, the same thing happened here, and where the early Germanic language had ****gard***, Latin had ***hort*** or ***hortus***, again meaning an enclosed garden. That Latin root gave us the word ***horticulture***.

As I noted, gardens offered a degree of refuge and privacy. And in large manors, the host would meet with guests in the garden. In Latin, that produced a new word combing the Latin prefix ***com*** meaning 'with' and that word ***hortus*** meaning 'garden.' This particular combination can still be found in the word ***cohort***, literally a person who joins you in the garden. But that term was slurred within French to simply ***court***, which came to mean the people gathered around the king. The king's advisors and attendants became known as his ***court***.

The word ***court*** was one of the earliest French words to be borrowed into English after the Norman Conquest, and within English, the word was often combined with its English cousin – the word ***yard***. That produced the word ***courtyard*** to describe an enclosed area near or adjacent to a house.

So all of that means that ***yard***, ***garden***, ***garth***, ***horticulture***, ***cohort***, ***court*** and ***courtyard*** are all cognate. They all derive from the same Indo-European root word meaning 'to enclose.'

As we can see from those words, they all relate to gardens in some way, and that implies that the early Indo-Europeans maintained some type of basic gardens as well. So the idea of enclosing a piece of land to cultivate plants is very old. Gardens were common among the earliest civilizations. They were a necessity for people who needed to grow their own vegetables and herbs. While most early gardens were very basic plots, some civilizations developed very fancy gardens. And one of the first civilizations to do that was ancient Persia. I noted earlier that those gardens were called paradises, and the first reports of wild roses being grown and cultivated in gardens came from Persia. Their gardens were designed in a very deliberate way with geometric designs, water features, and other aesthetic elements. They were admired by visitors, and over time, similar gardens could be found throughout the Mediterranean. Meanwhile, those early cultivated roses also spread to the Mediterranean, and then into Western Europe. And it's very likely that the spread of cultivated roses was linked to the spread of those fancy pleasure gardens. [SOURCE, '*The Rose,' Jennifer Potter, p. 61-4.*]

Within Greece and Rome, roses became associated with specific deities, especially the goddesses of love – Aphrodite and Venus. The symbolism was eventually extended to Christianity where the rose became a symbol of the Virgin Mary. That connection is most apparent today in the

word ***rosary***. A general collection of prayers was called a ***hortus deliciarum*** in Latin, literally a 'garden of delights.' And a specific group of prayers was called a ***rosarium***, literally a 'rose garden.' Many of those prayers were hymns of praise dedicated to Mary, and in the 1500s, that Latin word ***rosarium*** became the English word ***rosary***. Later, a collection of Hail Marys recited with prayer beads became known as a ***rosary***, and then the word ***rosary*** was extended to the beads themselves. And through that process, the word ***rosary*** – literally a 'rose garden' – came to refer to prayer beads. [SOURCE, 'Medieval English Gardens,' Teresa McLean, p. 132]

We also see this connection is the name of the common herb ***rosemary***. The original Latin name was ***rosmarinus*** – a combination of ***ros*** meaning 'dew' (D-E-W) and ***marinus*** meaning 'the sea.' So in Latin, the name literally meant the 'dew of the sea.' The word passed in late Old English as ***rosmarine***. But English speakers didn't really understand that meaning, and to them, the name ***rosmarine*** sounded sort of like a combination of ***rose*** and ***Mary***. And since people associated roses with the Virgin Mary, there was already a connection between those words in the minds of many people. So they gradually converted the name of the herb from ***rosmarine*** to ***rosemary***. In fact, the modern form of the word as ***rosemary*** appeared for the first time in that early English cookbook called the Forme of Cury which we looked at in an earlier episode.

We also find a connection between the Virgin Mary and flowers in the name of the common flower ***marigold***. It was simply called a ***gold*** in Old English, which reflected its color. But much like the rose, it became associated with Mary, and in the early 1400s, it started to appear in documents for the first time as ***marigold***.

Another flower associated with the Virgin Mary was the lily. To many medieval Christians, it was the most important devotional flower. Many depictions of Mary featured her with either roses or lilies or both. The rose was a symbol of her love, and the lily was a symbol of her purity. There was a traditional association between the color white and purity, so the white lily helped to draw that connection. And in fact, the term ***lily-white*** appeared for the first time in English documents in the late 1300s. [*SOURCE: 'Pleasures and Pastimes in Medieval England,' Compton Reeves, p. 136, and 'Medieval English Gardens,' Teresa McLean, p. 162*.]

Now given these basic connections between certain flowers and Christianity, it probably isn't surprising that monasteries placed a heavy emphasis on gardening. Most monasteries, especially Benedictine monasteries, maintained elaborate gardens for meditation and prayer. [*SOURCE: 'Medieval English Gardens,' Teresa McLean, p. 16-17.*] In fact, the Benedictine rule specifically required the cultivation of gardens. And like most common gardens, they served a variety of purposes.

Today, we tend to think of gardens as places where people grow pretty flowers and places where people grow a variety of plants to eat. Well, those were two of the basic uses of gardens in the Middle Ages. Monasteries, for example, had lots mouths to feed, so they grew vegetables and herbs in the gardens. And since gardens were places of meditation and prayer, the monks also tended to focus on beauty and aesthetics by growing flowers and shrubs. But it's also important to keep in mind that flowers were often used as food ingredients in the Middle Ages – much

more so than today. So flowers were grown for their beauty and fragrance, as well as for their culinary value.

Garden plants also served other important purposes in the Middle Ages. Remember that modern science didn't exist yet, so people relied heavily on plants and herbs as medicines. Every monastery had an infirmarer who was in charge of the infirmary and was responsible for making salves and other medicines. And that monk relied on those plants and herbs as basic ingredients. [*SOURCE: 'Medieval English Gardens,' Teresa McLean, p. 28.*] The herbs were often dried so they could be preserved and used throughout the year, and that may be how we got the word ***drug***.

The word ***drug*** appeared in English for the first time in poems like Piers Plowman and the Canterbury Tales. The word was borrowed from French, but its ultimate origin is disputed. One theory suggests that French borrowed it from a Dutch version of the word ***dry***, which was related to the English word ***dry.*** That connection implies that the word ***drug*** was derived from dried herbs that were often used as medicines, and if that theory is true, it means that the word ***drug*** is cognate with the English word ***dry***, meaning they both evolved from the same root word.

In addition to beauty, aesthetics, food and medicines, medieval gardens were also important because they cultivated plants used for dyes and inks. That was especially important in monasteries where illuminated manuscripts were produced. Elderberries and mulberries produced a common blue dye, while iris flowers produced a popular green dye, and saffron was used to make a yellow ink that was cheaper than gold leaf. [*SOURCE: 'Medieval English Gardens,' Teresa McLean, p. 35.*]

So as you can see, medieval gardens served a lot of different functions, and that was why they were such an important part of English society. Some monasteries maintained separate gardens – one for edible plants, one for medicinal plants, and one for meditation and prayer. Other monasteries combined all of those elements into one single garden, but divided the garden itself into separate sections for each type of plant. Common household gardeners didn't have that luxury. They tended to mix all of their plants together into one common plot. But regardless of layout, most people had access to some type of garden.

Of course, that included the nobility as well. And after the Norman Conquest, elaborate gardens became much more common at royal palaces and castles. Remember that the word ***court*** comes from the same root as the word ***garden***, and during the period of Norman rule, not only was the word ***court*** introduced to English, but its meaning also expanded from the king's 'co-horts' or 'garden mates' to the more varied senses that we have today, including the sense as a courtyard. It was during this same period that heraldry also became very important to the European nobility as kings, queens and other nobles adopted various symbols to represent their household or their family. Those symbols sometimes included animals and plants.

Geoffrey of Anjou was the Count of Anjou and Duke of Normandy in France. His tomb depicts him carrying a shield decorated with lions, and that is considered to be one of the earliest examples of European heraldry. But Geoffrey not only had an association with lions, he also had

an association with a particular plant. Supposedly, he often wore a bright yellow blossom of the broom plant in his hair or in his hat. In Latin, that plant was called ***planta genista***, and in French and English, it became known as ***Plantagent*** – the name for the family dynasty that he founded. He famously married Matilda, the granddaughter of William the Conqueror, and their descendants ruled England from the mid-1100s all the way through the Wars of the Roses, ending with the arrival of the Tudors at the end of the 1400s. So almost all of the kings we've encountered during the Middle English period were part of this family dynasty – a dynasty named for a common garden shrub.

By the way, I noted that the name of that plant in English was the broom plant. Well, as it turns out, that the plant had branches that were ideal for sweeping, and sometimes, people would bind several loose branches together for that purpose, and that is in fact where the get the modern word ***broom*** meaning a tool used for sweeping. It comes from the same shrub that produced the name of the Plantagenet Dynasty. ***Broom*** comes from the English name, and ***Plantagenet*** comes from the Latin and French name.

Now Geoffrey Plantagenet's great-grandson was Henry III. He was the king of England for over 50 years in the middle part of the 1200s. And he is important to this episode because he ruled at a time when nobles were putting a major emphasis on elaborate gardens. The English kings maintained a royal palace at Woodstock near Oxford. And Henry oversaw a major expansion of the gardens at that palace. He had two new gardens built, and another garden for his wife enclosed and improved for her enjoyment. The palace became a collection of royal gardens, and the new enclosures apparently included a rose garden. [*SOURCE: 'Medieval English Gardens,' Teresa McLean, p. 100*.] And that was a significant development because Henry's wife was the person who introduced the rose as a symbol of English royalty.

Henry's wife was Eleanor of Provence from the south of France. I talked about that marriage back in Episode 99. When she came to England, she was accompanied by a large retinue including many uncles and cousins from the south of France. The native English nobles didn't particularly like or understand all of the new foreigners at court who spoke a version of French that was very different from the Norman French they were accustomed to. But the new queen and her retinue came from the south of France where beautiful cultivated roses were held in high regard, and Eleanor decided to adopt the rose as her personal emblem. It was a white or gold colored rose, and Eleanor and Henry's eldest son also adopted the same rose as his personal emblem. He was Edward, and he eventually succeeded his father as king, thereby becoming Edward I. He was sometimes known by the nickname Longshanks. And again, he also used that white or gold colored rose as his emblem.

But he also had a younger brother named Edmund. And Edmund also wanted a rose as his emblem. But since his elder brother Edward had adopted the white rose, Edmund decided to go with the red rose as his emblem. And in that selection of the white rose by Edward and the red rose by Edmund, we can find the original use of red and white roses to distinguish different branches of the royal family.

Again, the elder brother Edward went on to become king, but the younger brother Edmund did receive a small consolation prize. He received a brand-new title – the first Earl of Lancaster. And just as Edward's descendants bore the title of King, Edmunds descendant's bore the title of Earl and then Duke of Lancaster. Those later generations stopped using the red rose as their emblem, but that historical connection remained.

Over time, Edmund's descendants became further and further removed from the main line of kings. But in the mid-1300s, Edmund's branch of the family tree reconnected with Edward's branch. That happened when Edmund's great-granddaughter Blanche married Edward's great-grandson John of Gaunt. I've talked about that marriage before in earlier episodes. It was John of Gaunt's first marriage, and he and Blanche were actually distant cousins, but that wasn't really unusual when it came to these types of marriages. As we know, John of Gaunt was the son of the king – Edward III. He was actually the third son to live to adulthood. And when he married Blanche, he married into the Lancastrian family line. That allowed him to eventually take the title of Duke of Lancaster for himself. So once again, a junior branch of the royal family bore a Lancastrian title.

And when Gaunt's son, Henry Bolingbroke, usurped the throne and became Henry IV, the House of Lancaster became the ruling family of England. Even though the Lancastrians now ruled England, the red rose originally associated with the family had been largely forgotten. The 1400s saw a succession of Lancastrian kings – Henry IV, Henry V and Henry VI – but none of them actually used the red rose as an emblem. However, writers and historians occasionally noted that historic connection between the House of Lancaster and the red rose, and that connection became fodder for later writers like Shakespeare. But more on that later.

Now when we left off with our historical narrative a couple of episodes back, we were still in the reign the third of the Lancastrian kings – Henry VI. He was the great-grandson of John of Gaunt, and he was the somewhat inept king who saw England fall into bankruptcy while losing the Hundred Years War. As we saw, the situation worsened when Henry started to experience mental illness and became largely unresponsive.

There had always been a cloud hanging over the House of Lancaster. As a junior branch of the family, there were always other nobles who had a better claim to the throne. The Lancastrians were descended from John of Gaunt, but remember, Gaunt was the third brother out of five. As I've noted in prior episodes, he had an older brother named Lionel, and even though Lionel was long dead, he did have living descendants. They had been skipped over when the Lancastrians usurped the throne, so they always posed a potential threat. But they had never really pursued their claims.

A few episodes back, we saw that Lionel's heir was his great-grandson Edmund. And based strictly on descent, Edmund actually had the best claim to the throne, but Edmund spent much of his spare time gambling and playing cards. We saw that one of the first references to playing cards in England came from his household accounts. So he was never really a threat to his cousins – the Lancastrians.

Now I should also note that John of Gaunt also had two younger brothers who I haven't really mentioned before in the podcast, and they had descendants. And even though those descendants were behind the Lancastrians in terms of descent, they now start to emerge as a very important part of our story.

Gaunt's next youngest brother was named Edmund, and he was given the title of the Duke of York. And it's here that we find the origin of the House of York who battled against the Lancastrians in the upcoming civil war. Now after becoming the Duke of York, Edmund did something very important in regard to the overall theme of this episode. He decided to use a rose for his personal emblem. Specifically, he chose a white rose – essentially the same rose that had been used by Queen Eleanor and Edward I back in the 1200s. That white rose had largely fallen out of use for personal emblems, but Edmund the Duke of York decided to bring it back. And that white rose continued to be used by his descendants who became known as the House of York.

Now you may be wondering how the Yorks had any kind of claim to the throne since they were behind the Lancastrians in the overall pecking order. Well, the answer to that has to do with a strategic marriage that brought Lionel's descendants, who had the best claim to the throne, into the House of York. In essence, the two lines were merged together by marriage. Here's what happened.

Edmund the card gambler, who never pursued his claim to the throne, had a younger sister named Anne Mortimer. Remember, they were the direct descendants of Lionel, so they represented the senior line of the Plantagenet family. Well, the sister Anne Mortimer married into the House of York. She married the son of Edmund the Duke of York. So Anne and her husband were cousins, but again, that wasn't really all that unusual with these royal marriages. And together, Anne and her husband had a son named Richard. So when Richard was born, he was a direct descendant of Lionel through his mother and a direct descendant of Edmund Duke of York through his father. And when his mother and his uncle Edmund died, he became the nearest living relative of his great-great-grandfather Lionel. So he now represented the senior branch of the Plantagenet family. So through his mother, he inherited a claim to the English throne. And through his father, he inherited the title of Duke of York. And he also inherited that white rose as personal emblem. And by the 1430s, he was starting to emerge as the major rival of the Lancastrian kings. For the first time, nobles who opposed the Lancastrians had an another option to turn to. They could look to Richard, the new Duke of York, who arguably had a better claim to the English throne than the Lancastians themselves. And the inheritances Richard had received from his mother and father had made him the greatest landholder in England. [*SOURCE: 'The Wars of the Roses,' Alison Weir, p. 84*.]

Again, the Lancastrian king was Henry VI – the somewhat inept king who inherited the throne as a baby, and who was unable or unwilling to stamp out the corruption which was rampant among his close advisors. His advisors took money, land and titles while the rest of England teetered on the verge of bankruptcy. [*SOURCE: 'This Realm of England: 1399-1688,' 8th ed., Lacey Baldwin Smith, p. 49.*] Meanwhile. England lost one battle after another during the final years of the

Hundred Years War in France, on its way to its inevitable defeat in the war. With every one of these developments, more and more people looked to Richard of York as an alternative to Henry.

The Lancastrians tried to marginalize Richard by giving him a military appointment in France during the war. It was intended to keep him out of English politics. And while the war kept Richard busy in France, it also gave him crucial military experience.

In 1445, King Henry married Margaret of Anjou – a cousin of the French royal family. It was a strategic political marriage, but Margaret turned out to be one of Henry's most loyal supporters and one of Richard of York's fiercest opponents. In the process, she eventually emerged as the de facto leader of the Lancastrian cause.

When Margaret became queen, she also adopted a flower as a personal emblem. Her flower was the daisy. [*SOURCE: 'The Last Plantagenets,' Thomas B. Costain, p. 296*] And the image of a daisy was embroidered on the robes of her attendants. Margaret may have chosen that flower because it is called a ***marguerite*** in French, so her name was the same as the flower. But, of course, the flower is called a ***daisy*** in English, which is literally a 'day's eye.' It's called that because the flower opens its petals during the day and closes them at night. So it basically opens it eyes during the daytime, and that's why English speakers called it the 'day's eye' – or ***daisy*** today.

The linguistic link between the names Margaret and Daisy was once very strong within English, and that connection helps to explain why the name Daisy is still a common nickname for Margaret.

Now as I noted, daisies acquired their modern name because they open in the daytime and close at night. Well, at nighttime, when the daisies are closed, birds will often nest in bushes and trees. And that fact gave us a very common phrase which has its origins during this period. In the Middle Ages, it was common for some people to hunt birds at night while they were nesting. They would take a torch or other light, and one person would hit the bushes with a stick while the other person would use the light to attract the fleeing birds. The hunters would either try to catch the birds in a net or strike them with a stick as they were flying away. And this activity gave us the common phrase to 'beat about the bush' or 'beat around the bush.' The phrase is recorded for the first time around the current point in our overall story of English in the mid-1400s. It appeared in an anonymous poem called 'Generydes' apparently composed around the year 1440. In Modern English the line reads:

But it has been said full long ago,
Some beat the bush and some the birds take.

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

Butt as it hath be sayde full long agoo,
Some bete the bussh and some the byrdes take.

The implication is that the person ‘beating the bush’ was doing something relatively easy and preliminary, while the person catching the bird the more difficult and crucial task. So to ‘beat about the bush’ or ‘beat around the bush’ came to refer to a preliminary activity leading up to the main event. Today, it has the sense of someone engaged in a needless delay rather than getting straight to the point. But it is a phrase related to bushes and shrubs, and it appeared in the mid-1400s.

Around the same time that poem appeared, another important poem was composed by a man identified as John the Gardener or simply John Gardener. That poem was called ‘The Feate of Gardening,’ and it is considered to be the first guide to gardening composed in the English language. The poem is usually dated to the 1440s, and it is served as a guide to anyone trying to maintain an English garden in the late Middle Ages.

The poem itself is not very long. It’s only about 200 lines. It’s divided into nine different sections dealing with different categories of vegetables, herbs, or fruits. It provides some practical gardening advice, but it’s mostly a guide as to the best time of year to plant certain items. Here are the opening lines of the poem – first in Modern English and then in the original late Middle English:

How so well a gardener be
Here he may both hear & see
Every time of the year & of the month
And how the craft shall be done
In what manner he shall delve & set
Both in drought and in wet
How he shall his seeds sow
Of every month he most know

Ho so wyl a gardener be
Here he may both hyre & se
Euery tyme of the ȝere & of the mone
And how the crafte schatt be done
Yn what maner he schatt delue & sette
Bothe yn drowthe and yn wette
How he schatt hys sedys sowe
Of euery moneth he most knowe

As a quick aside, I should note that gardeners probably had no problem keeping up with the months and the time of year, but like everyone else, they may have found it difficult to remember how many days were in each month. Some had 30 days, some had 31. One month had 28. Well around this same time, in the first half of the 1400s, we find the oldest known version of the common poem that many people still use today to keep track of those days. The poem was scribbled on a page in a Latin manuscript, but it was written in English. It reads:

Thirti dayes hath Novembir
April June and Septembir.
Of xxviij [twenty and eighte] is but oon
And alle the remenaunt xxx and j [thritti and oon]

Thirty days have November,
April, June, and September.
Of 28 is but one
And all the remnant 30 and 1.

Again, that mnemonic poem wasn't part of this gardening poem, but it was written and preserved around the same time. The gardening poem begins by stating that the grafting of apple and pear trees should be done between September and April. Grafting is the process of taking a limb or cutting from one tree and attaching to the limb of another tree. If done properly, the transplanted cutting will become part of the new tree. There were lots of reasons for grafting pear and apple trees. It could provide variety, or preserve the fruit of a weak or diseased tree, or repair a damaged tree. The first part of the 'Feate of Gardening' instructs gardeners how to graft trees successfully.

This part of the poem reminds us that apple and pear trees were common in English gardens and orchards in the Middle Ages. The words ***apple*** and ***pear*** have both been around since the Old English period, even though the word ***pear*** is ultimately from Latin and is one of those handful of Latin words borrowed by the early Germanic tribes from the Romans.

Apples and pears grew naturally in Britain. The wild apple was the ***crab*** or ***crab-apple*** – a term that appeared for the first time in English documents in the mid-1400s. Crab-apples were small and tart as were wild pears. But cultivated apples and pears were imported from the continent, probably first brought by the Romans. They were larger and sweeter, and they were the ones that people preferred to grow in their gardens or orchards. [*SOURCE: 'Medieval English Gardens,' Teresa McLean, p. 231*] People ate apples and pears in a variety of ways, but many people preferred to turn them into a drink. Apples were turned into cider, and pears were turned into perry. ***Cider*** and ***perry*** were both French terms borrowed in the 1300s. ***Cider*** replaced the Old English word ***æppelwin*** – literally 'apple wine.'

Now given the overall theme of this episode, here is something else you may or may not know about apples and pears. They are actually part of the rose family. In fact, many of the common fruits that we eat today are part of that same family. That includes plums, strawberries, peaches, and cherries, among many others.

Plum trees grew naturally in England, and the word ***plum*** is a native Old English word.

Strawberries also grew in the wild, but they were also cultivated in gardens. When cultivated, they produced a larger and sweeter berry. The word ***strawberry*** appears to be a native English word, but it isn't entirely clear how the name originated. Lots of theories have been proposed to suggest how strawberries might be related to straw, but again, there isn't really a definitive

answer. The more common Old English name was ***eorþ-berge*** – literally 'earth berry.' But the word ***strawberry*** became common in Middle English, and that was the word used by John the Gardener in his poem about gardening. Other berries like raspberries, elderberries, blackberries, and gooseberries could also be found growing in the wild. [*SOURCE: 'Pleasures and Pastimes in Medieval England,' Compton Reeves, p. 141.*]

Peaches are also a member of same rose family. Peaches are ultimately from East Asia, but they were introduced to Europe during the Roman period. They were actually grown in England in the Middle Ages, but they were difficult to grow and cultivate that far north, so they tended to be very expensive – and were mostly eaten by the wealthy. [*SOURCE: 'Food in Medieval Times,' Adamson, p. 21.*] The eastern origins of the peach is reflected in its name. Believe it or not, the word ***peach*** is actually a variation of the word ***Persia*** where the Romans encountered them. You might remember that Persia is also the place where we have the first evidence of rose cultivation. With respect to peaches, the Romans called the fruit a ***persica mala*** – literally a 'Persian apple.' The ***mala*** part was later dropped at the end, and as the word passed through French into English, it evolved from ***persica*** to ***pesca*** to ***peche*** to ***peach***. But ultimately, ***peach*** means Persian.

