# THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH PODCAST
# TRANSCRIPTS

# EPISODE 36:
# FINALIZING THE ALPHABET

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**EPISODE 36: FINALIZING THE ALPHABET**

Welcome to the History of English Podcast – a podcast about the history of the English language. This is Episode 36: Finalizing the Alphabet. Last time, we looked at how the first English scribes applied the Roman alphabet to the unique sounds of Old English. And we focused on all of those Germanic sounds in the back of the throat. This time, we'll complete our look at the first English alphabet by exploring some of the other unique sounds of early English. And once again, we'll see how this early alphabet impacted modern English spellings.

Before we begin, let me remind you that the History of the Alphabet audiobook is still available through iTunes, Amazon.com, and CDBaby.com. Just go to the website for the podcast – historyofenglishpodcast.com – for links to that audiobook.

Now as we saw last time, when the first scribes began to write down the English language, they encountered sounds which were new and starting to emerge in very early Old English. But they also encountered sounds that were native Germanic sounds – sounds that weren't necessarily new to English, but they were new to Latin.

One of those sounds was the 'TH' sound (/th/). This sound is still very common in Modern English, and it is a sound that goes all the way back to the original Germanic language, but it wasn't a sound generally found in Latin. So the Roman alphabet didn't have a specific letter for it. And that meant that the monks who were beginning to write down those Old English words had to come up with a way to represent that 'TH' sound. And different monasteries came up with different solutions.

One solution was the letter combination TH which of course we still use today. This letter combination actually originated with the Romans. As I noted, the Romans didn't really have the sound, but the Greeks did. And the Romans borrowed a lot of Greek words. The Greeks actually had a specific letter for the TH sound. That letter was theta. But the Romans didn't have that letter. So in order to represent this Greek 'TH' sound in all of those borrowed Greek words, they came up with the letter combination TH.

And those early Church scribes in Ireland were aware of that technique for representing the TH sound. And since English had that same sound, some of those early scribes used this letter combination as well. And that usage cane be found in some documents written in those northern British monasteries. But for some reason, this TH letter combination never really caught on in Old English beyond a handful of scribes in the north.

Instead of using the TH combination, some of those Northern scribes used the letter D to represent the 'TH' sound. They apparently thought that the letter D was the closest letter in the Roman alphabet to the 'TH' sound. And that makes some sense because some dialects have a tendency to replace the 'TH' sound with the 'D' sound.

For example, in some dialects spoken around New Orleans, it's common to say 'dis, dat and de utter' instead of the 'this, that and the other.' And even though other English dialects may not take it that extreme, it is still very common to hear people say /dis/ instead of *this*, or /dat/ instead *that*, or /dem/ instead of *them*. So the 'D' sound and the 'TH' sounds are related linguistically. And that is apparently why some of those early scribes elected to use the letter D for the 'TH' sound. But that didn't turn out to be a very good option because if you used the letter D for both sounds, then there was no way to distinguish those sounds.

So it appears that at some point very early on in Ireland, some scribes began to modify the letter D to distinguish the two sounds. And this modified D emerged as the more standard way to represent the 'TH' sound in the monasteries in northern Britain.

I noted in the last episode that the letter D in the Irish script resembled the modern lowercase D, except that the stem curved to the left. Well, to represent the 'TH' sound, some of those early monks put a little crossbar thru the stem of the letter. And that became the modified letter D for the 'TH' sound. I should note that this is one theory as to how that unique letter developed. Frankly, the ultimate origin of the letter is a little unclear, but that appears to be the most likely scenario.

The Anglo-Saxons called this unique letter *ðaet* (/that/). In modern usage, the letter has become known as *eth*, but that is actually a very recent name for what is really an ancient letter. Since that is the modern name of the letter, that's the name I'll use as well. This letter eth, which resembled a lowercase D with a line thru the stem, it became the standard way of writing the 'TH' sound in the Irish-influenced monasteries in the north.

But down in the south of Britain, among the Roman-influenced monks and missionaries, another option developed. In the south, it appears that native Anglo-Saxons were quickly being converted to Christianity and many of them were also joining monasteries. So that meant that there were more and more native Anglo-Saxons who were writing and copying documents in Latin. But some of them also must have been familiar with the native Germanic runic symbols because, within those monasteries, scribes began to borrow the Germanic runic symbol for the 'TH' sound. This 'TH' sound was a native Germanic sound, so the runes already had a symbol for it. And whereas the northern monasteries had basically invented a brand new letter for the sound, the Roman-influenced missionaries in the south just decided to borrow one from somewhere else – in this case, the runes.

This particular runic symbol was called *thorn*, and it resembled a modern letter P. I discussed this letter in an earlier episode about the Germanic runes. It looked like an uppercase P if you slide the loop at the top of the stem down to the middle of the stem. So it was kind of like a flag flying at half-staff or half-mast. This was the same letter which later got confused with the letter Y so that the word *the* – spelled 'thorn-E' – was misunderstood by later readers as *ye*.