Another member of the rose family is the cherry. Cherries are native to western Asia, but again, the Romans introduced them to Britain. [*SOURCE: 'Food in Medieval Times,' Adamson, p. 21.*] The word ***cherry*** was borrowed from French and Latin, and ultimately from Greek. And the Greeks probably picked it up from some other language in the east. The interesting thing about the word ***cherry*** is that it was originally ***cherise***. So one individual cherry was a ***cherise***. But English speakers were confused by that 's' sound at the end, and they started to think of ***cherise*** as a plural noun. So during the 1400s, people started to drop the 'S' when they were referring to a single piece of the fruit. And ***cherise*** became ***cherry*** without the 'S' at the end. And today, we only use the 'S' at the end when referring to multiple ***cherries***.

By the way, the same thing happed with ***peas***. People ate a lot of beans and peas in the Middle Ages as well, but ***pease*** was both the plural and the singular form of the word. So you had a lot of ***pease*** or just one individual ***pease***. But again, people became confused by that 'S' sound at the end of the singular form. They started to think of ***pease*** as a strictly plural term, and based on that, they started to refer to an individual 'pease' as a ***pea*** – without the 'S'. So the cherry and the pea have one thing in common. They both originally had an 'S' at the end which was lost over time because people thought the 'S' should be reserved for the plural forms.

Now after discussing apples and pears, John the Gardener included a section on the maintenance of grape vines. Even though we tend to associated grapes and wine with France, some people in England also grew grapes in the Middle Ages. The wine produced from the grapes was not considered to be as good as French wine, so most of the wine consumed in England continued to be imported from France. In addition to wine, English grapes were often used to produce a liquid called verjuice, which was a substance somewhere between wine and vinegar. It was a very popular flavoring in the Middle Ages. It was added to many medieval dishes. [*SOURCE: 'Pleasures and Pastimes in Medieval England,' Compton Reeves, p. 142.*]

Like many of those other fruits, grapes were originally brought to England by the Romans. The Anglo-Saxons called a grape a ***win-berige*** – literally a 'wine berry.' But in the late 1200s, the word ***grape*** started to appear in English documents, and it eventually replaced the old word 'wine berry.' The word ***grape*** was borrowed from French, but it appears that French acquired the word from a Germanic source, perhaps from the Franks. Most scholars think that the word ***grape*** was derived from a type of grappling hook used to grab grapes from the vine. And that etymology suggests that the words ***grape*** and ***grapple*** are cognate, and both may also be related to the words ***grab*** and ***grasp***. And even though English grapes were not as common as French grapes, they were common enough to be included in John the Gardener's guide to English gardening.

Now after discussing the maintenance of grape vines, John the Gardener turned his attention to onions, leeks and garlic. And it was probably appropriate that those were the first vegetables he discussed because they were some of the most popular vegetables grown in medieval gardens and cooked in medieval kitchens.

Of course, all three are part of the same family of vegetables, and in Old English, they were all sometimes referred to as ***leeks***. They were so common in gardens that the Anglo-Saxons often called a kitchen garden a ***leac-tun*** – literally a 'leek town' or 'leek enclosure.' And a gardener was called a ***leac-weard*** – literally a 'leek warden' or 'leek guardian.'

Since the word ***leek*** was a very general term, English speakers tried to distinguish various types of leeks. As we've seen before in the podcast, the word ***gar*** meant spear, and a spear-shaped leek was called a 'gar-leek,' which became our modern word ***garlic***. Both ***leek*** and ***garlic*** are Old English words.

But what about an onion? Well, ***onion*** is a French loanword.. It was sometimes called a ***cipe*** in Old English, but the Anglo-Saxons were also influenced by that French word ***onion***, and they coined a word for the vegetable that basically meant an 'onion leek.' So let's look a little closer at that word ***onion***. I noted in an earlier episode that ***onion*** is basically a variation of the word ***union***. ***Onion*** and ***union*** are actually cognate, and they're still only separated by one letter today. Originally, an onion was thought of as a vegetable with many separate layers that were 'united' into one bulb. And that sense of 'unity' or 'oneness' produced the Latin word ***unio*** which became the French word ***onion***. And the Anglo-Saxons took that word ***unio*** or ***onion***, and they came up with the term ***ynne-leac*** – literally a 'union leek' or 'onion leek.' But by the mid-1300s, English speakers had just adopted the French word ***onion*** by itself – without the leek part at the end. And over time, the word ***leek*** became restricted to one particular type of vegetable within this larger leek family.

After discussing onions and leeks, John the Gardener turned his attention to other types vegetables, but he didn't use the word ***vegetable***. He used the more traditional term ***wort***. That's because the word ***vegetable*** is a French loanword, and even though it eventually replaced the word ***wort***, it didn't really do so until the end of the 1400s. So when John the Gardener wrote his guide to gardening in the mid-1400s, he was still using the Old English word ***wort***.

That word still survives in the name of certain plants like St. John's Wort, so named because it supposedly flowered around the time of St. John's Day which was June 24. [*SOURCE: 'Medieval English Gardens,' Teresa McLean, p. 147.*] John the Gardener actually mentioned St. John's Wort in his guide to gardening, but he called it 'herbe Ion.' He didn't use the word ***wort*** for that plant, but he did use it for other plants like ***fieldwort***, ***ribwort***, ***motherwort***, ***spearwort***, and ***liverwort***.

Another plant with that name is ***colewort***. It's a term that goes back to the 1300s, and it was originally a generic term for any cabbage-like plant. In fact, the word ***cole*** was often used by itself with much the same meaning. It's derived from an old Latin root word that was borrowed by the early Germanic tribes. So it can be found in the name of a lot of related vegetables. It exists in the term ***cole-slaw***, which is actually derived from a Dutch version of the word. It also exists in the term ***kale*** which is a northern English form of the word. It can also be found in the first part of ***cauliflower*** which was borrowed from Latin.

But in early English, it became common to combine that word ***cole*** meaning 'cabbage' with ***wort*** meaning 'vegetable' to produce the term ***colewort*** meaning a 'cabbage-like vegetable.' It was a much more common word at one time, and it passed into early American English as well. In the southern part of the United States, the word ***colewort*** was slurred to 'col'ort,' and then became ***collard***. So the modern word ***collard*** is really just a different pronunciation of ***colewort***. Again, colewort would have been found in most gardens in the Middle Ages in part because it could be grown and harvested throughout much of the year. In fact, it was a staple of most gardens alongside onions, garlic and leeks.

During the Middle English period, the words ***cole*** and ***colewort*** started to be replaced with French loanwords. The word ***lettuce*** and ***spinach*** were borrowed from French, and John the Gardener actually used both of those words in his guide. English also borrowed the word ***cabbage*** which acquired much of the original meaning of ***cole*** or ***colewort***. ***Cabbage*** actually comes from the Latin word ***caput*** meaning 'head.' We've encountered that word before. ***Caput*** gave us words like ***cap*** and ***cape*** and ***captain*** and ***chaplain*** and ***chief***, even the word ***chef***. Well, it also gave us ***cabbage*** because these types of plants were originally leafy vegetables without a head. But during the Roman period, they started to be grown and cultivated with a ball-like head. And since that plant now had a head, they were named after that Latin word ***caput*** meaning head. And through French, the word became ***cabbage***.

For the most part, these types of cabbages or cabbage-like plants were eaten by cutting up the leaves and boiling them in a soup or porridge. So they were usually cooked until they were soggy and mushy. [*SOURCE: 'Medieval English Gardens,' Teresa McLean, p. 207.*] But some of those leafy vegetables had a firm root that could also be eaten. Those types of roots were called ***næps*** in Old English or ***neps*** in Middle English. And as they were cultivated and became more popular, people started to distinguish between different kinds of neps. One particular kind was round and bulbous, and it looked like a piece of wood that had been shaped and rounded by turning it in a lathe. And from that sense of turning, that particular nep started to be called a 'turn-nep,' which became our modern word ***turnip***. It's still called a ***neep*** in Scotland and parts of England. And it was a common vegetable in most medieval gardens.

Another common root vegetable was called a ***feld-more*** in Old English – literally a 'field root.' But the French called it a ***pasnaise***. That word was borrowed into English, but since English speakers considered it a type of nep, they changed the end of the word from '-naise' to '-nep.' So the ***pasnaise*** became a ***passenep***. And it eventually evolved into ***parsnip***. So the '-nip' at the end of ***turnip*** and ***parsnip*** represents this old word ***nep*** for a type of root vegetable.

Now John the Gardener listed most of his worts and root vegetables under the general category of herbs – or /herbs/ – depending on your pronunciation. During the Middle English period, there wasn't always a clear distinction between a vegetable and an herb. An ***herb*** could refer to any leafy vegetable. So John the Gardener included lettuce, spinach, and radishes under the general category of herbs. And he also included something else under that category. He included flowers – like violets, lilies, and red and white roses. Again, that wasn't really unusual because people actually ate different types of flowers in the Middle Ages.

Not only were certain flowers added to dishes, they also gave flavor to sauces and drinks. As raw salads became more popular in the late Middle Ages and the early modern period, people added flowers to salads, like Marigolds, violets, and hawthorne flowers. [*SOURCE: 'Sweet Herbs and Sundry Flowers,' Tania Bayard, P. 27.*] They were also added to soups and porridges. [*SOURCE: 'Food in Medieval Times,' Adamson, p. 14-15, and 'Medieval English Gardens,' Teresa McLean, p. 142.*] Several of these flowers, along with daisies, were also used as common medicines. [*SOURCE: 'Medieval English Gardens,' Teresa McLean, p. 162.*]

Roses were also consumed by people in the Middle Ages. Roses were used to add flavor to puddings and jams and preserves. They were also added to wines. [*SOURCE: 'Medieval English Gardens,' Teresa McLean, p. 169.*] Rose petals were steeped in water to create rose water. At medieval banquets, people would use the rose water to wash their hands. And roses were also used as medicines to heal certain eye diseases. [*SOURCE: 'Food in Medieval Times,' Adamson, p. 14-5.*]

So all of these flowers were common in medieval gardens, and John the Gardener specifically mentioned the 'rose ryde' and 'rose white' – the red rose and white rose – among a list of herbs at the end of his guide to gardening.

And that takes us back to where we began, with the simmering conflict between the House of Lancaster and the House of York that was taking place around the same time that John the Gardener prepared his guide to gardening. Of course, that conflict became known as the Wars of the Roses because, supposedly, the House of Lancaster was represented by the red rose and the House of York was represented by the white rose.

But the reality isn't quite that simple. The Yorks did use a white rose as one of their many symbols, but the red rose of Lancaster only had a limited use in the 1200s, and it had long since fallen out of use. So why is the conflict called the Wars of the Roses?

Well, the answer is a little bit of revisionist history and the most revered playwright in the English language. To understand how the upcoming civil war came to be known as the Wars of the Roses, we have to consider the two key rivals in the mid-1400s in the lead-up to the war. On the one side we have Richard of York who we looked at earlier in the episode. He was descended from two different branches of the Plantagent family, and he possessed the best overall claim to the throne if we looked solely at descent from the eldest child. His great-great grandfather had been Lionel, the eldest child of Edward III with living descendants. But he was also descended from Lionel's younger brother Edmund who had been the Duke of York. So he had inherited Lionel's superior claim to the throne through his mother, and he had inherited Edmund's title of Duke of York from his father. He had also inherited wealth from both family lines. So as the head of the House of York, he was a very powerful figure to be reckoned with, and as I noted, he did sometimes use the white rose of York as his emblem.

Meanwhile, the king was the Lancastrain Henry VI. He was the weak and ineffective great-grandson of John of Gaunt. As we know, the Lancastrians were the descendants of Gaunt, and Henry was descended from Gaunt's first marriage. But you might remember that Gaunt was married three different times, and his third wife was Katherine Swinford – the sister-in-law of Geoffrey Chaucer. She was the sister of Chaucer's wife. And Gaunt also had children with Katherine who were known as the Beauforts. And one of those grandsons was Edmund Beaufort, also known as the Duke of Somerset. He was one of the king's closest Lancastrian relatives and one of his closest advisors. In fact, given that the king didn't have any children at the time, he was likely the next in line to the throne, assuming that the throne remained in the hands of the Lancastrians. But if the nobles looked outside of that family, Richard of York had the better overall claim based on his descent from his ancestor Lionel because Lionel had been the older brother of John of Gaunt. So those competing claims set in motion a bitter and deadly rivalry between of Edmund of Somerset and Richard of York. The two distant cousins competed for influence at Henry's court, and when Henry succumbed to mental illness in 1453, the two distant cousins competed for control of England itself.

And that's the context for a very famous scene in William Shakespeare's cycle of history plays that cover this period. The particular scene appears in the play Henry VI, Part I. It's a completely fictional scene, but it helped to established the idea in the popular imagination that each side in the rivalry was represented by a rose. And the scene was set, appropriately enough, in a garden. It was the Temple Garden located near the law courts in London.

In the play, Shakespeare tells us that the two main rivals, Somerset and York, retreat to the garden where they are accompanied by several other prominent nobles. The two argue over their respective rights to the throne, and Somerset turns to one of the gathered nobles and asks him to choose between the two men. The noble named Warwick defers, but York encourages the nobles to make a choice and take sides. He says:

If he suppose that I have pleaded truth,
From off this brier pluck a white rose with me.

Somerset counters:

Let him that is no coward nor no flatterer,
But dare maintain the party of the truth,
Pluck a red rose from off this thorn with me.

Warwick then plucks the white rose indicating that he has sided with York. The next noble chooses a red rose indicating that he has sided with Somerset. The various nobles make their respective choices with the majority siding with York, whereupon York asserts that he has won the argument. But Somerset counters by saying:

Here in my scabbard, meditating that
Shall dye your white rose in a bloody red.

The argument comes to a close with Warwick issuing the following prophesy:

And here I prophesy: this brawl today,
Grown to this faction in the Temple Garden,
Shall send between the Red Rose and the White
A thousand souls to death and deadly night.

Again, that scene was completely fictional, and it was designed to provide a dramatic background to the real-life war that followed. That war was known as the Cousin's War at the time, but Shakespeare's famous scene in the Temple Garden helped to foster the notion that each side was represented by either a red or white rose.

But that's not to say that Shakespeare made up that association. The House of York did use a white rose as one of its symbols, and the House of Lancaster did have a very old connection to the red rose. And that connection was alluded to by other writers before the time of Shakespeare in the late 1400s and 1500s. But it was the popularity of Shakespeare that really pushed the idea to the forefront. In the late 1700s, the writer David Hume published his account of the civil war called "The Wars of the Two Roses." And that was the first known reference to the war as a war of the roses. From there, the term passed into popular culture as the usual name for the conflict.

Now before I conclude this episode, I should note that the war ultimately ended when Henry Tudor became king about 30 years after the war began. He was from the Lancastrian family, but he married the Yorkish heir, Elizabeth of York. And that marriage effectively reunited the two families and gave rise to the House of Tudor. When Henry's son became king as Henry VIII, he also adopted the rose as his emblem, but he insisted a modified version of the rose. To reflect the unification of the two competing houses, the new design combined the two roses by placing a white rose inside of a red rose. That new rose symbol became known as the Tudor rose, and it is still used as a prominent symbol of England to this day. It was also adopted before Shakespeare was born. So again, when Shakespeare depicted various nobles plucking roses in garden, he was simply developing an idea that already existed in the culture at the time.

Next time, we're going to turn our attention to the actual conflict between the Houses of Lancaster and York. Historians who have studied this period have a lot of traditional resources to consult like historical chronicles and government records. But for this particular war, they also have something else that is unusual and previously unavailable. They have an extensive collection of letters written and maintained by a prominent family in the eastern part of England known as the Pastons. Occasional letters appear in the historical record prior to this point, but the so-called Paston Letters are the first extensive collection of letters from the same family of writers available in English. They cover several decades across much of the 1400s, and they are a goldmine for historians of this period. They are also a goldmine for historians of the English language because they capture not only the shifting fortunes of the Wars of the Roses, they also capture the shifting vowels of the Great Vowel Shift. So next time, we'll explore those two events through this very important collection of letters.

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

EPISODE 138: FAMILY MATTERS

Welcome to the History of English Podcast – a podcast about the history of the English language. This is Episode 138: Family Matters. In this episode, we're going to look at the period of warfare in the mid-1400s known as the Wars of the Roses. The conflict was ultimately a family feud as two different branches of the royal family fought for control of the English crown. But that wasn't the only family conflict that was taking place in England at the time. Throughout the country, families were jockeying for position in a country where the old feudal order had broken down and where a new class of yeomen and gentry were acquiring estates at the expense of the traditional landed nobility. The Paston family was one of those newly rich families in the east of England. And the various members of that family wrote letters to each other throughout the 1400s. Most of those letters were saved, and they comprise the oldest collection of private letters in the English language. The letters not only highlight the struggles of this up-and-coming family, they also reveal a great deal about the state of the English language in the 1400s. So this time, we're going to look at this unsettled period of English history through the words and letters of the Paston family of Norfolk.

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, we're going to turn our attention to the second half of the 1400s and the conflict commonly known as the Wars of the Roses. By this point in history, we are really in the final stages of the Middle English period. There is no magic date to mark the transition from Middle English to Modern English, but the two major factors that scholars usually point to are the Great Vowel Shift and the introduction of the printing press. The Great Vowel Shift altered the pronunciation of the language, and the printing press helped to standardize the grammar and spelling of the language. By the mid 1400s, both of those developments were underway. The Great Vowel Shift was in its early stages, and the printing press had been invented in Germany, even though it hadn't arrived in England yet. So we are really on the eve of early Modern English – and the literature of this period reflects that. Many of the English documents produced during this period can be read by modern English speakers without too much difficulty. Spellings had not become fixed yet, but the overall language is very close to Modern English.

Unfortunately, the 1400s are not really considered to be highpoint for English literature. We find ourselves in the middle of the period that separated Chaucer from Shakespeare. So we're in a bit of a valley between those two peaks. There were some important writers and poets like John Lydgate and Sir Thomas Malory, but overall, this period is more notable for the developments within the language itself than the body of literature that it produced.

But some aspects of English literature did flourish during this period. For example, ballads became very popular, like those about Robin Hood. And letter-writing became a common activity. For the first time, people began to correspond with each other in English. Prior to this period, most of the surviving letters were official government documents written in French or

Latin. We don't really find private personal letters composed in English until this century, and there are certainly no collections of English letters prior to this point.

The rise of English letter writing was facilitated by two factors. First, people now had access to cheap paper which provided a convenient writing material for letters. And second, more people could read and write. Obviously, people didn't tend to send letters to each other if they couldn't read and write. But by the mid-1400s, literacy had become common enough throughout the country that people could correspond with each other without too much difficulty. Literacy had spread with schools which were increasingly common throughout England. And there was a growing middle class who could afford to send their children to those schools. So with an increase in literacy, there were more people who could communicate with other by sending letters. Some estimates suggest that about 15 percent of the country could read and write by the end of the 1400s, with estimates as high as 50 percent within a city like London. That growing literacy rate also guaranteed a market for all of those cheap books that were about to be produced with the printing press when it arrived in England a few years later. [*SOURCE: 'A History of England: Prehistory to 1714,' Clayton Roberts and David Roberts, p. 212-3*]

In an era before books were common, and when personal writing was much more limited, people tended to treasure their letters. They didn't just throw them away. A lot of people kept both the letters they received, and the rough drafts of the letters they sent. That meant that there was a record of both sides of the conversation. Over time, as members of a family communicated with each other, the letters started to accumulate– from a handful, to a few dozen, to hundreds of individual letters.

Several of those letter collections have survived – and the most famous of all is a collection maintained by the Paston family who lived in Norfolk in the east of England. The Paston family name was derived from the small village near the coast where they lived and where their ancestors had worked the land as peasants.

The rise of the Paston family reflected the changing nature of English society after the Black Death. They had gone from poor peasants to wealthy landholders in less than a century. The family also maintained a residence in London because they often had business there as well. And there was a regular stream of letters between Norfolk and London throughout the 1400s. Hundreds of those letters have survived. [*SOURCE: 'The Stories of English,' David Crystal, p. 179*]

The letters coincide with the end of the Hundred Years' War and the entire period of the Wars of the Roses, but they only occasionally mention the political situation. They mostly deal with personal and business matters, but as time passed, those personal and business matters started to become mixed up with political matters. And that's because the Pastons' estate repeatedly came under attack by powerful figures who were aligned with various factions in the Wars of the Roses. So the rising and falling fortunes of York and Lancaster had a direct impact on the fortunes of the Paston family.

The Paston struggles stemmed from the fact that they were nouveau riche – in other words, their wealth was recently acquired. They weren't part of the traditional landed nobility. The Pastons had benefitted from the unsettled aftermath of the Black Death when poor peasants were suddenly able to demand payment for their services. The era of serfdom and forced servitude declined as many workers acquired some money and purchased land of their own. That land had previously belonged to powerful lords, and the descendants of those lords weren't willing to give up their wealth and power without a fight. That produced a whole range of family disputes throughout the 1400s as the old money tried to keep the new money from taking over. Those families looked for powerful allies to help them pursue their claims. So those local family disputes were often tied in with that larger family dispute between the Houses of York and Lancaster. If you had a powerful ally in the Lancastrian government, you didn't want the Yorkists to suddenly take over and kick your ally to the curb. Of course, the opposite was true for your rivals who probably sided with the Yorkists in hopes that their allies would rise to positions of power. So local families often aligned themselves with one of the factions in the Wars of the Roses. And that turned a family dispute for the English throne into a civil war that impacted families throughout the country.

The rise of the Paston family began with a peasant farmer named Clement who lived and worked in Norfolk in the late 1300s during the time of Geoffrey Chaucer. He was apparently a free peasant – and he took advantage of the unsettled economic situation after the Black Death. He was able to save some money to send his son to school. [*SOURCE: 'English Social History,' G.M. Trevelyan, p. 29-30*] Clement realized that the way to advancement was education and literacy. Those were the great equalizers, and while Clement himself never enjoyed much wealth, he educated son did.

The son's name was William Paston, and after receiving a basic education, he went on to study law. And in 1429, he became one of the six justices on the Court of Common Pleas. William used his income as a judge to purchase several estates in Norfolk. By the mid-1400s, the Pastons were one of the largest landholding families in the county. [*SOURCE: ' [The Past Speaks,' Lacey Baldwin Smith and Jean Reeder Smith, p. 209-10*] So in just one generation, the family status has risen from peasants to landed gentry.

Even though William was a powerful judge, he faced constant challenges to the estates he had acquired. This was an era before the modern rules of property ownership had been fully developed. England was still in transition from the feudal era where everyone held their property from a feudal lord. And a century of plague and death made it difficult to establish who had clear title to a piece of property. There always seemed to be a distant heir – or a prominent lord who claimed to have some historical right to every large estate. Very often, the heirs of the local lord simply didn't want the property to pass to a peasant or a family of former peasants. So it was common for a seemingly legal purchase to come under attack. Sometimes the dispute ended up in court. But other times, a powerful lord simply gathered up a group of men and took the property by force. The matter might still end up in court, but this was an era when possession was truly 9/10s of the law.

That's what happened to one of William Paston's estates. A property called Beckham manor was seized by a rival claimant. And William spent ten years in court trying to establish his legal right to the property. He finally won the case in the year 1444, but he died only a month later. [*SOURCE: 'Blood and Roses,' Helen Castor, p. 40*]

William was survived by his widow Agnes and five children. William knew the value of education as well as any one in England. He had been one of the richest men in Norfolk, while his father had been a poor peasant. William's rise was largely due to his education. And once he had acquired his estate, his legal knowledge helped him to defend it from the many powerful men who sought to take it away. This idea was expressed in a letter from his widow Agnes to his son Edmund who followed in his father's footsteps and studied the law in London. The letter was sent to Edmund a year after his father's death while Edmund was still studying law. Here's part of the letter – first in Modern English and then in the original Middle English:

> 'To my well-beloved son, I greet you well, and advise you to think once per day of your father's counsel to learn the law; for he said many times that whosoever shall dwell at Paston should have need to know how to defend himself.'
>
> "To myn welbelouid sone I grete yow wel, and avyse yow to thynkke onis of the daie of yowre fadris counseyle to lerne the lawe; for he seyde manie tymis that ho so euer schuld dwelle at Paston schulde have nede to conne defende hymselfe."

Agnes then mentions several of the unresolved claims involving the Paston properties since her husband's death the prior year. She then includes the following passage:

> 'I send you not this letter to make you weary of Paston, for I live in hope, and you will learn that they shall be made weary of their work; for in good faith I dare well say it was your father's last will to have you do right well to that place. . .'
>
> "I sendde yow not this lettre to make yow wery of Paston, for I leve in hoope; and ye wolle lerne that they schulle be made werye of here werke, fore in good feyth I dare wel seyne it was yowre fadris laste wille to have do ryȝht wel to that plase . . ."

So in these passages we see the value that Pastons placed on acquiring a legal education, not just for the personal benefit of the child, but for the family's benefit as well. These passages also point to some interesting developments in the language. She writes that 'they shall be made weary of their work.' Apparently, she is referring to the people who try to raise legal challenges to the Pastons' ownership of the various properties. Edmund's legal knowledge will wear them down and make them weary. In that line she uses the northern pronoun ***they*** with its initial 'TH' sound, but then, instead of using the northern pronoun ***their***, she uses the southern form ***here*** with its initial 'H' sound. So within the same sentence, she mixes the northern and southern pronoun forms. That shows that both forms were probably common in eastern England at this time. And this type of mixed use occurs throughout the various letters.

The other thing that stands out is the relative lack of obsolete or archaic words. All of the words she uses are still commonly used today, even though the form of many of the words has changed over time. And that's true throughout the Paston letters, and also in most other English documents from this period. The vocabulary had become somewhat settled by this point. Of course, it would continue to grow and add new words, but most of the words that we would consider obscure today had already fallen out of use by the late 1400s. And that's why the documents of this period are much easier to read and follow.

Now at the end of this particular letter from Agnes, she asks Edmund to give a message to her other son John. And that's because John was also in London at the time. And in fact, John Paston is really the more important Paston brother for our story because he was the eldest brother, and he is the one who was ultimately responsible for dealing with his father's estate. And it is the letters between John and his wife Margaret and their children that comprise most of the surviving letters in the Paston family collection.

John had also been trained in the law, and as a young man, he had even spent a short period in the royal court where he had been in charge of the king's horses. As I noted, John had married a woman named Margaret, and they had both settled in Norfolk. And when John's father died, it fell to him to try to preserve the Paston estate. And he quickly realized that he had his work cut out for him.

I noted earlier that his father had spent about a decade litigating a claim against one of his most valuable properties called Beckham Manor, and that claim was finally resolved shortly before he died. Well, shortly after his death, the same claimant reappeared and renewed his claims to the property. A new lawsuit was started, and this time, the son John lost the manor house in the ensuing litigation. [*SOURCE: 'The Pastons and Their England,' H.S. Bennett*] As we'll see, that was only the beginning of John's problems.

A few years later, in May of 1448, we find a fascinating letter written to John by his wife Margaret. John was away in London, and Margaret was back in Norfolk. The letter recounts an argument between two men on the street that she had to break up. The letter is interesting both in the events that are described and the language that Margaret uses to tell the story.

Margaret writes that she and John's mother Agnes were attending church in town. Even though Agnes was her mother-in-law, but she refers to her here as her 'mother,' as was common at the time. Terms like ***mother-in-law*** and ***father-in-law*** were still relatively new terms in the language, and they hadn't yet replaced the more traditional way of referring to one's in-laws as simply 'mother' or 'father.'

Margaret writes that the Paston family chaplian, James Glois, was walking down the street outside of the church and passed between two other men – one of them being a prominent man of the town named John Wyndham. When Glois passed by, he didn't tip his hat as was customary at the time. It was common for a man to lift his hat and lower it when he encountered someone. That was sometimes referred to as 'covering your head.' Well, when Glois failed to do that, it started an argument which turned into a fight. Here's one part of the letter:

> ‘And James Gloys came with his hat on his head between both of the men, as he was wont of custom to do. And when Gloys was against Wyndham, he said thus: 'Cover thy head!' And Gloys said again, 'So I shall for thee.' And when Gloys was further passed by the space of three or four strides, Wyndham drew out his dagger and said, 'Shalt thou so, knave?' And therewith Gloys turned himself, and drew out his dagger and defended himself. . .’
>
> “And Jamys Gloys come with his hatte on his hede betwen bothe his men, as he was wont of custome to do. And whanne Gloys was a-yenst Wymondham he seid þus, 'couere thy heed'. And Gloys seid ageyn, 'so i shall for the'. And whanne Gloys was forther passed by þe space of iij or iiij strede, Wymondham drew owt his dagger and seid, 'Shalt þow so, knave?' And þerwith Gloys turned hym and drewe owt his dagger and defendet hym. . .”

Now there’s a subtle use of language in that passage which I’ve noted before. It’s the use of pronouns in the exchange between the two men. Wyndham says ‘Cover thy head’ rather than ‘Cover your head.’ By this point, pronouns like ***thee*** and ***thou*** and ***thy*** were restricted to familiar or informal use. You would use those terms with a family member, or loved one, or a very close friend.

But for anyone else, you were expected to use the more formal pronoun ***you***. Of course, as we’ve seen before, ***you*** was originally the plural pronoun. But by this point, it had become the standard form of address when speaking to an individual as well. It could be very offensive to use words like ***thee*** and ***thou*** and ***thy***, unless the person was a very close friend or family member. It’s sort of like calling someone ‘buddy.’ If the person really is your buddy or mate, it’s probably OK. But if you address a stranger on the street by saying ‘Hey buddy,’ that person might take offense. And that’s what happened here. Wyndham said to Glois, ‘Cover thy head’ rather than ‘Cover your head.’ Glois took offense and shot back, ‘So I shall for thee’ rather than ‘So I shall for you.’ So the two men were addressing each other with pronouns that would have been considered insults at the time.

The exchange led to an argument which was so loud that it caught the attention of the congregation inside the church. Margaret writes:

> ‘And with the noise of this assault and affray my mother and I came out of the church from the sacring, and I bade Gloys go into my mother's place again, and so he did. And then Wyndham called my mother and me strong whores, and said the Pastons and all their kin were (...). Myngham ... said he lied, knave and churl as he was. And he had much large language, as you shall know hereafter by mouth. . .’
>
> “And with þe noise of þis a-saut and affray my modir and I come owt of þe chirche from þe sakeryng; and I bad Gloys go in to my moderis place ageyn, and so he dede. And thanne Wymondham called my moder and me strong hores, and seid þe Pastons and alle her kyn were (...) Myngham ... seid he lyed, knave and charl as he was. And he had meche large langage, as ye shall knowe her-after by mowthe. . .”

So Wyndham had some choice language for Margaret and her mother-in-law – some of which Margaret refused to repeat in the letter because she says that 'he had much large language' which 'you shall know hereafter by mouth' – in other words, she will tell John all about it later in person. Interestingly, many of these old letters are riddled with holes, and there happens to be a hole at that one key part of the sentence where Wyndham says that 'the Pastons and all their kin were (blank)' There happens to be a hole right there, so we don't know exactly what word he used. But I bet that Margaret told John all about when she finally saw him in person. Many scholars think the man probably called them peasants or churls given the context of the passage. And that would have been a major insult because it would have suggested that the Pastons weren't really entitled to their newfound wealth. They were just peasants.

Margaret concludes the letter by noting that the argument flared up again later in the day when one of Wyndham's men once again attacked Glois and her mother-in-law's assistant named Thomas. She writes:

> 'A short time later, he came down with a two-hand sword and assaulted again the said Gloys and Thomas my mother's man, and let fly a stroke at Thomas with the sword and ripped his hand with his sword. And as for the latter assault, the parson of Oxnead saw it and will avow it. And much more things were done, as Gloys can tell you by mouth.'
>
> "A-non he come doun with a tohand swerd and assauted ageyn þe seid Gloys and Thomas my moderis man, and lete flye a strok at Thomas with þe sword and rippled his hand with his sword. And as for þe latter assaut þe parson of Oxened sygh it and wole a-vowe it. And moche more thyng was do, as Gloys can tell yow by mouthe."

Iin those passages in that letter from Margaret Paston, there's something very interesting about the way she spells certain words. First of all, let consider the word ***assault***, which she uses several times. It's a French loanword, and Margaret spells it A-S-S-A-U-T, which was the French spelling. So there was no L in the word at that time. The spelling reflects the pronunciation of the word in both Old French and Middle English as /æs-out/. Now within Modern French, the word is still spelled the same way, but it's pronounced /æs-o/. The vowel sound has changed and the final 'T' has become silent. But again, it was once /æs-out/ in both French and English. The 'L' was added into the word in the following century – the 1500s. And it was added in to reflect the original Latin root of the word. So the Latin version had an 'L' sound which was dropped in French, and then English took the word and put the original 'L' back in. And after that spelling change, English speakers actually started to pronounce that 'L.' And the vowel sound also shifted slightly from the /ow/ sound to the /aw/ sound. That's when the pronunciation shifted from /ass-out/ to modern /assault/. The same thing happened with words like ***fault***, ***default***, and ***vault***. They were all borrowed into English without an 'L.' So in Middle English , we had /fout/, /defout/, and /vout/. But then, in early Modern English, the vowel shifted and the 'L' was added in to reflect the Latin roots, and we ended up with ***fault***, ***default*** and ***vault***.

So Margaret Paston's use of ***assaut*** (/assout/) instead of ***assault*** typifies the speech and writing of the late Middle English period. The Paston letters also use the word ***defaut*** for ***default***, and they use ***reame*** instead of ***realm***, and ***savacion*** instead of ***salvation***. These were all the original

French forms of the words which reflects the fact that they were all recent loanwords. In each of those words, the 'L' was added later by Latin scholars, and that shifted the pronunciation of those words. And that also points to the fact that arbitrary spellings can sometimes impact the way words are pronounced over time.

There's also something else very interesting about the passages I just read. Margaret uses words like ***out***, ***down***, ***mouth***, ***avow*** and ***thou***. In each instance, she spells the vowel sound with either [OW] or [OU]. Remember that the letters U and W were not entirely distinct yet. They could represent the same vowel and consonant sounds. So ***out*** is spelled O-W-T. And ***mouth*** is M-O-W-T-H-E. And ***down*** is D-O-U-N. Now, you may be saying, 'So what?' After all, if we exchange those U's and W's, we basically have the modern spellings. But, this is actually a big deal because all of those words were traditionally pronounced with a pure /oo/ sound represented with letter U. So ***out*** was ***ut*** – spelled U-T. And ***thou*** was ***þu*** – spelled 'thorn-U'. Thorn was that letter that resembled a P, and represented the 'TH' sound. The word ***mouth*** was ***muþ*** – spelled 'M-U-thorn'. ***Down*** was ***dun*** – spelled D-U-N. And ***avow*** was borrowed from the Anglo-Norman word ***avouer*** (/a-VOO-ay/). But instead of spelling those words with their tradition letter U, Margaret consistently spelled them with either [OU] or [OW]. And that was because those words were no long being pronounced with their traditional /oo/ sound. They had acquired a new vowel sound, which Margaret and many other writers of the period represented with that new spelling.

Now modern linguists believe the vowel sound that Margaret was representing wasn't the modern /ow/ sound used today. It was actually an /oh/ sound. So ***ut*** (/oot/) had become ***owt*** (/oat/), and a couple of centuries later, the sound shifted again to become modern ***out***. ***ut*** (/oot/) – ***owt (***/oat/) – ***out***. That was the change. The same thing with the other words. ***Dun*** (/doon/) – ***doun*** (/doan/) – ***down***. ***þu*** (/thoo/) – ***þow*** (/thoa/) – ***thou***. ***muþ*** (/mooth/) – ***mowthe*** (/moath/) – ***mouth***. ***avouer*** (/a-voo-ay/) – ***avowe*** (/a-voa/) – ***avow***. Margaret was writing at a time when all of those words had those middle pronunciations between the original pronunciations and the modern pronunciaitons.

As you might have guessed by now, that specific vowel shift is one of several shifts that were taking place around this same time that are collectively known as the Great Vowel Shift. After the next episode, which will focus on William Caxton and the first English printing press, I'm going to try to break down the Great Vowel Shift and explore how modern English spellings still reflect these old vowel shifts. So we're going to spend some time dealing solely with that topic. But the important thing to take from the examples I just gave is that the vowel shifts were underway by this point – and also that the vowel shifts included back vowels as well as front vowels.

In earlier episodes, I gave a few examples of other early vowel shifts. I noted that the /ee/ sound and the /ay/ sound were shifting around. Well, those are both front vowels – pronounced high in the front part of the mouth. But this shift that we see in Margaret's letters – from /oo/ to /oh/ to /ow/ – that involved vowels pronounced high in the back part of the mouth. So we can see that the vowel sounds in both the front and the back of the mouth were shifting around, and they were tending to shift higher in the open cavity of the mouth.

Again, I'm going to try to break all of this down even further a couple of episodes from now, but I wanted you to see that a variety of vowel changes were underway when William Caxton arrived in England with the printing press, which we will explore next time. And for purposes of this episode, when I read a passage from the Paston letters, I'm trying to pronounce the vowels with these newer sounds. So I am accounting for the changes that we've discussed so far in the podcast.

Now around the same time that Margaret Paston composed that letter about the fight that she helped to break up, her husband John was involved in another dispute involving the estate that he had inherited from his father. As I noted earlier, this was an era when the heirs of the great lords were trying to reclaim properties that had been purchased by upstart peasants and yeomen. And I mentioned that John ending up losing Beckham Manor through one of these challenges.

Well, now he had to deal with a challenge to another property called Gresham Manor near the village of Gresham in Norfolk. John's father had purchased the estate from two joint owners. One of the sellers was actually Geoffrey's Chaucer's son, Thomas Chaucer. The other seller was a local landowner named Sir William Moleyns. John Paston inherited the manor from his father, and he and Margaret used it as their primary residence. Well, by the mid-1400s, one of the sellers' heirs known as Lord Moleyns had decided to lay claim to the manor. But rather than waste his time with the courts, he pursued his claim the old-fashioned way. He sent armed men to the property, and they seized the manor house by force. They then told the tenants to make all future rent payments directly to Moleyns.

John Paston's only recourse was to go to court to try to recover the property, but Molyens had connections extending all the way up to the royal court. So the legal proceedings bogged down, and that left the Pastons with very few options, but they weren't willing to give up. [*SOURCE: 'Blood and Roses,' Helen Castor, p. 70-1*]

A few months later, Margaret moved in a house nearby, and she directed the tenants to make their rent payments to her. This move angered Lord Moleyns, so his men began to stake out the house where Margaret was living. Margaret immediately realized that she had put herself in a perilous situation. So in October, she once again wrote to her husband John in London and told him what was going on. She told him to send her some weapons so she could defend herself and the house. She wrote the following:

> 'Right worshipful husband, I recommend me to you, and pray you to get some crossbows, and windlasses to bend them with, and quarrels or bolts for shooting; for your houses here are so low that no man may shoot out with no long bow, though we had never so much need.'
>
> "Ryt wurchipful hwsbond, I recomawnd me to ȝu and prey ȝw to gete som crosse bowis, and wyndacis to bynd þem wyth, and quarell, for ȝwr hwsis here ben so low þat þere may non man schete owt wyth no long bowe þow we hadde neuer so moche nede."

She then adds the following request: ‘And also I would aks that you should get two or three short pole-axes to keep indoors. . .’ – “And also I wold ȝe xuld gete ij or iij schort pelle-axis to kepe wyth doris. . .”

So right out of the gate, Margaret opens the letter by asking John to send crossbows, ammunition, and several short-handled combat axes. She’s clearly preparing for an attack. Interestingly, she asks for crossbows which could be fired like guns because she says that the ceilings in the house are too low to use the massive longbows that soldiers typically use.

One other quick linguistic note. This was still the era before dictionaries and spelling books, so people still tended to write phonetically. And Margaret begins the letter with the standard introduction ‘Right worshipful husband,’ but she spelled ***right*** R-Y-T. So notice that there was no G-H or any other letter in there to represent the old fricative sound that was normally pronounced in the middle of the word. It was traditionally pronounced something like /rixt/. And in other Paston letters that sound is generally represented with either the modern GH or the Old English letter yogh which was often used to represent that sound. But here, Margaret doesn’t represent that sound at all. So that is a strong indication that she didn’t pronounce that sound, just like we don’t pronounce it today. So that old fricative sound was disappearing in southern and central England here at the end of the Middle English period.

Now Margaret has requested all kinds of weapons to defend herself and her house. She then writes that the main manor house is still occupied by Lord Moleyns’ men, and that they are fully armed and ready to defend it against any potential attack. She then concludes the letter by asking John to send a few more items:

> ‘I pray you that you will vouchsafe – or agree – to buy for me 1 lb. of almonds and 1 lb. of sugar, and that you will buy some cloth to make your children’s gowns.’
>
> “I pray ȝw þat ȝe wyl vowche-save to don bye for me j li. of almandis and j li. of sugyre, and þat ȝe wille do byen summe frese to maken of ȝwr childeris gwnys.”

So in this letter, Margaret is demanding crossbows, ammunition, and axes to fend off the gathering horde, and oh yeah, while you’re at it, pick up some almonds and sugar and some material to make gowns for the kids. That’s a pretty remarkable grocery list, but it reflects what life was like for the Pastons in the mid-1400s.

A short time after Margaret wrote that letter, her fears came true. Lord Moleyns’ men broke into the house where she living and they ransacked it. Margaret took refuge in a room, but the men knocked down the walls and got to her anyway. Fortunately, they didn’t hurt her, but she and children had to flee to a friend’s house. The house was largely destroyed to prevent Margaret from coming back. [*SOURCE: Blood and Roses, Helen Castor, p. 80-1*]

Margaret’s husband John got word of the attack while he was still in London, and he petitioned the king for help. Parliament had assembled, so John asked the king to take the matter before parliament to restore his lands and punish Moleyns. In the petition, John pointed out the

corruption that he had encountered among local officials. He wrote of the local judges, "he that kepyth the seid courtis is of covyn with the seid misdoeres" – 'He that keeps the said courts is of coven – or in collusion – with said misdoers.' And he complained that Moleyns' power and connections prevented him from resolving the matter legally. He wrote that "your seid besecher is not abille to sue the commune lawe in redressyng of this heynos wrong for the gret myght and alyaunce of the seid lord" – 'Your said beseecher is not able to sue under the common law for redress of this heinous wrong because of the great might and alliances of the said lord.' He then asked that Moleyns be held to account, that the property be returned, and the Pastons and their tenants be protected from further attacks by Moleyns or his men.

John Paston didn't stop there. He then petitioned the Chancellor of England for a criminal investigation into Moleyns' actions. But there was no immediate action on the petitions. By February of the following year, John Paston had had enough. The details are sketchy, but apparently, John armed his own men, and they took back the manor by force. This was an era of 'might makes right,' and the Pastons finally realized that they were going to have to meet force with force. Though they were able to take back the manor, the Pastons didn't move back into the residence. [*SOURCE: 'Blood and Roses,' Helen Castor, p. 106-7*]

A few months later, there was finally a hearing to determine if Molynes had broken the law by sending in a private army to take the manor. It seems clear that laws had been broken, and that the Pastons were finally going to have their day in court. But when the officials met, John Paston learned that the king had instructed the sheriff to empanel a jury that would acquit Moleyns. And that's exactly what happened. [*SOURCE: 'Blood and Roses,' Helen Castor, p. 110*] Once again, Molynes' connections came through for him. The Pastons had taken their manor back by force, but there was no punishment for the men who had taken it from them in the first place.

The Pastons were certainly frustrated, and they were not the only ones. Even though we know the details of their story thanks to their surviving letters, similar crimes were being repeated around the country. Historical accounts often point to the rampant corruption that plagued the later years of Henry VI's rule, and this was just one aspect of that corruption. Local lords could often do as they pleased because the king wasn't willing to take decisive actions to stop it. Meanwhile, those around the king received valuable lands and titles while the country teetered on the edge of bankruptcy. And as I've noted before, England was still licking its wounds from the loss of the Hundred Years' War in France.

That was why so many people throughout England had become frustrated with the king and the people who advised him. And it was why so many people were looking for another alternative. And as I noted in the last episode, there was an alternative in the person of Richard the Duke of York. I traced his genealogy last time, so I won't do that again here, but he actually had the best overall claim to the throne in terms of family descent given that he was descended directly from Edward III's second son Lionel, whereas the king – Henry VI – was descended from Edward's third son John of Gaunt. Gaunt's Lancastrian descendants were only in power because they had usurped the throne a half a century earlier. So Richard of York had a legitimate claim to the throne. But much like John Paston, a legal claim didn't mean very much without the power to back it up. This was an era of 'might makes right,' and the House of Lancaster had firmly ruled

England for half a century. And there was no serious threat to King Henry's crown at this point in the early 1450s.