So early on, there was a regional divide in writing the 'TH' sound. In the north, they used the Irish-derived letter eth, and in the south, they used the runic symbol thorn. But by the 8th century, these two different ways of writing the 'TH' sound had spread throughout the island. There was no longer a regional divide. Both letters were being used at the same time and were being used interchangeably throughout the north and the south. And what's even more interesting is that both letters were often used interchangeably within the same document. A scribe would sometimes spell a word with eth and then later he would spell the same word with thorn.

Once again, all of this changed when the Norman French arrived. The Normans didn't like any letters that weren't Roman. So they got rid of both eth and thorn. And they switched over to that more traditional TH letter combination which the Romans had developed for those Greek words. And that was the point at which all of those English words finally got their modern TH spellings.

Now in addition to the 'TH' sound, the early English scribes had to deal with another native Germanic sound that wasn't found in Latin. And that was the 'W' sound. Latin did have a 'W' sound during the period of classical Latin. And throughout this podcast, I have mentioned on several occasions how the 'W' sound eventually shifted to a 'V' sound. This process occurred in early Italian and French. So those languages developed the 'V' sound where the 'W' sound had once existed in Classical Latin. So this is the process by which the Latin word for 'wine' – *winum* – became *vinum* and later became *vino* in Italian. And that sound change left the Romance languages with relatively few words with the 'W' sound.

Now even though this 'W' sound largely disappeared from the Romance languages, it was still a prominent sound in the Germanic languages. In later centuries, the German language itself would experience this same sound change that Latin had experienced. And many of the 'W' sounds shifted to 'V' sounds within German as well, but that change never occurred in English. So English has retained those original 'W' sounds to this day.

Now as I said, Latin did have a 'W' sound originally, but they never created a specific letter for it. If they had, the early English scribes probably would have used it, but instead, Latin used a single letter for both the 'W' sound and the vowel 'U' sound – /oo/. And that letter was basically the letter 'U' which we still have today.

During the period of Latin, the letter U could be written two ways. If you were writing on stone with a chisel, it had two straight lines like our modern letter V. But if you were writing with a quill, it tended to have a curvy shape like our modern letter U. But it was the same letter at the time, and it represented two sounds – the consonant 'W' sound and the vowel 'U' sound. And it represented both of those sounds because the 'U' sound is closely related to the 'W' sound. When a U appears before another vowel, it tends to make the 'W' sound. So a name like *Louis* – spelled L-O-U-I-S – it is sometimes pronounced as /Lew-wis/. And in fact, we have an alternate spelling of the name which reflects that pronunciation change – L-E-W-I-S. And a word like *accrue* has a 'U' sound at the end, but if we put an 'ING' at the end of the word, it tends to become /accru-wing/ with a 'W' sound.

So this is another one of those sounds which linguists call a semi-vowel because it's a sound which can be produced when a vowel precedes another vowel. So just as an I before another vowel can create a 'Y' sound, a U before another vowel can create a 'W' sound.
So the 'W' sound in Latin was really an extension of the 'U' sound (/oo/).

Now you don't really need to know all of that linguistic terminology. You just need to know that the 'U' sound and the 'W' sound are both very closely related – both linguistically and historically. And that is why the Romans used a single letter for both sounds.

And since this same 'W' sound later evolved into a 'V' sound, that 'V' sound is also related to that original 'U' vowel sound. And initially there was just one letter for all three of those sounds in the Latin alphabet. So that meant that the original U or V-shaped letter was doing a lot of work in Latin.

Over time, scribes and later printers began to distinguish the curvy shape of the letter from the angular shape. They eventually allocated the curvy shape to the vowel sound /oo/ and the angular shape with the straight lines to the consonant sound /v/. And it was only at that point that the two different shapes of the original letter became distinct letters – U and V with each having their own sound. But even though that distinguished the 'V' sound, the U still represented the 'W' sound such that it still existed in French or other Romance languages.

So the later scribes of the late Middle Ages looked for a way to distinguish the vowel 'U' sound from that consonant 'W' sound. They were well aware of the natural tendency of the 'U' sound to become a 'W' sound when it appeared before another vowel. So that tendency led to a spelling innovation. To distinguish the 'U' sound from the 'W' sound, later scribes would simply put two U's together. After all, U plus U equals W. A good example of this is the Latin word for 'horse' – *equus* – spelled 'E-Q-U-U-S.' But that double-U was pronounced /w/ – /eq-wuss/. So double-U became the standard way of writing that sound. Single-U was the vowel sound, and double-U was the consonant sound. And double-U became the single letter 'W.' So that's how the letters U, V and W are connected. They all have similar shapes, and they are all located together in the modern alphabet because they share the same history. They started off as a single letter, and they became three distinct letters over time. And it was all a product of these sound changes and the need to distinguish those specific sounds.

But here's the important part. All of that history that I just described involving the creation of the letters V and W took place much later in our story. It took place well after the period of Old English, and therefore long after the Anglo-Saxons began to write down the English language. So the original Anglo-Saxon scribes didn't have a modern letter V or W to work with. They only had that original letter sometimes written in a curvy U-shape and sometimes written in an angular V-shape. And that single letter was doing all of the work for these various sounds in late Latin and early French.