But what about Henry's successor? Well, the succession was always an important concern, and at this point, Henry didn't have any children. If Henry died, would the nobles stick with the House of Lancaster? If so, they would have to turn to another descendant of John of Gaunt, and that would presumably be Gaunt's grandson from his third marriage known as Edmund Beaufort. He was the Duke of Somerset, and he was one of King Henry's closest advisors. He is generally known to history as simply Somerset based on his title. But if the nobles looked beyond the House of Lancaster to the person who actually has the best overall claim to the throne, then they would presumably turn to Richard of York. So those two men, Edmund of Somerset and Richard of York, were jockeying for position in the early 1450s, and that created the rivalry between the Houses of Lancaster and York.

Then in 1453, King Henry succumbed to mental illness. He was a direct descendant of the English kings through his father, but he was also a descendant of the French kings through his French mother. She was the daughter of the mad king of France known as Charles the Mad. So Henry apparently inherited that genetic trait. And out of nowhere, he suddenly became unresponsive in 1453. He was conscious at times, but he had no idea what was going on, and he couldn't communicate.

That brought the matter of the succession to the forefront, but as it turned out, Henry's wife Margaret had become pregnant a few months before Henry's dementia sat in. Two months later, she gave birth to a baby boy. She was also French and a close relative of the French king. Like so many marriages of this era, it was a political marriage, but Margaret's son was now the heir to the English throne. And she would fiercely defend her child's claim to the throne even as the country descended into civil war.

So with King Henry suffering mental illness, the House of Lancaster was now led by his cousin Edmund of Somerset with his wife Queen Margaret playing a very important role behind the scenes.

Meanwhile, the House of York had a clear leader in Richard of York. And he made his position in the country even stronger by forming a close alliance with Neville family in northern England. The Nevilles had a long-standing rivalry with the Percy family in that same region, and the Percys were closely aligned with Lancastrians. So the leaders of the Neville family aligned themselves with Richard of York because they believed their complaints against the Percys would never be taken seriously by the Lancastrian court. So you can start to see how the division between the House of York and the House of Lancaster extended to other families throughout the country. Family rivalries were common in every corner of England, and if your family's rivals had connections to the Lancastrian court, then your family tended to align with the House of York. We saw this same issue with the Paston family in Norfolk. They couldn't get a fair hearing in the local courts because their rivals had connections with the Lancastrian rulers. So this scenario played out around the country.

The alliance between Richard of York and Neville family wasn't really a surprise because York had actually married into the Neville family. And his wife's nephew was Richard Neville, the earl of Warwick – often referred to as simply Warwick. He would turn out to be a key figure in the upcoming civil war. His support was so crucial that he became known as the Kingmaker.

With King Henry now mostly unresponsive, it was decided that a protector need to be appointed to run the country until the king's condition improved. Richard of York already had strong support among nobles in the south of England, and now he combined that support with the support of the Neville family in the north. That was enough to permit him to secure the position of protector for himself. He now became the de factor ruler of England – until either Henry's illness ended or until Henry's infant son was old enough to rule on his own. [*SOURCE: 'Lancastrians to Tudors: England 1450-1509,' Andrew Pickering, p. 20*] This meant that power temporarily shifted to the House of York.

Richard of York used his new position as Protector of the Realm to clear out most of his opponents from their official positions. Many of these people were accused of corruption, and Richard's primary rival, Edmund of Somerset, was accused of treason and sent to the Tower of London. Parliament didn't allow Somerset to be brought to trial, but Richard was content to have him out of the way. [*SOURCE: 'The Wars of the Roses,' Alison Weir, p. 186.*]

For over a year, Richard ruled England in his capacity as protector, and he went about restoring order and trying to root out the corruption that existed for some time at the highest levels of the government. But then, at Christmastime in the 1454, King Henry started to recover from his illness.

A few days later, in January of the following year, John Paston received a letter from a close friend in Norfolk named Edmund Clere. The letter informed John about the king's recovery. The letter begins with the following passage: "Blessed be God, the Kyng is wel amended, and hath ben syn Cristemesday" – 'Blessed by God, the King is well amended, and has been since Christmasday.' He then added the following details:

> '...on the Monday afternoon, the Queen came to him, and brought the infant Prince with her. And then he asked what the Prince's name was, and the Queen told him Edward; and then he held up his hands and thanked God thereof. And he said he never knew of anything til that time, nor what had been said to him, nor where he had been while he had been sick til now.'
>
> "... on the Moneday after noon the Queen came to him, and brought my Lord Prynce with her. And then he askid what the Princes name was, and the Queen told him Edward; and than he hild up his hands and thankid God therof. And he seid he never knew til that tyme, nor wist not what was seid to him, nor wist not where he had be whils he hath be seke til now."

Now as it turned out, King Henry's recovery was never a full recovery. He continued to suffer from bouts of mental illness, but he was well enough to resume some of his responsibilities. And more importantly for his allies, he was well enough to bring an end to the protectorate which had allowed Richard of York to rule England for the past year. [*SOURCE: 'The Wars of the Roses,' Alison Weir, p. 189.*]

This were merely the first of what would be several transfers of power back and forth between the Houses of Lancaster and York, and the Wars of the Roses hadn't even begun yet. Richard of York retired to the north of England. And the Lancastrians celebrated their return to power. The king's cousin, Edmund of Somerset, was released from the Tower and restored to his positions as well. Of course, Somerset now planned to take revenge on his rival York.

He called for a meeting to be held at Leicester in the Midlands north of London. And Richard of York and his ally Warwick were summoned to attend. The Yorkists thought it was a trap. Rather than being arrested and tried for treason, they decided to strike first. As we've already seen in regard to the Pastons, it was common for the local lords to have their own private armies. So it was relatively easy to Richard of York and Warwick to assemble an army of several thousand soldiers among their supporters. They headed south and intercepted the royal caravan as it departed from London on its way to the meeting in Leicester. The two groups met at the town of St. Albans just north of London. And that proved to be the site of the first battle of the Wars of the Roses.

The battle only lasted for about half an hour, and it was a decisive victory for the Yorkist forces. When it was over, the bodies of dead soldiers littered the streets, and that included the body of the king's cousin, Edmund of Somerset. With his rival now dead, Richard of York clearly had the upper hand. Meanwhile, the king was found in town with a serious wound to his neck. He had been struck in the neck with an arrow during the fighting – but he survived. [*SOURCE: 'The Wars of the Roses,' Alison Weir, p. 202*.]

At this point, Richard of York became the dog who caught the car. He had defeated the king, and he had possession of the king, but he wasn't the king himself. And he didn't have the popular support to depose the king. So after a few months, the situation slowly returned to some semblance of normalcy. But there was an uneasy impasse. King Henry was still on the throne, but Richard of York continued to play a prominent role on his council.

With Somerset now dead, and with the king still struggling with mental illness, Queen Margaret now emerged as the de facto leader of the House of Lancaster. Even though she was French, she was also the mother of the Lancastrian heir to the throne. So the future of the House of Lancaster rested on her shoulders. And in the same way that Margaret Paston had defended her family's estate against its rivals, her namesake Queen Margaret did the same thing. She defended her family against its Yorkist rivals. And both Margarets were willing to go to war to defend their turf. But for now, Queen Margaret needed some create some distance between her husband the Yorkists who now dominated the government. So she moved herself, her husband, and his royal court to Coventry in the Midlands. Meanwhile, York and his Neville family allies held onto London. For the next two years, the conflict simmered – as the two sides plotted their next move.

During that period of time, some families were firmly aligned with one faction or the other. They were clearly Yorkist or Lancastrian. But many families simply had a preference for one of the factions without a formal alliance. That was essentially the case with the Paston family of Norfolk. Most of their enemies had connections with the Lancastrian government, so they tended to favor the Yorkists, but they didn't take up arms at this point for either side.

The same was basically true for one of the Pastons' Norfolk neighbors named Sir John Fastolf. He was an old man, but he had fought for many years in the Hundred Years' War in France. In fact, he had fought there with Richard of York, so he had sympathies for Richard. Over time, Fastolf acquired a very large estate, and he built a massive castle in Norfolk called Caister Castle. He is actually one of the inspirations for William Shakespeare's later character of Falstaff in his cycle of history plays that cover this period. But again, his name was actually Fastolf. By this point, he lived in retirement in Norfolk near the Pastons, and he was a close friend of John Paston. He didn't have any children, so by this point, he was trying to plan for the final distribution of his estate when he died.

Among other plans, he wanted to set aside part of Caister Castle as a chantry. In other words, he wanted to set aside part of the castle for a group of priests or monks. They would live there and pray for Fastolf's soul. In 1459, John Paston received a letter from a friar who was working with Fastolf on his plans. The letter reported that Fastolf was in poor health and he wanted John to come help him complete the terms of his Will. The letter mentions that Fastolf had previously discussed his plans for a chantry at the castle, "And fond that tyme no bonys in the matere" – 'and found at that time no bones in the matter' – or as we would say today, 'at the time he made no bones about the matter.' The letter then stated that those were still his wishes.

That particular passage in that letter is notable because it is the first recorded use of a version of the phrase 'make no bones about it' meaning 'to have no objections.' I noted in an earlier episode about medieval cooking that the phrase is ultimately derived from eating fish, especially a soup made with fish. Some fish have a lot of bones, and you have to pick out all of the bones, which is a pain. But a fish with very few bones makes it easy to eat. So if you 'find no bones in' something, which was the phrase used here, it meant that you didn't have a problem with it. And that led to the more modern version of the phrase 'make no bones about it.' But again, we can trace the first recorded use of that phase back to this letter to John Paston in 1459.

Now Fastolf died a short time later, and he was never able to complete the final version of his written Will. But John Paston visited Fastolf in his final days, and Fastolf told him his final wishes for the distribution of his estate. Now under English common law, and oral will recited on one's death bed can be a valid will under certain circumstances. The technical term for that type of will is a nuncupative will. If you've ever studied the laws associated with wills, you've probably encountered that term before. Well, the first recorded use of that technical term in the English language was in the Paston letters. And it appears in the Paston letters became Fastolf's oral or noncupative will left the bulk of his estate to John Paston, including the massive Caister Castle. Paston had instructions to complete Fastolf's wishes concerning the chantry, but otherwise, the castle was supposed to go directly to John Paston. Well, as you can probably guess by this point, there were other very important people who wanted that castle. And the fighting

and litigation surrounding Fastolf's Will and the ownership of that castle consumed the rest of John Paston's life. And it is a constant source of conversation in the Paston letters from this point forward.

For the first couple of years after Fastolf's death, the Pastons' rivals didn't challenge the Will or lay claim to the castle. That may have been because they were consumed with the renewal of fighting in the Wars of the Roses. Around the same time that Fastolf died, Queen Margaret decided that it was time to force the Yorkists out of London, and to force them out of the government. So Richard of York and his supporters were accused of treason, and the Lancastrian forces descended on London.

A series of battles followed with victories and defeats on both sides. But ultimately, Richard of York was forced to flee the country, and he took refuge in Ireland. His ally Warwick also escaped. He crossed the Channel to the port city of Calais, which was the only part of France still held by the English. With the Yorkist leaders on the run, Margaret had Parliament declare them all to be traitors. They were sentenced to death if they returned, and all of their properties were forfeited to the crown.

But the Yorkists were not deterred. A few months later, Richard of York's ally Warwick returned from Calais. And he was accompanied by Richard's son Edward. And Edward proved to be a very effective fighter. Warwick and Edward made their way back to London where there was strong Yorkist support – and the mayor allowed them to enter the city. They then left and pursued Queen Margaret's forces across the country. In July of 1460, the two armies finally met at Northampton where the Lancastrians were soundly defeated. King Henry was taken alive, but Margaret fled westward into Wales.

At this point, Richard of York returned from Ireland, and he tried to have himself proclaimed as king. But he didn't have enough support from the lords to push it through. It was agreed that Henry would remain king, but Richard would be designated as the heir. But that meant that Henry's young son was disinherited. Queen Margaret's goal was to protect her son's claim to the throne, so she had no choice but to regroup her forces and plan a counter-attack.

When Richard of York received word of Margaret's plans, he was apparently taken by surprise. He headed out of London with a small force to take on Margaret's forces, but when the two sides met at Wakefield in the north of England, Margaret actually had the larger army. Her forces overwhelmed the Yorkist soldiers, and Richard of York was actually killed in the battle which took place in December of 1460. [*SOURCE: 'This Realm of England: 1399-1688,' Lacey Baldwin Smith, p. 60*]

So by this point, both of the original rivals, Edmund of Somerset and Richard of York, were dead. They had been killed on the battlefield. King Henry was still alive, but struggling with mental illness. His cause was now clearly led by his wife Queen Margaret. Meanwhile, the leadership of the Yorkist faction passed from Richard of York to his son Edward. And Edward maintained his father's close alliance with Warwick and the Neville family.

Following the victory at Wakefield, Queen Margaret decided to head south to take back London. Her army now included a lot of mercenaries from Scotland. And as they traveled south, she allowed her forces to loot and pillage the towns and cities as they passed through. Word of these atrocities reached the south before her forces got there. Remember that Margaret was French – a close relative of the hated French king. And now she had a lot of Scottish mercenaries, which also generated resentment because Scotland was another traditional enemy. And the looting and pillaging in the north caused even more alarm and fear in the south.

It was this point, in January of 1461, that John Paston received a letter from his brother Clement. Clement wrote that the men in his community were joining with the local lords to confront the forces that were headed down from the north. He wrote the following:

> In this country, every man is well-willing to go with my lords here, and I hope God shall help them, for the people in the north rob and steal, and have been appointed to pillage all this country and give away men's goods and livlihood in all the south country, and that will ask a mischief – or call for punishment. My lords that are here have as much as they may do to keep order in all this country, more than four or five shires, for they will soon be upon the men in the north, because it is for the well-being of all the south.
>
> In thys cwntré euery man is well wyllyng to goo wyth my lordys here, and I hope God xall helpe hem, fore þe pepill in þe northe robbe and styll and ben apoyntyd to pill all thys cwntré, and gyffe a-way menys goodys and lyfflodys in all þe sowthe cwntré, and that wyll ask a myscheffe. My lordys þat ben here haue as moche as þey may doo to kep down all thys cwntré, more þan iiij ore v scherys, fore þey wold be vp on þe men in northe, fore it ys fore þe welle of all þe sowthe."

The opposition in the south bolstered the Yorkist cause, and it allowed Edward's Yorkist forces to resume control of London. The opposition to the Lancastrians was so fierce by this point, that it allowed Edward to proclaim himself as the new king in March. He received the support of the gathered Parliament, and at just 18-year years of age, he became Edward IV – the first Yorkist king of England.

A few days later, Margaret Paston sent a letter to her husband John. In it, she wrote the following:

> 'There is great talking in this country of the desire of my Lord of York. The people report full worshipfully also of my Lord of Warwick. They have no fear here but that he and the other should show too great favor to them that have been rulers of this country beforetime. . .'
>
> "Ther is gret talkyng in thys contré of the desyir of my lorde of York. The pepyll reporte full worchepfully of my lord of Warwyk. They haue no fer her but þat he and othyr scholde schewe to gret favor to hem þat haue be rewyllerys of thys contré be-for tyme. . ."

By this point, Queen Margaret was aware of the opposition in the south, so she pulled back her forces and retreated to the region around Yorkshire. Edward then headed north to confront Margaret's army, and the two sides met at Towton in the north on March 29.

The ensuing battle is known as the Battle of Towton. It was fought in a blinding snowstorm, and it is considered to be one of the bloodiest and deadliest battles ever fought on English soil. It is estimated that somewhere between 60,000 to 100,000 soldiers were on the ground that day. The battle lasted for much of the day, and some estimates suggest that nearly 10,000 men were killed. [*SOURCE: 'Lancastrians to Tudors: England 1450-1509,' Andrew Pickering, p. 25*] Edward's Yorkist forces finally prevailed and secured the victory, and thereby secured his status as the new king. The Lancastrian cause never fully recovered from the defeat.

Meanwhile, Margaret and the deposed king received word of the defeat, and they fled to Scotland. Despite Edward's victory, there was still deep-rooted support for the Lancastrians in the north, and Henry would eventually recover the crown – albeit for a very brief period.

With that brief exception, Lancastrian rule of England came to an end, and we now enter into a protracted period of Yorkist rule. Edward reigned for most of the next two decades. And his reign was marked by extended periods of relative peace punctuated by occasional flare-ups in the fighting between the two factions of the royal family.

Back in Norfolk, the Pastons had Yorkist leanings and were probably happy with the turn of events. John Paston was actually selected a member of Edward's first Parliament. But his elation didn't last for very long. Around the same time that Edward became the king, John Paston's inheritance from his friend Fastolf came under attack – both legally and physically. Some of the properties were taken from him by force, and the ownership of the massive Caister Castle became tied up in the courts.

The castle was claimed by the powerful Duke of Norfolk, and the Duke happened to be a Yorkist ally of the new king Edward. So for the Pastons it was a case of 'meet the new boss, same as the old boss.' Even though the crown had changed hands, the Pastons' enemies once again had a direct connection to the king, and for a second time, the Pastons found themselves on the outside looking in.

John Paston did everything he could to defend his rights to the Fastolf estate. But his opponents were powerful and politically connected. The defense consumed the rest of Paston's life. In October of 1465, Paston received a letter from his elderly mother Agnes. She seemed to be concerned about the toll that the conflict was taking on John's life. She wrote:

> 'By my counsel, dispose yourself as much as you may have less to do in the world. Your father said, "In little business lies much rest." This world is but a thoroughfare and full of woe; and when we depart therefrom, we bear with us nothing but our good deeds and ill. And here no man know how soon God will call him, and therefore it is good for every creature to be ready.'

> “Be my counseyle, dyspose ȝoure-selfe as myche as ȝe may to haue lesse to do in þe worlde, ȝoure fadyr sayde, 'In lityl bysynes lyeth myche reste.' þis worlde is but a þorugh-fare and ful of woo, and whan we departe þer-fro, riȝth nouȝght bere wyth vs but oure good dedys and ylle. And þer knoweth no man how soon God woll clepe hym, and þer-for it is good for euery creature to be redy.”

It seemed like a premonition, and it turned out to be true. Seven months later, John Paston died suddenly while he was in London. That was Agnes’s last surviving letter to her eldest son. In the end, the Pastons were able to hold on to Caister Castle, but most of the rest of the Fastolf inheritance was lost.

Interestingly, Agnes’s final letter to her son uses two proverbs – ‘In little business lies much rest’ and ‘This world is but a thoroughfare and full of woe.’ She attributes those saying to John’s father and her late husband, William Paston. But William didn’t make those up himself. They are both found in the writing of Geoffrey Chaucer. The first is found in a poem by Chaucer called ‘Truth’ and the second is found in the Canterbury Tales. We don’t know if William Paston repeated those proverbs because he read them in a copy of Chaucer’s work. Maybe they was just common expressions at the time. But we do know that a lot more people were about to be exposed to Chaucer’s poetry because William Caxton brought the printing press to England in the decade after John Paston’ death. And one of the books Caxton published with the new press was a copy of the Canterbury Tales.

Caxton’s press began a process that changed the English language by melding it into a fixed form, and by making the dialect of London the standard dialect of English. So next time, we’ll look at Yorkist England and the arrival of the printing press in the 1470s.

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

EPISODE 139: THE BUSINESS OF PRINTING

Welcome to the History of English Podcast – a podcast about the history of the English language. This is Episode 139: The Business of Printing. In this episode, we're going to look at the introduction of the printing press to England and the first books to be printed and mass-produced in the English language. The person who made that happen was a merchant and businessman named William Caxton. He was part of the growing merchant class in England, and his activities reflect the intersection of language and money in the late Middle Ages. In order to understand the ultimate impact of his press on the English language, we have to remember that he was a merchant – not a linguist. His printing decisions were designed to increase sales, not to reform or standardize the language. Those motivations left English with a mixed legacy. In some ways, it encouraged standardization, but in other ways, it had the opposite effect. So this time, we'll explore the business of printing in the late Middle Ages.

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

Now last time, we looked at the collection of letters written by the Paston family of eastern England. They reflected the fact that England was an increasingly literate society in the late Middle Ages. Though literacy rates were much lower than today, there were still more and more commoners who could read and write. And most of those people only spoke English. So there was an increasing demand for relatively cheap books composed in English. The problem is that books in England were still written by hand, and most of them were written on expensive parchment or vellum. So they tended to be expensive luxuries, and many of them were still composed in Latin or French.

We know from the Paston letters that the Pastons loved to collect books. John Paston's son – also named John – owned several books, including books by Geoffrey Chaucer and the English poet John Lydgate. [*SOURCE: 'The Yorkist Age,' Paul Murray Kendall, p. 442*]. But again, the Pastons were a wealthy family, and those books were probably expensive handwritten versions. The average commoner had very few, if any, books to call their own.

Of course, there was now a technology available to satisfy that demand for affordable books – the printing press. It could generate hundreds, and even thousands, of copies of the same book. And it could print those books on paper. That made books available and affordable to anyone who wanted one. But that new technology was still confined to the continent. At the current point in our overall story in the 1460s, there was still no printing press in England. Even if printed books were imported from the continent, they weren't written in English. So the demand for cheap English books remained unsatisfied.

Now wherever there is a strong demand for something, someone usually comes along to take advantage of the business opportunity. But the printing press was such a new invention, that no one in England understood how it worked. So it wasn't like someone could just make their own copy of a press. Ultimately, someone needed to go to the continent and figure out how to use the

new technology and then bring it back to England. That person was likely to be an enterprising businessman, and England had such a businessman. His name was William Caxton.

Very little is known about Caxton's early life, but he later wrote that he was born in Kent. As a young man, he moved to London where he served as an apprentice to a prominent merchant. Around 1450, he moved across the Channel to Bruges in the region of Flanders. As we saw in earlier episodes, England had a very close trading relationship with Flanders because Flanders was a major producer of cloth and textiles. English wool was exported to Flanders where it was turned into cloth. And then, that cloth was imported back into England. Caxton had apparently been involved in that cloth trade, and he relocated to Flanders to take advantage of the business opportunities there. So Caxton's interest in Europe had nothing to do with the printing press. It had to do with the cloth and textile trade.

And it was a good time to be involved in the cloth business because England now had a king who was a strong ally of the merchant class. As we saw last time, Edward of York became king in 1461 when he defeated the Lancastrian king Henry VI at the Battle of Towton. Henry and his wife Margaret and their young son fled to Scotland. When Edward assumed the throne, he became Edward IV – the first Yorkist king of England.

Edward proved to be a strong ally of the English merchants doing business in Flanders. A few months after becoming king, he granted a charter to those merchants who became known as the Merchant Adventurers. 'Adventurer' may seem like an odd name, but I should note that the word ***venture*** – as in a business venture – is ultimately a shortened version of the word ***adventure***. ***Venture*** is first recorded around this time in the mid-1400s, so ***adventure*** was still the more common term. Both words involved some form of risk, and for the Merchant Adventurers, it was a business risk.

The charter they received from the new king was intended to better organize the merchants in the region. It was designed to minimize disputes between them and to increase their power relative to the other merchants in the region. The charter directed the merchants to designate a governor who would oversee and manage the merchant activity in the Low Countries. The governor would adopt rules and settle disputes between the merchants. He would also serve as a liason between the English government and the Flemish authorities. A short time later, those merchants designated a new governor. That governor was William Caxton.

All of this points to the fact that the cloth trade continued to provide a very important link between England and Flanders. But the relationship between the two regions was complicated. Flanders was not an independent region. It was actually under the control of the Dukes of Burgundy. Burgundy is a region in the eastern part of modern-day France, but it was largely independent duchy at the time. In fact, the Dukes of Burgundy were rivals of the French kings. And during the Hundred Years' War, you might remember that Burgundy had a close alliance with England against the French king. But when Burgundy walked away from that alliance, it sealed England's fate, and it contributed to England's eventual defeat.

So at this point in the 1460s, there was a fierce debate raging in England. The new king Edward favored a renewal of the alliance with Burgundy. Since the Dukes of Burgundy effectively ruled Flanders, it would foster the trading relationship with Flanders. It would also provide a check on the authority of the French king .

But there was an opposing view. Some officials preferred that England extend an olive branch to France and try to form a closer relationship with its traditional rival. That would help to ensure peace and stability, which would be good for trade and economic growth throughout the entire region, even though it might strain the relationship with Burgundy and Flanders. The leading proponent of this opposing view was King Edward's right-hand man Richard Neville, the earl of Warwick – commonly referred to simply as Warick. I mentioned last time that he was the head of the Neville family, a prominent family in northern England. The main areas of support for the House of York were in the south and west of England, so Warwick's support gave the Yorkists a crucial foothold in the north. And his support was so important that he eventually acquired the nickname 'The Kingmaker.'

Warwick had supported Edward's father, Richard of York. And he supported Edward when he became the first Yorkist king. But now, the close relationship between Edward and Warwick started to fray. Warwick negotiated an alliance with France, while Edward sought to renew the alliance with Burgundy.

Though the fighting in the Wars of the Roses had settled down, the prior king Henry and his wife Margaret were still around, and they still had their supporters. Insurrections continued to flare up in the north, but in 1464, Edward defeated the Lancastrian rebels at the Battle of Hexham, and that brought a temporary end to the fighting. A short time later, the prior king Henry was captured and placed in the Tower of London. He was still suffering from mental illness, but he was now in Edward's custody. However, Henry's wife Margaret was still on the run with her young son – the Lancastrian heir to the throne. And that ensured that the division between the Houses of York and Lancaster would continue to fester.

Around that same time, Warwick the Kingmaker finally worked out an agreement with France. Under the agreement, France would recognize the new Yorkist king Edward as the rightful king of England – and France would stop providing support to the Lancastrian rebels. As usual, the alliance was to be sealed with a political marriage. King Edward was to marry the French king's sister. But as soon as the terms of the agreement were revealed, Edward announced that there was one little problem with the marriage agreement. You see, he was already married.

Edward had recently married a woman named Elizabeth Woodville, and he had been keeping the marriage a secret. Elizabeth was a beautiful young woman who was part of Edward's court. He had fallen in love with her, but she didn't come from a prominent family. And in fact, she had been married before and had children from her prior marriage. So all of that was very controversial. Kings were expected to marry for political reasons, not for love. Even though Elizabeth's prior husband was dead, there was added controversy when Edward's allies realized that he had actually fought for the other side in the earlier battles of the Wars of the Roses. So had the new queen's father and her brother. So the first Yorkist king had married a woman with

close ties to the Lancastrians. Needless to say, the revelation of this secret marriage was a bit of a scandal.

The marriage blew up the potential alliance with France and infuriated Edward's ally Warwick. It also turned out that Edward's new queen had a lot of siblings and close relatives, and they were soon given prominent positions in the government and the royal court. Her siblings were married to prominent nobles throughout Europe. Those were positions and marriages that Warwick had been trying to secure for his own children and relatives. And then Edward started to ignore Warwick's advice altogether. All of this soon led Warwick to abandon his support for Edward.

With Warwick pushed to the side, Edward was free to pursue his alliance with France's rival, Burgundy. As per usual, the alliance was formalized with an arranged marriage. Edward's sister Margaret married the Duke of Burgundy in the summer of 1468. So Margaret now provided a direct link between her brother the English king and her husband the Duke of Burgundy.

Margaret's marriage took place in Bruges in Flanders. And she arrived there at the same time that William Caxton was serving as the governor of the English Merchant Adventurers. The old trading relationship between the two countries was soon renewed and reaffirmed, and English exports to Flanders started to increase once again. But Caxton was apparently tired of serving as the governor of the local merchants. Around this same time, he left his position as governor and went to work for the new duchess Margaret. He was appointed as the secretary to her household in 1469.

His new position was apparently much less stressful, and it left him with a lot of leisure time. He observed the nobility's fascination with courtly romances, and he came across a lot of books in and around the duchess's household. That included some books that had been printed with Gutenberg's new printing press. One of the books Caxton encountered was a collection of stories about the ancient city of Troy and the Trojan War. The book was composed in French by a writer named Raoul le Fevre. It was called ''Le Recueil des Histoires de Troyes' – literally 'The Recuyell of the Histories of Troy' – but it meant 'The Compilation or Collection of the Histories of Troy.' Again, it was a French book, but Caxton was fascinated by it, and he decided to translate it into English. In a later account, he wrote that he began the translation to make it available for English-speakers "and also to passe therwyth the tyme" – 'and also to pass therewith the time.'

He wrote that he "had made and wretyn a fyve or six quayers" – 'had made and written five or six quires.' So that's about 40 or 50 pages. But then he recalled that he "fyll in dispayr" – 'fell into dispair.' He became frustrated with the translation felling that it wasn't very good. Later, he showed the partial translation to Duchess Margaret, and he recalled that she 'oversaw and corrected' his work. She also told him to finish the translation. And being in her service, he did as she ordered. And it was probably a good thing that he did that because that translation eventually became the first book to be printed in the English language. So at least some of the credit for that innovation goes to Duchess Margaret of Burgundy – the English king's sister. Had she not ordered Caxton to finish that translation, he may have never finished the project, and he may have never bothered to print it for other English speakers to read. It actually took Caxton a

while to finish the translation, and while he was working on the project, things started to fall apart for Margaret's brother in England.

Edward had pursued and formalized his alliance with Burgundy and the Low Countries. And he had given his in-laws prominent positions in the English government. And in the process, he had completely alienated and sidelined his old ally Warwick.

Warwick decided to take matters into his own hands, and he approached Edward's younger brother George who was the duke of Clarence. Warwick's plan was to replaced Edward with George. And George even married Warwick's daughter to seal their new partnership. The two soon started an uprising in the Midlands. So this was actually an internal York versus York battle. So it was an internal family feud within the larger family conflict known as the Wars of the Roses. After a few months, Edward was able to put down the rebellion, and Warwick and George fled to France.

It turned out that they weren't the only ones who had taken refuge there. The former queen Margaret had also headed to France after her husband– the former king Henry VI – had been captured and taken prisoner. And in France, Warwick and Margaret, the old bitter enemies, patched up their differences. So Warwick switched sides. The long-term supporter of the Yorkist cause now threw in his lot with the Lancastrian queen. The French king blessed the new alliance by agreeing to give them financial support if they agreed to abandon England's alliance with Burgundy.

A short time later, in 1470, Warwick returned to England with troops paid for by France. He and George landed in the south of England while King Edward was in the north. Warwick's forces quickly seized London and freed the old Lancastrian king Henry from his imprisonment in the Tower. They declared Henry to be the rightful king, and he was briefly restored to the throne, even though his mental illness prevented him from making any decisions on his own behalf. This is why Warwick ultimately became known as the Kingmaker. The speed of Warwick's invasion and Henry's restoration took Edward by surprise. It prevented Edward from mounting an effective defense. So now it was his turn to flee Britain and take refuge somewhere else. And of course, he headed to Flanders where his sister and brother-in-law were in charge.

According to some accounts, William Caxton helped to find living arrangements for Edward and his retinue when they arrived in Bruges. [*SOURCE: 'The Last Plantagenets,' Thomas B. Costain, p. 355*] But Edward wasn't looking for a permanent residence there. He only remained in Flanders for a few months while making arrangements for his return to England.

In March of 1471, Edward headed back and landed in the north of England. Warwick had never had strong support among the nobles, and now his allies started to abandon him. Meanwhile, Edward's close ties to the merchant community in London helped him to re-secure the capital city. In April, Edward's forces were welcomed back into London by cheering crowds. The old Lancastrian king Henry was promptly sent back to the Tower. The throne of England had become a revolving door, and now the door was opened back up to Edward and the House of York. And it was about to close on Henry once and for all.

Edward rode out of London to meet Warwick's forces on the outskirts of town at what was then the small town of Barnet. The two sides squared off against each other for what would be a decisive battle in the Wars of the Roses. Edward's forces won the day, and more importantly, Warwick was killed while trying to escape the battlefield. The Kingmaker was dead, but the rival Lancastrian king Henry was still alive in the Tower, and a rival Lancastrian army was still being led by Henry's wife Margaret and her young son, the Lancastrian heir. A few weeks later, Edward's Yorkist forces met Margaret's Lancastrian forces at Tewkesbury in the west of England. Once again, Edward emerged victorious. Margaret was captured – and more importantly – her son was killed during the battle. That meant there was no longer a Lancastrian heir. The only remaining descendant from John of Gaunt's first marriage was the poor senile king Henry who was still being held in the Tower of London. And Edward realized that the time had come to bring a permanent end to that rival line. When Edward arrived back in London, it was announced that Henry had died in the Tower.

Henry's death, and the death of his son, brought an end to the first phase of the Wars of the Roses. Edward had secured his position as the king, and the main line of Lancastrians was extinguished. But while there were no more descendants of John of Gaunt from his marriage to his first wife Blanche, there were some living descendants from his marriage to his third wife Katherine Swinford. And one of those descendants had married into a Welsh family called the Tudors. So we're not quite done with John of Gaunt's heirs. As we'll see in a future episode, the Tudors preserved what remained of the Lancastrian claim to the throne. But for now, the main line of the House of Lancaster had come to an end. With her husband and son now dead, the old queen Margaret was permitted to return to France where she died in poverty a decade later. For the remainder of Edward's reign and the rest of his natural life, he ruled England without any more major challenges to the throne.

Around the time that Edward reclaimed and secured his position as the King of England, William Caxton finally completed his English translation of that collection of stories about Troy and the Trojan War. For now, it was just a handwritten text. But then, Caxton took a trip to Cologne in Germany where he observed an actual printing press in action. And while he was there, he learned how to use it.

It isn't clear if he made the trip to Cologne to learn about the press or if he simply encountered it during his travels. But being a businessman, he definitely saw the potential of the new device. While continental presses were producing books in the local languages, they weren't producing any books in English. Caxton knew that there was a demand for English books back in his home country, so it was just a matter of seizing the opportunity and starting his own printing business to produce books in his native language.

He eventually returned to Bruges in Flanders and set up his own printing shop there. He had his personal translation of that French book about the Trojan War. So that was the obvious choice for the first English book to the printed in his shop. And in 1475, 'The Recuyell of the Histories of Troy' became the first book to be printed in the English language by means of a mechanical device. And interestingly, it wasn't printed in England. It was printed in Bruges in Flanders in what is today Belgium.

Caxton's translation was very straight-forward. His primary contribution to the English language was as a printer, not a writer. He was a businessman, and he wanted his books to appeal to the widest possible audience. So he chose to use a form of English that most people would understand. He wasn't really a wordsmith or a poet, and he didn't try to push the boundaries of the language. As a result, he didn't tend to use a lot of new or unusual loanwords. However, there are a few words which are recorded for the first time in this particular book. For example, we find the first known use of the word ***happiness***. He also used the word ***terribility*** in the book. It was a noun form of ***terrible***. That word was common in the language for a while, but it later died out.

Caxton's first book also provides the first recorded use of another word which is relevant to the overall theme of this episode. It was the word ***industry*** – a word borrowed from French. The word ***industry*** originally referred to a unique skill or ability. We still have that sense when we say that someone is very ***industrious***. But the use of that unique skill or ability to make money is what produced the modern sense of the word ***industry*** as a commercial activity or enterprise. So it is probably appropriate that Caxton's first printed book introduced the word ***industry***, and ultimately gave birth to a new publishing industry in England.

After that initial book containing stories about Troy and the Trojan War, Caxton produced a few other English books in Bruges, including a book about the game the chess. And they all proved to be very popular. They were sold to English speakers in Flanders, and they were also exported across the Channel to readers in England. Caxton's book about chess was called 'Game and Play of the Chess.' It's even mentioned in the Paston letters, which continued to be written by later generations of the Paston family. Last time, I talked about John Paston's struggles to retain the family's properties. Well, one of the letters from this period mentions that his son had a copy of Caxton's book about chess. So that confirms that some of these new publications were being exported across the Channel to England. [*SOURCE: 'The Oxford History of English,' Lynda Mugglestone, p. 175-6*]

Given the popularity of those initial publications, it soon became obvious to Caxton what he needed to do. He needed to move back home to England and set up his press there.

In 1476, he leased a shop near Westminster Abbey, and he set up the first printing press in England. Now you might assume that this was the same process that any modern businessperson would use. Find a good location, sign a lease, and open your business. But it wasn't that simple. This was still an era when trade guilds and craft guilds has a lot of power. The Guild of Stationers in London was the guild that included scribes who still wrote out books by hand. And they were not at all happy at the prospect of having to compete with a machine. The printing press was an early example of people losing their jobs to automation. So in order to open up his printing shop, Caxton needed the support of local leaders to overcome that opposition. And it is generally believed that Caxton had the support of the king himself.

Evidence of that support is shown in an accounting entry from a couple of years after Caxton opened his shop. The entry shows that King Edward granted Caxton the sum of 20 pounds for "certain causes and matters performed." [*SOURCE: 'The Last Plantagenets,' Thomas B.*

Costain, p. 357] Caxton even dedicated some of his publications to the king, as well as to the king's son and brother Richard. [*SOURCE: 'The Yorkist Age,' Paul Murray Kendall, p. 186*]

Caxton's shop was located in a small building near Westminster Abbey. It was in an area where much of the country's legal and government business was conducted. He converted the building into a print shop and a bookshop. So he not only printed books, he also sold them.

The first book that Caxton printed in his new shop in England was a book called 'Dictes or Sayengis of the Philosophres' – literally the 'The Dicts or Sayings of the Philosophers.' It was an English translation of a French book, and it was published in 1477, making it the first known book to be printed on English soil.

From that point on, the press pumped out one book after another. A few months later, Caxton published a copy of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales. About a dozen copies of that version of the Canterbury Tales still exist. One sold in the late 1990s for $7.5 million, making it arguably the most expensive fiction book to have ever been sold. There have been some non-fiction books and some political and religions manuscripts that have sold for more, but in terms of fiction, that is pretty much the premium.

Caxton then published a French-English dictionary or translation guide. And he also produced a translation of Aesop's Fables, several popular romances, a history of England, and a type of encyclopedia called 'The Myrrour of the Worlde.'

In the 1480s, he acquired an English manuscript which synthesized many of the popular tales that were part of the King Arthur legend. It relied heavily on the versions that had been composed in France. Caxton identified the author as Sir Thomas Malory. Malory called the compilation 'The whole book of King Arthur and his noble knights of the Round Table,' but Caxton gave the work a new shorter title. He called it 'Le Morte D'Arthur' – the Death of Arthur.

This particular book is considered to be the first modern version of the Arthurian legend, and it is really the primary source for the modern stories. It includes all the popular characters and stories – the Knights of the Round Table, the search for the Holy Grail, Lancelot and Guinevere, Merlin, the Sword in the Stone, and Lady of the Lake, Camelot, the Round Table, and so on. Many scholars consider it to be the most important work of English literature between the time of Chaucer and the time of Shakespeare.

Interestingly very little is known about the author, Sir Thomas Malory. Caxton's manuscript gave his name, but that was about it. And for many centuries, Caxton's publication was the only known version of the manuscript. But then, in 1934, a librarian at Winchester College named Walter Oakeshott discovered an old manuscript in a safe at the college. It turned out to be a handwritten version of Malory's book. Further inspection revealed that it pre-dated Caxton's version. And in fact, based on some slight ink smudges on the manuscript, it was revealed that the smudges actually matched the typeface used by Caxton's press. So this was apparently the actual manuscript that Caxton used when he prepared his version of the book. When some of the printed pages were pulled off the press with wet ink, they were apparently laid down on the

handwritten manuscript creating the smudges. This slightly older handwritten manuscript is known today as the Winchester manuscript. Though it is similar to Caxton's printed version, there are some significant differences. Caxton reworked the manuscript – deleting some sections and adding some new parts. And this older manuscript describes the author, Sir Thomas Malory, as a "knyght presoner" – a 'knight prisoner.' That little bit of information helped scholars to determine who the author really was.

There is one Sir Thomas Malory in the historical records who spent time in prison. In fact, he spent a lot of time in prison. He was a bit of a rogue and lived a life of crime. He spent much of his adult life in and out of jail. He fought with Warwick the Kingmaker, and when Warwick turned on King Edward, Malory got caught up in the insurrection and the subsequent retribution. At some point, he was captured and thrown into prison. Over the ensuing years, he apparently passed the time by composing Le Morte D'Arthur.

So all of those popular books and movies about King Arthur owe much of their existence to a disgraced knight who got caught up in the Wars of the Roses and spent several years in prison. And they also owe their existence to a printer who was looking for some interesting material that might help him make a quick buck. Caxton didn't show much interest in the ancient classics. He was far more interested in material that he could sell to the average Englishman and English woman. And Arthurian stories were popular in the late 1400s, just as they are today.

From Caxton's first publications in the mid-1470s until his death in 1491, he published around 100 different books and manuscripts. [*SOURCE, 'The History of Early English,' Keith Johnson, p. 166*] And of course, the press pumped out many copies of each book, thereby producing literally thousands of books over the course of that decade and half.

A few of those books were published in Latin or French, but the majority – about two-thirds of them – were published in English. [*SOURCE: 'The Story of English,' Joseph Piercy, p. 87.*] Those were books that had either been composed in English or were translated into English from other languages. For the books that had to be translated into English, Caxton made many of the translations himself.

Now the idea of printing books in English seems like a relatively simple and straight-forward process – because written English is standardized today. We have fixed spellings, fixed word forms, and a fixed grammar. If someone sends you an email in standard English today, you can't really tell where they're from or what accent they have based on the language in the message – because it is a generic written from of English. But that wasn't the case in Caxton's time. He lived in a time before the language had become standardized when people still spoke very different dialects and wrote phonetically. So when people thought about English, they didn't necessarily think of it as a single form of speech. It was a bunch of closely-related dialects. But Caxton wanted to publish books that could be purchased and read throughout the country. So that posed a bit of a problem. The dilemma was made even worse by the changing pronunciations of the Great Vowel Shift which were also underway by that point.

Caxton mentioned this problem in several of the prologues he composed over the years, but the most famous example comes from a book he published late in his life. It was an English version of the great classical work The Aeneid by Virgil. Caxton's version was called 'Eneydos.' Caxton's prologue to that book is one of the most well-known passages of the late Middle English period because in it he outlined the challenge of printing a book in English during that period.

This is the passage where he gave the famous example of what word he should use for eggs. I told that part of the story in an earlier episode when I first looked at Middle English dialects, and I gave this example to illustrate how different the dialects were during the Middle English period. But now I want to read you an extended version of the passage because it is very revealing. You really get an insight into the challenges that Caxton faced as a businessman trying to reach the widest possible audience. Again, this passage is quite long, so I'll break it up into several parts, and as always, I'll give you a modern version first and then the original version. I should also note that, like in the last episode, I'm going to change some of the vowel sounds to reflect the early stages of the Great Vowel Shift. So the Middle English passages may sound a little different from the passages I read in earlier episodes.

> After various diverse works had been made, translated and achieved, and having no work in hand, I was sitting in my study where lay many diverse pamphlets and books, and it happened that to my hand came a little book in French, which had lately been translated out of Latin by some noble clerk or scholar in France, which book is named Eneydos, made in Latin by that noble poet and great clerk Virgil.
>
> "After dyuerse werkes made / translated, and achieued / hauyng noo werke in hande, I, sittyng in my studye where as laye many dyuerse paunflettis and bookys, happened that to my handle came a lytyl booke in frenshe, whiche late was translated oute of latyn by some noble clerke of fraunce, whiche booke is named Eneydos / made in latyn by that noble poete & grete clerke vyrgyle /"
>
> And when I had made myself familiar with this said book, I deliberated, and concluded to translate it into English, and forthwith took a pen and ink and wrote a leaf or two, which I then oversaw again to correct it. And when I saw the fair and strange terms therein, I doubted that it would please some gentlemen who lately have blamed me, saying that in some of my translations, I have used overcurious or erudite terms which could not be understood by common people, and desired me to use old and homely or more familiar terms in my translations.
>
> "And wha I had aduysed me in this sayd boke. I delybered and concluded to translate it into englysshe. And forthwyth toke a penne & ynke and wrote a leef or tweyne whyche I ouersawe agayn to corecte it / And wha I sawe the fayr and straunge termes therein, I doubted that it sholde not please some gentylmen which late blamed me, sayeing yt [þt] [*that*] in my translacyons I had ouer curyous termes which coude not be vnderstande of comyn peple/ and desired me to vse olde and homely termes in my translacyons."

And wanting to satisfy every person, and to do so, I took an old book and read therein, and certainly the English was so rude and broad and unrefined that I could not well understand it. And also, my lord abbot of Westminster did show to me late certain evidences or documents written in an older English, in order to reduce it into our English now used: and certainly it was written in such way that it was more like Dutch than English. I could not reduce it or translate it so as to be understood.

“and fayn wolde I satisfye euery man / and so to doo toke an olde booke and redde therin / and certaynly the englysshe was so rude and brood that I coude not wele vnderstande it. And also my lorde abbot of westmynster ded do shewe to me late certayn euydences wryton in olde englysshe for to reduce it in to our englysshe now vsid / And certaynly it was wreton in suche wyse that it was more lyke to dutche than englysshe I coude not reduce ne brynge it to be vnderstonden.”

And certainly our language now used varies far from that which was used and spoken when I was born.... And the common English that is spoken in one shire varies from another. So much so that in my own days it happened that certain merchants were in a ship in the Thames on their way over the sea into Zealand – a region in the Netherlands. And for lack of wind they tarried at Foreland in Kent, and went on shore to refresh themselves. And one of them, named Sheffield, a mercer, came into a house and asked for food, and especially he asked for ‘eggs.’ And the good wife answered that she could not speak French. And the merchant was angry, for he could not speak French either, but he wanted eggs, and she did not understood him. And then at last another merchant said he would have "eyren," and then the good wife said she understood him well. Lo, what should a man in these days now write: "eggs" or "eyren"?

“And certaynly our langage now vsed varyeth ferre from that which was vsed and spoken whan I was borne /... And that comyn englysshe that is spoken in one shyre varyeth from another. In so moche that in my dayes happened that certayn marchantes were in a ship in tamyse for to haue sayled ouer the see into zelande / and for lacke of wynde thei taryed atte forlond. and wente to land for to refreshe them And one of thaym named sheff elde a mercer came in to an hows and axed for mete and specyally he axyd after eggys And the goode wyf answerde that she coude speke no frenshe. And the marchant was angry for he also coude speke no frenshe. but wolde haue hadde egges/ and she vnderstode hym not/ And thenne at laste a nother sayd that he wolde haue eyren/ then the good wyf sayd that she vnderstod hym wel/ Loo what sholde a man in thyse dayes now wryte. egges or eyren/”

Certainly it is hard to please every person, by reason of diversity and change in the language. For in these days every person that is of any reputation in this country will utter their communications in such manner and with such terms that few people will understand them. And some honest and great clerks have been with me, and desired me to write the most curious or erudite terms that I could find. And thus, between plain, rude and curious, I stand abashed. But in my judgment the common terms that are daily used are easier to be understood than the old and ancient English.

> "certynly it is harde to playse euery man/ by cause of dyuersitie & chau(n)ge of langage. For in these dayes euery man that is in ony reputacyon in his cou(n)tre wyll vtter his comyncacyon and maters in such maners & termes/ that fewe men shall vnderstonde theym/ And som honest and grete clerkes haue ben wyth me and desired me to wryte the moste curyous termes that I coude fynde/ And thus bytwene playn rude / & curyous I stande abasshed. but in my Iudgmente/ the comyn termes that be dayli vsed ben lyghter to be vnderstonde than the olde and au(n)cyend englysshe/"
>
> And forasmuch as this present book is not intended for a rough uplandish or rustic man to labor over when reading it, but only for a clerk and a noble gentleman that feels and understands the deeds of arms in love, and in noble chivalry, therefore, somewhere between both, I have reduced and translated this said book into our English, not overrude or rough, nor curious or erudite, but in such terms as shall be understood, by God's grace, according to my copy.
>
> "And for as moche as this present booke is not for a rude vplondyssh man to laboure therein/ ne rede it/ but onely for a clerke & a noble gentylman that feleth and vnderstondeth in faytes of armes in loue & in noble chyualrye/ Therefor in a meane bytwene bothe I haue reduced & translated this sayd booke in to our englysshe not ouer rude ne curyous but in such termes as shall be vnderstanden by goddys grace accordynge to my copye."

So that's a lot. Let's break that down and consider what Caxton has to tell us. He tells us that he came across a French copy of the Aeneid, and he decided to translate it into English, but he became frustrated because he couldn't decide whether to use what he called 'curious' terms meaning fancy elevated words, or whether he should use 'rude' terms meaning common ordinary words. So he is alluding to a difference in register. Should he used the speech of the noble upper class, the merchant middle class, or the poor lower class? There was a difference.

Of course, the answer to that question would determine whether he should use a plain ordinary word from Old English or a fancy loanword from French or Latin.

But it wasn't just a matter of register and class. It was also a matter of region. The people of England spoke different dialects, so which one should he use? That was the point of story about the eggs. ***Egges*** was the northern dialect word. ***Eyren*** was the southern dialect word. Both words could be found in a city like London. So again, which should he use? The same was true for regional pronoun forms and grammatical forms which we've examined in earlier episodes. Those were also mixed together in places like London. If he chose the northern forms, he might not be able to sell his books in the south, and vice versa.

And then there was the whole issue of the Great Vowel Shift which was also underway at this time. That meant that people living side by side in the same regions probably pronounced many of their words differently. So that created another whole other set of problems for phonetic spellings. Caxton even alludes to the variation within London English in part of that passage. He wrote, "And certainly our language now used varies far from that which was used and spoken

when I was born." Caxton was born only about 20 years after Geoffrey Chaucer died, yet his English was very different from Chaucer's. And part of that had to do with the differing pronunciations of vowel sounds at the time. Given the suddenness of that change, there was probably a generational divide as well with older people preferring traditional pronunciations and younger people preferring the newer pronunciations.

So all that points to lots of divisions within the language. There were class divisions, regional divisions, dialect divisions, accent divisions, and probably even generational divisions. So how was a printer supposed to choose between those options? What was the correct business decision?

And speaking of business, that word is a good example of the dilemma that Caxton faced.. I've mentioned this before, but the word ***business*** is literally 'busy-ness' – the state or condition of being busy. Notice that the word ***busy*** is spelled B-U-S-Y, but it's not pronounced /bus-ee/, it's pronounced /bizzy/ like it should be spelled B-I-Z-Y. We have this result because the word is an Old English word that had a vowel sound (/ü/) that disappeared in Middle English. As the old sound disappeared, it was replaced by a different sounds in different parts of the country. It became /ih/ in the north and east, and /oo/ west, and /eh/ in Kent in the southeast. People from all of these regions converged in London in the decades after the Black Death. So by Caxton's time, he would have probably heard all three pronunciations. The modern word ***busy*** reflects this linguistic variation. It has the spelling of the west with the letter U, but it has the pronunciation of the north and east with the /ih/ sound. Interestingly, Caxton was from Kent where people pronounced the word with an /eh/ sound, and appropriately enough, he spelled the word B-E-S-Y in works like Le Morte d'Arthur. So given that type of variation, what was the best business decision – or /bessy-ness/ decision – or /bussy-ness/ decision? As a salesman, what was the best way to reach everyone in the country?

In the end, Caxton decided to use a form of the language that was somewhere in between the various extremes. He chose the common ordinary language of the typical clerk or scholar or educated person who might read his books. He also chose the common speech of London, which was a type of Midland speech that avoided the unique features of the far south and the far north and the far west. It was a type of speech that was somewhere between those extremes, and with some effort, it could be read and understood throughout the country. It was a simple business decision.

There's also evidence that Caxton sometimes tried to edit or soften the language in order to avoid offending readers. A good example of this occurs in Caxton's version of Le Morte d'Arthur. In Malory's original version, there is a passage where Lancelot is struck with a spear, and it is pulled out of his side. The original line reads, "And [he] gave a great shriek and a grisly groan, so that the blood burst out, nigh a pint at once, that at last he sank down upon his arse and so swooned down, pale and deadly." But when Caxton got to that passage, he took out the word ***arse*** and replaced it with the word ***buttocks***. That appears to have been an intentional edit to avoid a term that might offend some readers.[*SOURCE: 'Words in Time,' Geoffrey Hughes, p. 99-100.*] Again, it was apparently a business decision. Don't offend your customers.

Another example of Caxton's use of common language can be seen in the term he used for an object that was very important to a printer. The word for the printed page itself. You may have noticed that in the Prologue I read earlier, he used the word ***leaf***. That was the traditional English word for a piece of parchment or paper. The word ***page*** is a French loanword, and it's actually recorded for the first time in an English document in the 1480s, around the time that Caxton set up his printing shop in England. So Caxton was almost certainly familiar with the word, but it was so new in the language at the time that he apparently preferred to stick with the traditional word ***leaf***. Again, this is an example of his somewhat conservative approach to the language.

By adopting a manner of speech found among the common people of London, Caxton set the English language on its way toward standardization. His successors in the printing industry adopted the same basic approach, and over the next couple of centuries, written English gradually became standardized. When that process was completed, the written language no longer matched any specific dialect or spoken form of English. It was no longer a purely phonetic representation of the language.

While much of the progress toward standardization took place after Caxton's death, he did make some small steps in that direction during his lifetime in his publications. For example, he often followed the Chancery standard which government scribes used. I discussed the emergence of that standard a few episodes back. Where there was an inconsistent or conflicting usage in the language, Caxton tended to follow the Chancery standard. It is worth noting that Caxton's printing shop was established in Westminster near the government offices, not in the heart of London itself. His shop catered to the clerks, and lawyers and educated bureaucrats who worked in and passed through Westminster. So given that, it isn't surprising that he would tend to follow the Chancery standard where there was conflicting use.

For example, the word ***such*** was ***swich*** in Old English. Both forms were still common in the late 1400s, but Caxton followed the Chancery scribes and used ***such***, which became the standard form of the word. [*SOURCE: 'Inventing English,' Seth Lerer, p. 120*] He also used the [g-h] spelling in words like ***right*** and ***might*** and ***fight***. Even though the sound represented by that letter combination was disappearing from the language, the Chancery scribes tended to represent that sound in their spellings, and Caxton did the same. Similarly, Caxton followed the Chancery scribes in using the '-ly' adverb ending instead of the older '-lich' ending. [*SOURCE: 'Inventing English,' Seth Lerer, p. 119*]

Caxton also tended to follow the Chancery when it came to the variable pronoun forms. For example, he used the letter ***I*** for the first person singular pronoun which was the form preferred by Chancery. In the south of England, people tended to say ***ich***, but that older form was on its way out. And Caxton generally used the northern third person pronouns with the 'TH' sound – ***they***, ***them*** and ***their***. As we've seen before, the south of England had very similar pronoun forms that all began with an 'H' sound. Caxton not only used the northern 'TH' forms, he was actually more consistent in that usage than the Chancery was. [*SOURCE: The Evolution of the English Language, George H. McKnight, p. 83*]

But Caxton's consistency in his use of pronouns did not extend to spellings. Uniform spellings were simply not a priority. As I've noted so many times before, Caxton was a product of a time when there were no fixed spellings. People spelled words phonetically, and sometimes, it seems like they enjoyed finding new ways to spell a word.

A well-known example of this type of variation is the word ***thorough***. Researchers have found over a hundred different spellings of that word in Middle English. Even a simple word like ***might*** is spelled at least twenty different ways in earlier periods of English. [*SOURCE: 'Righting the Mother Tongue,' David Wolman, p. 48*] No one was really concerned about the 'right' way to spell a word because there really wasn't a 'right' way to spell it yet.

In some ways, Caxton's press actually made spellings even MORE inconsistent because he sometimes altered the spelling of a word to make a given line of text look better on the page. Let me explain. Like many printers, Caxton was concerned about the appearance of his books. He wanted them to resemble the beauty of handwritten manuscripts. After all, that would make them sell better. Well, handwritten manuscripts tended to have justified margins. In other words, both the left column and the right column were even. Each line of text began as the same point on the left margin and ended at the same point on the right margin. Now today, it's very easy to do that with a word processor. You just click a button, and the program automatically adjusts the spaces between the words to justify the margins. It was a little more difficult for a scribe to do that, but the scribe could still adjust the spacing and shape of the letters to make the line come out at the right point. But for a printer, it was much more difficult to justify the right margin. The letters had fixed shapes that couldn't be altered, and if there was too little or too much blank space between the words, the line would look odd.

One way to avoid that problem was to play around with the spelling of the words. If necessary, you could add in a few letters to stretch out the line or take out a few letters to shorten the line. Take a word like ***only*** – O-N-L-Y. You might remember from an earlier episode that it began as the word 'one-ly.' Well, if Caxton needed to stretch out a given line, he could spell it according to its original etymology – O-N-E-L-Y. He could also stretch it out even further by spelling it O-N-E-L-I-E. That would extend it from four letters to six letters. [*SOURCE: 'The Lexicographer's Dilemma,' Jack Lynch, p. 170*]

The silent E at the end of many words also provided a way to shorten or extend a given line of text. As we've seen before, the inflectional endings that were once so common at the end of words had disappeared over time. In early Middle English, many of them were reduced to a generic 'eh' sound at the end of the word, and that sound was represented by a letter E. By the time of Chaucer, people were starting to drop those 'eh' sounds at the end of many words, so that letter E at the end became optional for many scribes. Sometimes a given word was spelled with an E at the end, and sometimes the E was dropped. Well, that provided another option for printers.

If they needed to shorten a line, they would drop the E at the end of those words. If they needed to extend the line, they would add the E's back in. So in Caxton's works, we find a word like ***good*** sometimes spelled as G-O-O-D-E and the word ***book*** spelled B-O-O-K-E. Caxton

sometimes spelled the word ***pity*** in its modern way as P-I-T-Y. But sometimes he extended it to P-I-T-T-Y. And sometimes he even stretched it out to P-I-T-T-Y-E. [*SOURCE: 'Spell it Out,' David Crystal, p. 137.*]

The main point here is that the spellings used by printers remained variable and inconsistent. And in some cases, that variation was intentional and was purely aesthetic. It was simply a matter of aligning the margins. For a book seller, that was more important that any concern about standardized spellings.

There was also another factor that shaped Caxton's spellings, and ultimately shaped the history of English spelling itself. And that factor had to do with the place where Caxton began his printing operations. When Caxton decided to start his own printing business in Bruges in Flanders, the only presses that were available for purchase were those in nearby Germany or perhaps a few that had just been established in the Low Countries. The printing press included both the press itself, as well as the type or letters that went along with it. And on the continent, they didn't use some of those unusual English letters that had been around since the Anglo-Saxon period. So there was no letter thorn or eth to represent the 'TH' sound. And there was no yogh to represent the guttural fricative sound that was disappearing in much of England. That meant that Caxton didn't have access to those letters when he printed his first books.

So he followed the lead of other scribes and the Chancery in using [TH] in place of the thorn and eth. And he used [GH] for the yogh. That alone made Caxton's publications look modern compared to most Middle English manuscripts.

Caxton also adopted another innovation. Since he didn't have a thorn symbol, sometimes he used a letter Y instead. Remember that the thorn was used to represent the 'TH' sound. Traditionally, the thorn looked like a letter P with the loop in the middle of the stem rather than at the top of the stem. But some scribes tended to elongate that loop and stretch it upwards to the right. And when the stem was drawn in a slightly curved manner, it made the letter resemble a Y. Prior to Caxton, there are a few surviving examples of scribes drawing the thorn and the letter Y exactly the same way. Well Caxton picked up on that idea, and he sometimes used the letter Y for the thorn.

One situation where he tended to do that was for the word ***the***. That was obviously a very common word, and sometimes, if Caxton wanted to shorten a given line, he would spell the word with a letter Y and then an E in the form of a superscript. So it was a little E placed above the line. That shrank the word down so it didn't take up much space at all. And that technique ultimately gave rise to the spelling [YE] for the word ***the***. That's where we get a phrase like 'Ye Olde Book Shop.' But as I've noted in prior episodes, that ***ye*** is really just the word ***the***. It's simply an alternate spelling. So it should be pronounced 'The Olde Book Shop.' That little bit of linguistic confusion was caused by an early printing innovation to account for a missing letter.

I should note that Caxton did solve this problem a few years after he had re-located to England. He created several new typefaces for his press, and those new typefaces did include some of those old English letters. So his later publications did sometimes use the thorn or yogh. But generally speaking, the printers who followed Caxton didn't tend to bother with those older

letters. They just used the type or letters that were used on the continent. And a short time after Caxton died, the yogh fell out of use in English. The letter thorn – or the letter Y as a substitute for the thorn – survived a bit longer because printers could use it to shorten a word and justify the margins. It survived about a century longer, but it finally disappeared from English in the early 1600s. [*SOURCE: 'The Emergence of Standard English,' John H. Fisher, p.14*]

Now there's one other aspect of English spelling that can probably be traced back to Caxton's original printing press in Flanders. It's a specific spelling convention that Caxton's employees used, and they apparently brought it with them to England. Here's what happened.

When Caxton brought the press to England in the 1470s, he didn't just bring the equipment with him. He also brought some of his employees who had worked in his printing shop in Flanders. After all, no one in England knew how to operate the thing. He needed workers who could set the type or letters in the correct way. We actually know the name of one of those workers. He was Jan van Wynkyn, but he is better known as Wynkyn de Worde. The reason why we know his name is because he took over the printing business when Caxton died. Wynkyn was from Alsace in what is today eastern France, but it was mostly German-speaking at the time, so he presumably spoke a form of German as his native language. He worked in Flanders with Caxton, and he presumably also spoke or at least understood Dutch. It appears that some of Caxton's other typesetters also spoke Dutch because his books sometimes contained common spellings that were used in Dutch. Caxton himself didn't oversee the printing of each page of each book, so the employees were often left to their own devices. And when an English word resembled a Dutch word, they would sometimes spell the word in the Dutch manner. [*SOURCE: 'Spell it Out,' David Crystal, p. 139*]

So for example, in a few places, we find the word ***good*** spelled G-O-E-D like it would have been spelled in Dutch. And the word ***rook*** – R-O-O-K, which referred to a type of bird, was spelled R-O-E-K like in Dutch. [*SOURCE: 'A History of English Spelling,' D.G. Scragg, p. 67.*]

Well, those specific spellings didn't stick in English, but there was one Dutch spelling that did, at least in some words. And that was the use of the letters [GH] to represent the hard 'g' sound (/g/). That spelling was common in Dutch, and when Caxton's typesetters had to render the word ***ghost*** in the phrase 'Holy Ghost', they spelled it with a [GH] which it still has today. The word ***ghost*** is actually a common Germanic word, and within English, it had always been spelled with a simple G at the beginning. But in the Middle Dutch that was spoken at the time, the word was usually spelled G-H-E-E-S-T. And it appears that Caxton's typesetters mimicked that spelling in a religious manuscript that was published in the print shop. The book was known as the Royal Book, and for the first time in recorded English, the word ***ghost*** was spelled with a [GH] at the front. It was actually spelled G-H-O-O-S-T. The same spelling popped up again in a rendering of Chaucer's Book of Fame, as well as other publications. [*SOURCE, 'Spell it Out,' David Crystal, p. 140*]

Now that spelling didn't catch on immediately, but it appears that Caxton's publications were so common, and other printers were so inclined to follow his lead, that it became common to spell ***ghost*** with a [GH], and that was the accepted spelling by the time of Shakespeare.

Caxton's workers also spelled the word ***aghast*** with a [GH], and that spelling also became common over time. By the way, ***aghast*** is derived from the same Old English root as ***ghost***. So it made sense to treat the spellings the same. By the way, ***ghastly*** also comes from the same root, and it also picked up the same spelling over time. [*SOURCE: 'Spell it Out,' David Crystal, p. 140.*]

Now I should note that Caxton's books also spelled other words with the same [GH], but for some reason, the spellings didn't stick in those cases. So for example, we find ***guess*** spelled G-H-E-S-S-E, and ***goose*** was spelled G-H-O-O-S, and ***girl*** was spelled G-H-E-R-L-E. [*SOURCES: 'The Stories of English,' David Crystal, p. 258, and 'Spell it Out,' David Crystal, p. 140-1*] Modern linguists are still not sure why the [GH] spelling stuck to certain words and not others. It seems that there was something unique about the word ***ghost***, and the related words ***ghastly*** and ***aghast***, that caused printers to retain the more exotic spelling for those words. Maybe it was the spooky or supernatural nature of those words. We have additional evidence for that when the word ***ghoul*** was borrowed from Arabic in the late 1700s. It initially appeared with a simple G, but it also acquired a [GH] spelling a short time later, perhaps due to a perceived connection between the words ***ghoul*** and ***ghost***, even though the words are not related.

I should also note that the Italian language used the same [GH] spelling for the hard 'g' sound, so sometimes that spelling appears in English in words borrowed from Italian. That accounts for that spelling of words like ***ghetto*** and ***spaghetti***. [*SOURCE: 'Spell it Out,' David Crystal, p. 141*]

Now we don't know if Caxton's assistant, Wynkyn de Worde, is the person who is responsible for those [GH]'s that were so common in those early printed books, but we do know that he took over the printing business when Caxton died in 1491. The business continued to grow and flourish under his supervision, and he eventually decided to move the printing business to a new location. His new shop was located in a house on a street in London called Fleet Street. Other printers soon joined him by setting up competing shops nearby, often on the same street. And that's how the British publishing industry became known as Fleet Street in much the same way the US financial industry became known as Wall Street. [*SOURCE: 'The Last Plantagenets,' Thomas B. Costain, p. 359.*]

England's new printing industry flourished in the years after Fleet Street became the publishing hub. Within a century and a half after Caxton's death, English printers had published over 20,000 different titles. Some were small pamphlets, and some were massive books, but they all contributed to the spread of knowledge and the spread of the written language to every corner of England. [SOURCE: 'A History of the English Language,' Albert C. Baugh & Thomas Cable, p. 199-200] Along the way, both the grammar and the spelling of written English became more and more fixed. By the end of that period, written English was somewhat divorced from spoken English. It was no longer a purely phonetic representation of the language. As we'll see, there were many reasons for that disconnect, but one of the factors was the continuing evolution of the spoken language. The Great Vowel Shift was still taking place when those printers started to standardize spellings in the mid-1500s. That meant that spoken English was a moving target, and phonetic spellings were never going to work. If the Great Vowel Shift had taken place a

century earlier, or if the printing press had been introduced a century later, English spellings would probably make a lot more sense today. But of course, that's not what happened.

So next time, we'll finally turn our attention to the topic that many of you have been waiting for – the Great Vowel Shift. We'll explore what happened, and we'll try to figure why it happened. And hopefully, I won't completely confuse you along the way.

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

EPISODE 140: YOU SAY 'TO-MAY-TO'

Welcome to the History of English Podcast – a podcast about the history of the English language. This is Episode 140: You Say 'To-May-to.' In this episode, we're going to begin our look at one of the most fascinating topics in the overall history of the English language – the Great Vowel Shift. That term refers to a series of changes that affected the way many vowel sounds were pronounced in English. It's important to the overall story of English because it helps to explain why English words are pronounced the way they are today, and it also helps to explain why English spelling is so weird because many words are spelled the way they were pronounced before the vowel shift occurred. But in order to understand what happened, we really need to have a sense of what vowels are and where each vowel sound is pronounced in the mouth. Armed with that knowledge, we can start to see how the vowels relate to each other. And how a change in one vowel might impact the vowels around it. So this time, we're going to take a break from our regular historical narrative, and we're going to focus on vowels. What they are. Why they're important. Where they're pronounced. And how they're spelled. And then, over the next couple of episodes, we'll explore the actual changes that are known today as Great Vowel Shift.

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, we're going to begin our look at the Great Vowel Shift. I've touched on it briefly in earlier episodes, but in order to understand why it is so important to the story of English, we need to take a step back and look at the big picture. This is definitely one of those developments where it is easy to miss the forest for the trees.

The Great Vowel Shift was a systematic change in the way many words were pronounced in English. Words that had been pronounced with one vowel sound started to be pronounced with a completely different vowel sound. Of course, every vowel sound is pronounced in a specific way in a specific part of the mouth. So that didn't change. When we make a sound with our mouth like 'ee' or 'ah,' we do it the same way that people have made that sound since the beginning of human speech. But the thing is, we don't all use the same vowel sounds. I may say ***either*** ('EE-ther'), you may say ***either (***'AI-ther'). I may say ***tomato*** ('to-MAY-to'), and you may say ***tomato*** ('to-MAH-to'). I may say ***data*** ('DÆ-ta'), and you may say ***data*** ('DAY-ta'). Vowel sounds vary within English. Some reflect broad differences in accents. And some are just a matter of personal preference.

At certain points in history, this type of variation was even more widespread within the language with many words being pronounced with different vowels sounds side-by-side among the same speakers. Old pronunciations existed alongside newer pronunciations. Over time, as this variation declined and people settled on specific pronunciations, they often settled on the newer pronunciations. The result was a systematic change in the way words were pronounced. It appears that the Great Vowel Shift involved a similar process.

Over several generations, from the end of the Middle English period through the early Modern English period, vowel pronunciations became unsettled, and many words could be pronounced in two or more different ways. In the early 1600s, the English playwright and poet Ben Johnson wrote that "All our Vowels are sounded doubtfully." But eventually, that confusion was resolved as speakers settled on a more fixed set of pronunciations. The new vowel pronunciations came to dominate the southern half of Britain and eventually reached the New World and the other English colonies. But in other parts of the British Isles, the new pronunciations were only partially adopted. The result was a basic split that contributed to many accent differences that can still be detected throughout the British Isles. Of course, not all accent differences are the result of the Great Vowel Shift. Accents have never completely settled down. Shifts continued to occur in the centuries that followed the vowel shift. And modern linguists are quick to note that regional vowel shifts are still occurring within English to this very day.

Historically, these changes not only affected the way words were pronounced, they also affected the way those words were spelled. I don't have to tell you that Modern English spellings are crazy and inconsistent, but it is important to keep in mind that they were once much more logical and much more consistent. When English spelling came to be standardized, those spellings generally reflected the way words were pronounced at the time. The problem is that the Great Vowel Shift was still underway, and the pronunciations continued to change after those spellings were adopted. So today, there is often a disconnect between the way a word is spelled and the way it is pronounced. And while that can be incredibly frustrating, it can also be the key to unlocking and understanding how the vowels changed in the past.

When we encounter words like ***day*** and ***great*** and ***take***, we probably notice that they are all pronounced with the same vowel sound – /ei/. But in each case, that sound is spelled differently – ***day*** with its [AY], ***great*** with its [EA], and ***take*** with its [A] and [silent E] at the end. It all seems kind of crazy until you realize that all three words were pronounced differently before the Great Vowel Shift. And those spellings reflect the way those words were pronounced at that time. ***Day*** was /dæi/, ***great*** was /grɛt/, and ***take*** was /tɑ:k/. The spellings reflect those old differences in pronunciation. But during the Great Vowel Shift, the pronunciations merged. They all acquired a modern /ei/ sound, and we were left with different spellings for the same sound. So that's why the story of the Great Vowel Shift is important to both modern pronunciations and modern spellings. And that's also why I wanted to discuss the printing press in England before delving into the details of the Great Vowel Shift.

Now most discussions about the Great Vowel Shift usually include diagrams to help show how the vowels shifted around. It is certainly easier to understand when you can see and visualize the changes. But this is a podcast, and I don't have the benefit of pictures and diagrams. So I want to help you form a mental image of what happened. And that really begins with a basic understanding of where the vowels sounds are produced in the mouth. So in this episode, I want to lay the foundation for the following two episodes by taking a tour of the mouth to see how and where the vowels are pronounced. And also to see how slight shifts create many of the different accents and pronunciations that we have today.

But let's begin with a very basic and very important question. What is a vowel?

Well, I think we tend to think of vowels and consonants in terms of letters. If someone were to ask you what a vowel is, you might reply "A, E, I, O, U and sometimes Y." Well, those are the letters we use to represent and spell vowel sounds, but we really need to consider the more basic and fundamental questions. What is a vowel sound? How is it different from a consonant sound? And why did our English teachers feel the need to distinguish the two?

Well they all involve sounds created in the mouth, but the main difference between a vowel and consonant is whether or not the sound is restricted as it passes through oral cavity. If the sound is blocked or restricted in any significant way, it is a consonant. If the sound flows through in an open and unrestricted way, it is a vowel. Now the vowel sound may be altered by the shape and placement of the tongue, but it otherwise flows though the vocal tract without being restricted by the throat, or the palate, or the teeth, or the lips.

If we think about common consonant sounds like the 'p' sound (/p/), or the 'b' sound (/b/), or the 'd' sound (/d/), they all involve some type of blockage of sound in the front of the mouth. And sounds like the 'g' sound (/g/) and the 'k' sound (/k/) involve a blockage of sound in the back of the mouth in the throat region. Sometimes consonant sounds don't involve complete blockage, just a tight restriction like fricatives. The air flows through, but the sound is restricted creating a hissing sound. That produces sounds like the 's' sound (/s/), the 'v' sound (/v/), or the 'sh' sound (/sh/), or the 'j' sound (/j/). Some consonant sounds resemble vowel sounds like the 'r' sound in ***car*** or ***rain***. There's not much of a restriction there, but there is a tightening of the vocal tract that helps to produce that sound. Similarly, the 'w' sound (/w/) and the 'y' sound (/y/) involve very slight restrictions and are sometimes called 'semi-vowels' because they resemble vowels in some respects.

But pure vowels don't involve those types of restrictions or blockages in the vocal tract. The sounds flow through the mouth with no blockage or restriction other than the shape of the tongue itself. The sound is produced in the open part of oral cavity, and the specific point where the sound is made is largely determined by the shape and placement of the tongue. So the sound /a:/ ('ah') is pronounced in the lower back part of the oral cavity, and the sound /i:/ ('ee') is pronounced in the higher front part of the oral cavity. But between those two extremes, there is a continuous series of sounds that can be produced in the mouth. We can easily shift between those sounds without any stoppage, even though they are produced in completely different parts of the mouth – /ahhh – eeeee – ahhh/. So whereas consonants tend to be produced in very specific ways in very specific parts of the mouth, vowels are produced in the open cavity of the mouth and can easily shift around.

Since there are no barriers between the vowel sounds, that allows them to vary a bit from speaker to speaker. Whereas we might all pronounce the 'b' sound or the 'k' sound or 's' sound the same way, our pronunciation of the vowels may vary a bit. Some people pronounce the words ***caught*** and ***cot*** with the same vowel sound. Some people – like myself – find it difficult to distinguish the words ***pen*** and ***pin***, and ***wheel*** and ***will***. You've probably heard me pronounce those pairs the same way from time to time in the podcast. And vowels not only vary from accent to accent and

person to person, they sometimes vary within the speech of the same person. You may not realize it, but there are certain words that you probably pronounce differently over the course of a conversation. That's very common, and it happens in part because vowel sounds flow into each other. It's easy to pronounce a vowel in one place one time, and then to pronounce it in a slightly different place the next time.

So how many vowel sounds are there? Well given that vowel sounds exist along a continuum, the number of possibilities seems almost infinite. But in actuality, each language uses only a handful of vowel sounds among the many that can theoretically be produced by the human mouth.

Let's consider a word like ***bite***. By changing the vowel sound in the middle, we can create lots of other English words – ***beat***, ***bit***, ***bait***, ***bet***, ***bat***, ***boat***, ***but***, ***boot***, ***bought*** (as in 'I bought a car'), and ***bot*** (as in 'robot'). That's eleven different vowels giving us eleven different words. But we also have the vowel sound in ***book*** which is another distinct sound. And we have the vowel sound in ***boy*** which is also unique. There are also a few other vowel sounds that vary a bit from one accent to the next. All in all, linguists tell us that the there are about a dozen pure vowel sounds used in English, and there are also a handful of diphthongs consisting of two pure vowel sounds pushed together. So in all, we have around twenty different vowel sounds in Modern English, depending on the accent and dialect.

Unfortunately, we only have six letters to represent all of those sounds – A, E, I, O, U, and sometimes Y. And to be fair, when [Y] is used as a vowel, it's mainly just as a substitute for [I]. It doesn't really represent a distinct vowel sound on its own. It did represent a distinct sound in Old English, but that sound disappeared from the language. So today, [Y] is really just a variation of [I]. So all of that means that we have to make those five or six letters do a lot of work to represent around twenty different vowel sounds.

One way to do that is to use letter combinations like when we use [OU] to represent the vowel sound in ***house*** or when we use [OY] to represent the vowel sound in ***boy***.

Another more common way to stretch the use of vowel letters is to assign more than one sound to each letter. That isn't an ideal solution, but that's the way English has worked from the very beginning. That's why we sometimes refer to the 'long' and 'short' sound of each vowel letter. When we are learning to read, we are told that the /ai/ sound in ***bite*** is the 'long I' sound, whereas the /i/ sound in ***bit*** is the 'short I' sound. The /ei/ sound in ***hate*** is the 'long A', whereas the /æ/ sound in ***hat*** is the 'short A'. Each of our vowel letters has a so-called 'short' sound and a 'long' sound, thereby allowing us to double the number of sounds represented by each letter.

But if you're like me, you may have found that terminology confusing when you were in English class. When I pronounced ***bite*** and ***bit***, the length of the vowels seemed pretty much the same. And when I tried to say /ai/ really fast and quickly, it came out more like /a/ than /i/. What I didn't know then is that those terms 'short' and 'long' didn't really mean than the short vowels were pronounced shorter and quicker than the long vowels. That terminology is really just a holdover from an earlier period of English when the short vowels sounds really were shorter and

quicker pronunciations of the long vowel sounds. During Old English, speakers could pronounce a particular vowel sound slowly or quickly. And the nature of the sound was a little different in each case. The short vowel sounds really were the shorter versions of the long vowel sounds. But that old relationship broke down completely during the Great Vowel Shift.

By and large, the short vowel sounds remained in place and didn't change. And for that reason, we tend to use the same letters to represent those sounds that the Anglo-Saxons did. But the long vowel sounds shifted around. Words that were pronounced with the longer pronunciations acquired new pronunciations. Each long vowel sound was replaced with a new long vowel sound. So when the Great Vowel Shift was completed, each vowel letter continued to represent at least two sounds. One was the traditional short sound of the letter, but the other was a brand new long sound unrelated to the short sound. That's why the modern short and long sounds don't match in most cases. When I struggled to make /ai/ sound like /i/, I wasn't crazy. /ai/ (the 'long I' sound) is really unrelated to /i/ (the 'short I sound'). That's why they don't match today, and that's why the so-called 'short' vowels aren't just quick versions of the 'long' vowels. They're really completely different vowel sounds represented by the same letter.

After the Great Vowel Shift, the length of the pronunciation didn't really matter as much anymore. The two sounds of each letter were completely different, so it didn't really matter if you pronounced one vowel longer than the other. And over time, English speakers have tended to disregard the differences in length. Now some vowels by their very nature tend to be pronounced a little longer. And linguists say that speakers in Britain are a little more likely than Americans to pronounce their vowels with different lengths. But beyond those broad generalizations, we don't really distinguish the long and short vowels by length anymore. We just use that old terminology to identify the two sounds of each letter. A 'short' vowel sound simply refers to the original short pronunciation of the letter, and a 'long' vowel sound refers to the newer vowel sound that emerged during the Great Vowel Shift or during the centuries that followed that shift. [*SOURCE: A Biography of the English Language, C.M. Millward, p. 256*]

Beyond those basic two sounds represented by each letter, each vowel letter can also be pulled into service to represent other sounds. For example, the letter A not only has the so-called 'short' sound of ***hat*** and the so-called 'long' sound of ***hate***, it can also be used to represent other sounds like the /a:/ sound in ***father***, and the /ə/ sound in ***about***, and the /ɛ/ sound in ***any***. So even though each letter has its primary short and long sounds, it can sometimes be used to represent other sounds as well. And that's what creates a lot of the confusion in modern spelling.

Now the use of individual letters to represent all of those vowel sounds has a limit. To make five or six letters represent about twenty different vowel sounds, we would have to give each letter at least three or four different pronunciations. That would be stretching it a bit too thin. So very often, if we need to represent a specific sound, we simply combine two letters to create a new spelling like the [OU] in ***house*** and [OI] in ***avoid***.

By using these various spelling techniques, we can represent all of the vowel sounds used in English – not that we do so consistently, mind you, but we can at least represent those sounds.

Of course, much of that inconsistency is the product of changes that have taken place over the past few centuries. And we'll look at those changes in some detail over the next couple of episodes. But before we delve into the Great Vowel Shift, I think it's important to get a sense of how the various vowel sounds relate to each other. We need to get a better idea of where the sounds are made in the mouth because that actually helps to explain how one sound can shift over to an adjacent sound. Again, I can't show you a picture or diagram on a podcast, so I'm going to take you on a tour of the open cavity of the mouth, and hopefully, I can help you visualize where the various vowel sounds are articulated.

Now linguists tend use a specific type of diagram to show where the vowel sounds are made. It's essentially a profile view of the mouth with specific phonetic symbols to show where the various sounds are located. If you think that would be helpful as I go through this discussion, you can go to the website ipachart.com. IPA stands for the International Phonetic Alphabet. It's a series of symbols that have been created by linguists to represent each unique vowel sound. Unlike the regular letters of the alphabet which represent multiple sounds and are used inconsistently, each IPA symbol represents one specific sound and only that sound. The good thing about the website I mentioned is that it not only includes the IPA symbols and the location where each one is made in the mouth, but it also includes the actual sound of each symbol. Just click on the symbol at each point in the mouth, and you can hear the sound that's made there. So again, if you're visually oriented, you might want to pull up that website ipachart.com, and then you can see where each of these vowel sounds is articulated.

Let's begin with a sound that I've talked about in recent episodes because it was apparently one of the first sounds to be affected by the Great Vowel Shift. It's this sound /i:/ ('ee'). Again, I'm not talking about the letter [E]. That's just a symbol. I'm talking about the sound /i:/ when it comes out of your mouth. Those are two different things because there's only one /i:/ sound, but as we'll see, it can be represented with several different letters.

That /i:/ sound is made very high up in the front part of the mouth. It is the highest front vowel that we can make.

Here's how the IPA chart represents that sound – (/i:/).

This is the sound we find in words like ***tree***, and ***bee***, and ***seem***, and ***feel*** and ***easy***. Now in terms of spelling, we generally spell this sound today with letter [E] or a double [E]. But another common spelling for this sound is the letter combination [EA] as in ***beam***, and ***speak***, and ***leaf***, and ***please***, and ***team***. Now you have probably wondered why we have those two different spellings. [E] or double [E] on the one hand, and [EA] on the other. Well, generally speaking, those spellings reflect different pronunciations in the distant past. The words spelled with [E] or double [E] had one pronunciation, and words spelled with [EA] had a slightly different pronunciation, and during the Great Vowel Shift the vowel sounds in those respective words merged together into the modern sound /i:/ ('ee') that we use today. Again, we'll look at that

development in more detail in the next episode, but I just wanted to make the point that sometimes two or more vowels sounds merged together in the past, but the older spellings were retained, and that helps to explain why we have different ways of spelling that sound today. Remember that English spellings tend to reflect pronunciations that existed BEFORE the Great Vowel Shift.

Now historically, English spelled this sound with a completely different letter – the letter I. That was the normal letter used for the /i:/ ('ee') sound before the Great Vowel Shift. It was the letter used by the Romans, and it was the letter adopted by the Anglo-Saxons. It was the letter used in English all the way up to the Great Vowel Shift, and it's still the letter used today in much of continental Europe.

After the Great Vowel Shift was completed, English continued to borrow words from other languages, and it tended to retain the spellings from those languages. That's why we have quite a few words where this /i:/ ('ee') sound is still represented by letter I – the same as it was before the Great Vowel Shift. We find it in French loanwords like ***police***, ***ravine***, ***machine*** and ***elite***. We also find it in Italian loanwords like ***spaghetti*** and ***pizza***. It's also in Spanish loanwords like ***fiesta***, ***siesta*** and ***tortilla***. We also find it in the recent Scandinavian loanword ***ski***, and the Japanese loanword ***tsunami***, and even the Swahili loanword ***safari***. We also have it in loanwords from South Asia like the Hindi word ***yogi*** and the Urdu word ***khaki***. Whenever we come across a word where this /ee/ sound is spelled with letter I, we can generally assume that it's a loanword from another language, and we can also assume that it was borrowed at some point after the Great Vowel Shift was underway – sometime after the mid-1400s. And that's because letter [I] became disconnected from its original /i:/ sound during the Great Vowel Shift. A new set of words started to emerge with this /i:/ sound, and they were typically spelled with [E], or double [E] or [EA] as I noted earlier.

Now remember that vowel sounds could be pronounced either long or short in earlier periods of English. And when this /i:/ ('ee') sound was pronounced short and quickly, it came out as /i/ – the sound we have in words like ***sit***, and ***in***, and ***miss***. Remember that the short vowel sounds didn't really change during the Great Vowel Shift, so those pronunciations are very old. And that's why those words are still spelled with their original letter [I] in English.

So we've looked at the highest vowel sound in the front of the mouth. Now let's shift down to the vowel sound that is slightly lower and located next to the /i:/ sound – and that's the /e:/ ('ay') sound. So we go from high /i:/ ('ee') to slightly lower /e:/ ('ay').

Here's how the IPA chart represents that sound – (/e:/).

This is the sound we find in words like ***face***, and ***tape***, and ***cake***, and ***age***. We generally spell this sound today with letter [A]. But another common spelling for this /e:/ sound is the letter combination [AI] and [AY] as in ***wait***, and ***raid***, and ***day***, and ***way***. Sometimes, we spell this sound with the letter combination [EI] and [EY] as in ***they*** and ***obey*** and ***weigh*** (W-E-I-G-H). And sometimes, we even use that letter combination we saw earlier [EA] as in ***great*** and ***steak*** and ***break***. Well, once again, the reason why we have those different spellings is because each of

those spellings once represented different and distinct vowel sounds. But during the Great Vowel Shift, words with those various pronunciations merged together into this vowel sound /e:/ (‘ay’). So even though they are pronounced with the same basic vowel sound today, most of those words still retain their older spellings which can be traced back to the period before the vowel shift was completed. Again, we’ll look at the details of those changes in the next episode.

Now this vowel sound /e:/ (‘ay’) also existed in Latin, and the Romans represented it with letter E. And the Anglo-Saxons adopted the Roman alphabet and also spelled this sound with letter E. That was the traditional letter that was used until the Great Vowel Shift moved everything around. And again, most of the languages in continental Europe still tend to use the letter E for the /e:/ (‘ay’) sound. We can find many recent loanwords in English where that sound is still spelled with an E. We find it in words like ***café***, ***fiancé***, ***resume***, ***saute***, ***ballet***, ***buffet***, ***beret***, ***gourmet*** and ***melee***. When we encounter that spelling, we can generally assume that we’re looking at a loanword that was adopted during or after the Great Vowel Shift.

Now there is one other important note that I should make about this sound. Linguists are quick to note that the pronunciation of this sound has changed a little bit since the Great Vowel Shift was completed. By the late 1700s, it had become common in the south of England to pronounce this sound with a little glide at the end – to pronounce the /e:/ (‘ay’) sound with a little /i:/ (‘ee’) sound at the end. So /e:/ became /ei/. In other words, it shifted from a pure vowel sound to a diphthong – a combination of two vowels put together. And that diphthong has become the standard pronunciation throughout much of Modern English.

Now having looked at the high /ee/ sound and the slightly lower /ei/ sound, let’s move down a little further to the next vowel sound which is /ɛ/ (‘eh’). Here’s how the IPA chart represents that sound – (/ɛ/).

This is the sound we find in words like ***set***, and ***pet***, and ***dress***, and ***head***, and ***egg***. We typically spell this sound today with the letter [E], and in fact, this is what is known as the ‘short E’ sound. So in the past, English had that sound we looked at previously – the /ei/ sound, which was spelled with letter E like in ***café***. And they had this adjacent sound /ɛ/, which could be pronounced either short or long. And all of these sounds were close enough and similar enough that they could all be represented by letter E. The long version of this /ɛ/ sound shifted and disappeared in the Great Vowel Shift, but the short version survived, and it survives as our modern ‘short E’ sound. Remember that these short sounds didn’t really change that much during the Great Vowel Shift. That’s why we still tend to spell this short sound with letter [E].

Now so far, we’ve looked at the three highest vowel sounds produced in the front of the mouth in descending order from highest to lowest. We have /ee, /ei/ and /ɛ/. I tried to think of a good mnemonic device to help you remember that order because it is important to the Great Vowel Shift. So try this one. “Eat Aged Eggs.” Notice that all three words begin with a different vowel sound – /ee, /ei/ and /ɛ/. So if you can remember to “Eat Aged Eggs”, you can also remember the order of these front vowel sounds from high to low.

As we'll see next time, these three sounds are not only adjacent to each other, but they also have a historical relationship. These vowel sounds have tended to move around and bump into each other at times, especially the lower vowels moving up into the space occupied by the higher vowels. I should also note that some words in Modern English have pronunciations that fluctuate between those sounds. Think about the pronunciation of the word ***economic*** ('ee-conomic') or ***economic*** ('eh-conomic'). One version uses the higher vowel sound /i:/ ('ee'), and the other uses the lower sound /ɛ/ ('eh'). Also consider the American pronunciation of ***leisure*** ('lee-zhure') versus the British pronunciation as ***leisure*** ('lɛzhure'). Again, we see that one version uses the higher vowel and the other uses the lower vowel.

And if we focus on the so-called 'short' pronunciations of these vowels as /I/ and /ɛ/, we actually have the complete merger of those sounds in certain words in some accents. That process is the source of the so-called 'pin-pen merger' where certain word pairs like that are pronounced exactly the same. This pronunciation is common in the American South. And as I noted earlier, my native accent does that, so I actually have a hard time pronouncing ***pin*** and ***pen*** with different vowel sounds. I have to concentrate to do that. Again, we'll look at that phenomenon in more detail in future episodes.

Also, with respect to these short vowel sounds, the shift from the lower /ɛ/ up to /I/ is one of the most notable features of the modern New Zealand accent. Many people from New Zealand will shift that sound up in much the same way that I do when I pronounce ***pen*** as 'pin.' But in a Southern accent in the US, that only happens before nasal sounds like the 'n' sound, whereas in New Zealand, it is much more widespread and can happen in just about any context.
Yes become 'yis.' and ***head*** become 'hid.'

Here's a comment from listener Annie who hails from New Zealand. She mentions how this particular vowel shift continues to expand among younger generations in New Zealand. [CLIP]

Here's another voice sample from Dan who is from Aukland, New Zealand. He read several of the sentences I provided, and notice his pronunciation of ***tent*** as 'tint,' ***ten*** as 'tin,' ***pencils*** as 'pincils,' ***pen*** as 'pin,' and ***egg*** as 'igg.' Again, some of those are tough for me to distinguish because my natural accent does the same thing in all of the words except ***egg***. But here's Dan's readings: [CLIP]

So I hope you can hear that. Ultimately, the main point here is that there is still movement and merger between the short versions of these three highest front vowels.

Now let's move down a little bit lower to the next vowel sound – the /æ/ sound. This is the sound that's adjacent to the /ɛ/ sound that we just looked at, and this is one of the lowest front vowels.

Here's how the IPA chart represents that sound – (/æ/).

This is the vowel sound that we hear in words like ***trap***, and ***cat***, and ***math***, and ***hand***. It is almost always spelled with the letter [A], and it is sometimes simply known as the 'short A' sound. Now this sound had a close historical connection with the sound that's pronounced slightly underneath it, and that's the /ɑ:/ ('ah') sound. The /a:/ sound is the lowest vowel sound of all. Linguists will note that there are actually some very subtle variations of this sound within Modern English, with the pronunciation in some words being slightly more forward and the pronunciation in others being all the way back in the throat region. For our purposes, the differences are so slight that I'm going to treat them as one vowel sound – /ɑ:/. Now there is a slight difference in the British and American pronunciations of that sound, but that difference has more to do with the shaping of the lips than the location of the sound itself. And I'll discuss that difference in a moment.

But first, I want to focus on the relationship between that lowest front vowel /æ/ as in ***hat*** and this low central or back vowel /ɑ/ ('ah') as in ***what***. I mentioned that there was a historical connection between those two sounds.

First, they are neighbors, both being located in the bottom part of the mouth – /æ/ being slightly higher and more forward and /ɑ:/ being lower and further back. As we move down or move up, we transition from one sound to the other.

Now the basic connection between those sounds is probably apparent if you think about spelling. Both sounds can be represented with letter A. As we saw, the higher /æ/ sound is the so-called 'short' A sound as in ***hat*** and ***cap***. And historically, that lower /ɑ:/ sound was also represented with letter A. In fact, /ɑ:/ is the original sound of letter A, and it's still the sound of letter A in much of continental Europe. Again, the Great Vowel Shift moved things around in English. But in some words, we do harken back to the original sound of letter A and use it to represent the /ɑ:/ sound. We find it in words like ***father***, and ***what***, and ***swan***, and ***watch***.

So other than a common spelling, what is the deeper historical connection between the /æ/ and /ɑ:/ sounds? Well, both of those sounds could be pronounced either long or short in Old English. But in the early Middle English period, the short /æ/ sound shifted down to the /ɑ/ sound in many words, and the short /æ/ sound largely disappeared from English.

But then in the 1500s and early 1600s, a large group of words that had that low /ɑ/ sound shifted the vowel back up to /æ/. That's how we got the modern pronunciation of words like ***hat***, and ***man***, and ***trap***, and ***back***.

But then, in the 1700s and 1800s in southern England, another group of words with that higher /æ/ sound shifted back down again to the /ɑ:/ sound. That's why English speakers in southern England use the /ɑ:/ sound in many words where other speakers use the /æ/ sound. So in southern England, you're likely to hear ***bath*** ('bahth') instead of ***bath*** ('bæth'), and ***pass*** ('pahss') instead of ***pass*** ('pæss'), and ***glass*** ('glahss') instead of ***glass*** ('glæss'). So that difference was due to a relatively recent vowel shift from/æ/ to /ɑ:/ in southern Britain, and only in certain words, mainly words where the vowel appeared before specific consonants. So even in southern England, you'll still find words like ***hat*** and ***man*** and ***trap*** pronounced with that higher vowel like most of the rest of the English-speaking world.

The main point here is the /æ/ and /ɑ:/ sounds have a close historical relationship, and words with those sounds have shifted back and forth over the centuries. And we can still see a close relationship between those sounds in Modern English. Think about the pronunciation of the word spelled A-U-N-T. Some people say 'ant' and some people say 'ahnt.' So the pronunciation is divided between those vowels.

For those listeners who have left voice samples at the website, I included a sentence that read, "We bought the lot with a large pecan tree in the back yard." One of the reasons why I composed the sentence with the word ***pecan*** ('pee-can') – or 'pee-cahn' – was to see how everyone pronounced it. Interestingly, there was about an even split, and didn't always break down on neat regional lines. Here's a sample from listener Shasti from Washington State in the northwestern US. [CLIP]. And here's Jennifer from Los Angeles dealing with the same issue. [CLIP] Now here's Steve from Florida with his take on that word. [CLIP]

The point of those examples is to illustrate that there is still a basic connection between the neighboring /æ/ and /ɑ:/ sounds in the bottom part of the mouth. And these types words that have two different pronunciations are a good example of how vowel shifts occur. At certain times in history, it wasn't just a handful of words that did this like 'ant' and 'ahnt,' and 'pe-can' and 'pe-cahn.' It was a lot of words – some with an older, more traditional pronunciation and some with a newer pronunciation. When most speakers eventually settled on the newer pronunciation, you had a vowel shift.

Now so far, we've completed our look at the vowel sounds pronounced in the front part of the mouth. We've gone all the way from /i:/ at the top down to /ɑ:/ at the lower back part of the mouth. Again, that progression was /i:/, /ei/, /ɛ/, /æ/, and /ɑ:/. Earlier, I gave the mnemonic 'Eat Aged Eggs.' Now let's extend that to cover all of the sounds we've explored so far. So let's make it 'Eat Aged Eggs At Ollie's.' If you can remember that, you can remember the order of all of the front vowels from highest to lowest. Again, /i:/, /ei/, /ɛ/, /æ/, and /ɑ:/. And /ɑ:/ is really a central or back vowel because it is pronounced so far back in the throat region.

So now, let's continue our movement around the perimeter of the oral cavity, and let's shift our focus to the back vowels. I just talked about the /ɑ:/ ('ah') sound in words like ***father***, and ***what***, and ***swan***, and in some British and Commonwealth pronunciations of ***bath***, and ***pass***, and ***glass***. But you may have noticed that we also use that sound in a lot of words spelled with the letter O – like ***hot***, and ***stop***, and ***box***, and ***sock***. In fact, even though this /ɑ:/ sound is historically associated with the letter A, we actually call that sound the 'short O' sound. So what's the deal with that? How did the letter O get into the mix?

Well, the answer lies next door – specifically the sound that's located next door. If we start at the /ɑ:/ sound in the far back of the mouth, and we move up slightly, we come to the /ɔ:/ ('aw') sound. This sound is not only slightly higher that the /ɑ:/ sound, it's also pronounced with rounded lips. In other words, we make a little 'O' shape with our lips when we make this sound. None of the front vowels are pronounced with rounded lips, but most of the back vowels are pronounced that way.

Here's how the IPA chart website illustrates this sound – /ɔ:/.

There were a lot of words with that sound in Middle English, and they were often spelled with a letter O. As we'll see this sound is located adjacent to the /o:/ ('oh') sound, so it made sense to use the letter O since there was no Roman letter that specifically represented that sound. But in the 1500s and 1600s, that /ɔ:/ ('aw') vowel sound in a large number of those words shifted down to that /ɑ:/ sound we looked at previously. That's how we ended up with words like ***lot***, and ***pot***, and ***rock***, and ***stop*** – all spelled with a letter O, but pronounced with an /ɑ/ sound. And that's how we ended up with /ɑ/ as the so-called 'short O' sound.

Now to be fair, I should note that there is a subtle difference in the pronunciation of this sound in standard American English and standard British English – also known as Received Pronunciation. For most people, the difference is very small, but for people who study accents, it's very important. Generally speaking, Brits pronounce this sound with rounded lips, retaining that roundness that existed in the original /aw/ sound. But Americans don't round their lips. Notice the following differences in pronunciation for the words ***hot***, ***sock*** and ***stop***. First, the standard British pronunciation, then the standard American pronunciation. Notice how the first pronunciation in each sound is more rounded. [CLIP]

I hope you heard the difference. Again, the difference may be subtle or very obvious, depending on your ear. But this is a good example of how small differences help to distinguish accents.

Now, here again, we see a close connection between neighboring sounds. And even today, we still find a close relationship between this /ɔ:/ sound and the adjacent /ɑ:/ sound beneath it. In fact, the relationship is so close that many English accents have merged the two sounds together. This is the phenomenon that linguists call the 'caught-cot merger.' And they call it that because many English speakers pronounce those two words the exact same way. And it's not just those two words. It's almost all words that have that /ɔ:/ sound. They tend to be pronounced with the lower /ɑ:/ sound or with some sound in between. The two sounds have merged in those accents.

This phenomenon is common in many parts of the northern United States and Canada. It can also be found in some other accents – like some accents in Scotland.

So let's listen to a few examples. This feature is especially strong in the upper Midwestern part of the United States. A lot of the voice samples I received from that region featured this merger. So here are a couple of sentences that illustrate how the sounds have merged. One sentence is "I caught Jimmy sitting on a cot in the tent." You'll notice that ***caught*** and ***cot*** are both pronounced as 'cot.' The other sentence is the one we saw earlier, "We bought the lot with the large pecan tree in the backyard." Again, you'll notice that ***bought*** and ***lot*** are pronounced with the same vowel sound as 'bot' and 'lot.'

Let's begin with Nicole from Minnesota: [CLIP]

Now we'll go a little further west. Here's Melanie from Montana: [CLIP]

Again, that's the so-called 'caught-cot merger' where the neighboring /ɑ:/ and /ɔ:/ sounds have merged in certain dialects.

OK, so we've covered the link between the low /ɑ:/ sound and the slightly higher /ɔ:/ sound. Now let's move up to the next highest vowel sound in the back of the mouth – the /o:/ ('oh') sound. This is the so-called 'long O' sound. This is another rounded vowel where the lips are rounded when it's pronounced. Again, all of these back vowels have rounded lips in English.

Here's how the IPA chart website represents that sound: /o:/.

Now in Modern English, words with this sound can be spelled in a variety of ways. We sometimes use a simple letter [O] as in ***gold***, ***gross***, ***stone***, and ***hope***. In other cases, we use the letter combination [OA] as in ***boat***, and ***float***, and ***road***. And sometimes, the sound is spelled with [OW] as in ***blow***, and ***grow*** and ***snow***. It can even be spelled with [OU] as in ***soul***.

Modern words with this sound come from a variety of sources, and they had a variety of sounds in the distant past. Unfortunately, the modern spellings don't really help us to trace those original sounds like they do with some of the other vowels sounds. The spellings in these words have become mixed together over the past few centuries.

I should note that this is another vowel sound that has changed a bit in the Modern English period. It is another vowel that has shifted from a pure vowel to a diphthong. In earlier periods of English, it was pronounced more like /o:/ as a pure simple vowel. But in the 1700s and 1800s, it also started to acquire a little glide at the end. In American English, it tends to be pronounced as /oʊ/ with a little /u:/ sound at the end. So you get /oh-oo/. Again, when it's pronounced very quickly, it can be difficult to hear, but it's there – /oh-oo/.

Interestingly, this diphthong sound has evolved a little bit differently in England in standard British English – also known as Received Pronunciation. There, the sound begins a little more forward in the center of the mouth and then moves to that /u:/ sound. It's a very subtle difference, but let me give you a couple of examples. Here's the word ***home***, first with a standard American accent and then with a British Received Pronunciation accent. [CLIP] Now let's listen to the word ***boat***, again first with a standard American accent and then with British Received Pronunciation. [CLIP]

So I hope you can hear that. It's a subtle difference, but it shows how the language is still evolving and how vowel sounds are never fully settled in English.

I should also note that there are some places in the British Isles where the /o:/ sound is still pronounced more in line with its original pronunciation as pure vowel, but the diphthong is the more common form in the standard English of Britain and America.

Now having discussed the /o:/ sound, we can move up one final step to the next highest vowel, which is actually the highest vowel sound that be pronounced in the back of the mouth. It is the /u:/ sound.

Here's how the IPA chart website renders the sound: /u:/.

Now this sound is generally associated with letter [U]. And we find the letter [U] in the spellings of words like ***rude***, and ***truth***, and ***blue***. But in English, it's just as common to find this sound represented by letter [O] – either a single [O] or a double [O]. That includes words like ***two***, ***do***, ***move***, ***food***, ***boot***, ***moon***, and so on. So what's going on there?

Well, you may be able to guess the answer by now. What we have are really two different sets of words – one that already had an /u:/ sound spelled with a letter [U] and another that had an /o:/ sound spelled with a either a single or double [O]. Remember the /o:/ sound was the sound we just looked at. It's adjacent to the /u:/ sound – just one step down. And during the Great Vowel Shift, those words that had that /o:/ sound shifted up one step to the /u:/ sound. And through that process, /fo:d/ became ***food***, and /mo:n/ became ***moon***, and so on. That's also why those words are spelled with a letter [O], even though they have a sound that's traditionally associated with letter [U]. Again, we'll explore these changes in a little more detail over the next couple of episodes.

Now one other quick note about this sound. So far, I've described it as the /u:/ ('oo') sound, but there is also a slight variation of this sound which is the 'yoo' sound. In fact, that's what we call letter U. Again, 'oo' versus 'yoo.' 'Yoo' has a little 'y' sound at the front. And in fact, the 'long U' sound is actually this 'yoo' sound. Of course, we have that 'yoo' sound in lots of words like ***beauty***, and ***few***, and ***view***, and ***mute***.

To further add to the confusion, there are some words that can be pronounced either way, depending on the speaker and depending on the accent of the speaker. So someone might purchase a ***new*** ('noo') car or a ***new*** ('nyoo') car. And they might listen to ***tunes*** ('toons') on the car radio or ***tunes*** ('tyoons') on the radio. In Britain, you're likely to hear the word D-U-T-Y pronounced as 'dyoo-ty,' whereas in American English, you would likely hear it pronounced as 'doo-dy,' which is actually the same pronunciation used for a slang term for excrement. So when an American says that he or she has a lot of 'doodies' at work, it can sometimes be met with giggles from the listener. But that unintentional pun doesn't really happen if someone from Britain refers to his or her 'dyoo-ties.'.

So why do we have these two slightly different pronunciations of this sound? Well, again, the answer lies in the history of the language. Most of these words that are always or sometimes pronounced with the 'yoo' sound had that 'yoo' sound in early Modern English. Those words had that sound from earlier periods of English or had acquired it through a separate vowel shift around that time. Those words were very often spelled with a letter U – either a single [U] or [EU]. Sometimes [EW] was used since [U]'s and [W]'s were still sometimes interchangeable. That's why most of those words are spelled today with either a [U] as in ***duty***, or an [EU] as in ***feud***, or an [EW] as in ***new*** and ***view***. And it's also why we call the letter [U] 'yoo' and not 'oo.' That was just the common pronunciation at the time. But then in the 1700s, the little 'y' sound started to be dropped in a lot of those words, and it left English with a random mixture of /yoo/ and /oo/ pronunciations among those words. And today, all of those words exist side-by-side with that other group of 'oo' words that I mentioned earlier which are spelled with either a single

or double [O]. Remember that those words shifted up from the /o:/ (‘oh’) vowel sound during the Great Vowel Shift, which is why they have that ‘O’ spelling. So the net result is a mixture of spellings and two slightly different pronunciations, but the spellings do provide some general clues about the original pronunciations of those words. Again, we see this recurring theme of words with different sounds and spellings merging together at some point in the Modern English period. And that has left us with different ways of spellings and representing the same or similar sounds.

Now the ‘oo’ sound and the ‘yoo’ sound are classified as ‘long’ vowel sounds. But letter [U] also has two different ‘short’ sounds as well. The first and more traditional ‘short U’ sound appears to be a literal short version of the long /oo/ sound that we just looked at. It’s the /ʊ/ sound in words like ***put***, ***pull***, ***full***, ***bush***, ***good***, ***look***, and ***wool***. And notice again that these words can be spelled with either a letter [U] or a double [O]. And there are a few other spellings as well. The double [O] is actually the most common spelling for this sound, and most of those words actually represent a shortening of the long ‘oo’ sound in the 1600s. So generally speaking, the words that use the [U] spelling tend to be words that had that ‘short U’ sound before the 1600s when those words were typically spelled with a [U]. And words that have the double [O] spelling tend to be words that acquired that sound in the 1600s or later when the sound shortened from /u:/ to /ʊ/. That’s what happened with words like ***look*** and ***good***. Their history takes them from /lo:k/ to /lu:k/, and then shortened from /lu:k/ to ***look***. And from /go:d/ to /gu:d/ and then shortened from /gu:d/ to ***good***. And that’s why words like that are still spelled with double [O]’s.

Around the same time that the vowel sound was becoming short in those words, some words that already had that sound shifted and acquired a new sound. That was the /ʌ/ sound in words like ***mud***, and ***cup*** and ***strut*** and ***much***. And that’s the other ‘short U’ sound. But this change didn’t really happen in northern England, so even today many of those words are still pronounced the older way in northern England. So whereas someone from the south of England or most of the rest of the English-speaking world would say ***cup***, you might hear people in northern England say ‘coop.’ Again that northern pronunciation is just the original ‘short U’ sound that was preserved there, but changed in other words elsewhere.

So all of that leaves the letter [U] with two ‘long’ sounds – ‘oo’ as in ***soon*** and ‘yoo’ as in ***feud*** – and two separate ‘short’ sounds – /ʊ/ as in ***look*** and /ʌ/ as in ***cup***. That points to a lot of instability in this highest vowel sound pronounced in the back of the mouth.

So now we’ve covered most of the pure vowel sounds used in Modern English. We’ve traveled around the perimeter of the open cavity of the mouth where those vowel sounds are formed. Earlier, I gave you a little sentence to help you remember the order of those sounds and the relationship between them. So let’s extend that mnemonic to include those final few vowels – /ɔ:/, /o:/ and /u:/. Our previous version was ‘Eat Aged Eggs At Ollie’s.’ Now we can extend it to “Eat Aged Eggs At Ollie’s Awesome, Old, Uber.’ (There aren’t a lot of words in English that begin with the ‘oo’ sound.) So that sentence will take you through most of the pure vowel sounds used in English – /i:/ (Eat), /ei/ (Aged), /ɛ/ (Eggs), /æ/ (At), /ɑ:/ (Ollie’s), /ɔ:/ (Awesome), /o:/ (Old), /u:/ (Uber). As we’ll see over the course of the next couple of episodes, that order is kind of important because vowels sounds tend to shift to the sound next to it, so

understanding the relative positions of the sounds helps to see how the vowels shifted during the Great Vowel Shift.

Also, before I conclude, I should mention that there is one other pure vowel sound that is very common in Modern English, but I haven't mentioned it so far. And that's because it's not located around the perimeter of the oral cavity. It's actually located right in the center of the mouth. It the sound /ə/ like the initial sound in ***about*** and ***allow***, and the final sound in ***China*** and ***sofa***. It's a sound that has become increasingly common in English over the centuries. And linguists have a special name for it. They call it the schwa.

I like to think of the schwa as the black hole of English vowel sounds. It sits right there in the middle of the mouth, and it sucks other vowel sounds towards it. In astronomy, a black hole is a massive dense star at the center of a solar system that collapses in on itself, and it has such a strong gravitational pull that it sucks in every thing around it – even light. That's why it's a 'black' hole. Well, the schwa seems to have it own gravitational pull at the center of our mouths. If speakers aren't really precise in the way they pronounce their vowels, it's easy to just use this generic /ə/ sound in the middle of the mouth. That's what happened with most of those specific inflectional endings used in Old English – the endings that were pronounced with sounds like 'ah,' and 'ay,' and 'oo,' and 'as,' and 'um,' and so on. In late Old English and early Middle English, people started to reduce all of those various specific endings down to a somewhat generic /ə/ ending. The gravitational pull of the schwa reduced all those various endings pronounced in various parts of the mouth down one simple /ə/ sound pronounced in the center. That /ə/ sound was spelled with a letter [E]. And since that generic /ə/ didn't really serve any grammatical function anymore, that sound at the end of those words was eventually dropped in Middle English. That left English with a lot of silent [E]'s at the end of many words. That silent [E] is like the faint signal emanating from a collapsed star. It's a remnant of the schwa sound that replaced all of those various inflectional endings. And in fact, the linguistic symbol for this /ə/ sound is an upside lowercase [E].

By the way, the same type of thing happened again in the early Modern English period from the late 1400s through the 1600s. Think about words spelled with [IR] like ***bird***, ***dirt***, ***girl*** and ***firm***. Now think about words spelled with [UR] like ***burn***, ***fur***, ***hurt***, and ***curve***. Same vowel sound. Now think about words spelled with [ER] like ***nerve***, ***serve***, ***her***, and ***verse***. Again, the same vowel sound. Now thing about words spelled with [OR] like ***word***, and ***work*** and ***world***. Once again, the same vowel sound. No matter how you spell it, you end up with the same sound in most standard English dialects. And that vowel sound is the schwa – the /ə/ sound. And that's because all of the various vowel sounds that once existed before the 'R' were reduced down to a generic /ə/ sound in early Modern English. In that environment, the schwa extended its gravitational pull again, and all of the differing pronunciations became /er/. So we need to add this central vowel called schwa to our collection of English vowel sounds.

So we've now covered the primary vowel sounds used in Modern English. There are some other common vowel sounds that I didn't discuss like the /ai/ sound in ***bite***, and the /au/ sound in ***house***, and the /oy/ sound in ***boy***. There was a reason why I didn't discuss those here. None of those are pure vowel sounds. Believe it or not, those are all combinations of vowel sounds. So

they're diphthongs. They're formed by putting together two different vowel sounds that we covered in this episode. Again, we'll look at the formation of those diphthongs over the course of next couple of episodes.

Now I realize that that was a lot of information. But no one ever said this was going to be an easy topic. I wouldn't expect you to remember everything I covered in this episode. The main point was to introduce you to the basic vowel sounds used in English, and to get you thinking about vowels in terms of sounds and not letters. The disconnect between vowel sounds and vowel letters makes this especially challenging in English. But again, that disconnection is largely the result of the sound changes associated with the Great Vowel Shift.

So next time, we'll turn our attention to those specific changes. In order to do this, we're going to break the discussion into two parts. Even though the Great Vowel Shift impacted all of the long vowel sounds in English, there were actually two separate parallel developments. One series of shifts affected the front vowels, and a separate series of shifts affected the back vowels. So I'm going to break the discussion into two parts. Next time, we'll focus on what happened to the front vowels. And then, in the following episode, we'll focus on the back vowels. And hopefully, when we're done, English pronunciation and spelling will make a lot more sense.

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