But English also had all of those sounds. It had a vowel /oo/ sound which was the sound of the vowel U. It also had the 'W' sound which was a sound inherited from the original Germanic language. And it had the 'V' sound, at least in certain situations.

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So the first Old English scribes needed to distinguish these sounds. And they ended up giving each sound a separate letter in Old English. So let's look at the 'W' sound first, then we'll look at the 'V' sound.

With respect to the 'W' sound, we have to keep in mind that it was rapidly disappearing from Late Latin during the period of the seventh century. But as I noted last time, when the Irish monasteries were first established in Ireland in the fifth century, they were working with a slightly earlier version of the Roman alphabet. So the Irish scribes were more familiar with the use of the letter U for the 'W' sound just as the early Romans had used it. So now, more than a century later, many of the Irish-influenced scribes in northern Britain chose to do what the early Romans had done. They used the letter U for the 'W' sound.

But remember that the scribes in the south followed a slightly different tradition. They were a product of that later missionary movement led by Augustine. So when Augustine arrived in Kent at the very end of the sixth century, he brought a slightly later version of the Roman alphabet. And since the 'W' sound had continued to decline in Latin, and since it was being replaced with the 'V' sound, those southern scribes were not as familiar with the 'W' sound, and apparently they were not as inclined as their northern counterparts to use the U for the 'W' sound.

So just as they had done with the 'TH' sound, the southern scribes once again turned to the runic alphabet. Since the 'W' sound was a common sound in the Germanic languages, the runes had a specific symbol for it. So those early scribes in the south adopted that runic letter called 'wynn' for the 'W' sound. The letter wynn was yet anther letter that resembled a modern letter P. In some scripts, it resembled a P, but instead of a circle at the top of the stop, it was more like a sideways 'V'. So if you were writing a P, draw the straight vertical line, but instead of doing a loop at the top, draw a line to the right then back to the left creating a sideways V shape. In other scripts, the letter had much bigger, rounded loop almost like an uppercase D, but it didn't extend all the way to the bottom of the stem like an uppercase D does.

So that left Old English with three different P-shaped letters. They had this P-shaped letter wynn for the 'W' sound. They also the letter P for the 'P' sound. And they had that letter thorn which I discussed earlier for the 'TH' sound. All three letters all had a straight stem with a loop of some sort on the right side. So these three letters can make it challenging to read Old English texts. And apparently the Middle English scribes after the Norman Conquest also found these three letters confusing.

As we know by now, the French-influenced scribes of Middle English hated those Germanic runic symbols. And they also disliked many of the spelling conventions which the Old English scribes had invented. So just as they got rid of that letter thorn for the 'TH' sound, they also got rid of the runic letter wynn for the 'W' sound. They then went back to the letter 'U' – the traditional Latin letter for the 'W' sound. And, as I noted earlier, they eventually began to use two 'U's back-to-back – the double-U – to represent the 'W' sound. But again, Old English didn't have a 'W.' It generally used that runic letter wynn.

So we've covered the 'TH' sound and the 'W' sound. In both cases, the Old English scribes ended up using Germanic runic symbols since Latin didn't have specific letters for those sounds. But what about that 'V' sound which I mentioned earlier?

As we've seen, the 'V' sound eventually evolved out of the 'W' sound in the early Romance languages. That's the process by which *winum* became *vinum* and later *vino*. But that sound change really occurred after Old English was first written down. So the first English scribes didn't have a letter for the 'V' sound. But English did have the 'V' sound. So the first Old English scribes looked for a way to represent that sound.

Rather than creating a brand new letter, those early English scribes chose to use another letter – the letter F. So that may seem a little weird. But let's think about it.

On several occasions, I've talked about how we often have voiced and unvoiced versions of the same sound. And the 'F' and 'V' sounds are another example of this. The 'F' sound (/f/) is the unvoiced version, and the 'V' sound (/v/) is the voiced version. The only difference between those sounds is the fact that the vocal chords are involved in the 'V' sound. And the early English scribes were apparently aware of this basic connection because they concluded that the letter 'F' was best way to represent the 'V' sound.

So the original Old English version of the word *love* – *lufa* (/loov-ah/) – was spelled 'L-U-F-A', but again, the pronunciation was voiced with the 'V' sound.

Now there may be a more basic reason why the Old English scribes used the letter 'F' for the 'V' sound. Not only were the two sounds related linguistically, but the Anglo-Saxons often shifted the pronunciation of the two sounds within the same words. Where the 'F' sound occurred between two vowel sounds, or between two other voiced sounds, the 'F' sound in the middle often became a 'V' sound.

So let's think about that. The 'F' sound is unvoiced, but the vowels are voiced. So when this unvoiced 'F' appeared between vowels which were voiced, or between other voiced sounds, the 'F' in the middle also became voiced. That means that it became a 'V' sound. So the vocal chords stayed engaged, and that naturally shifted that 'F' sound in the middle to the 'V' sound. So I hope that makes sense because it's important for two reasons.

First, it helps to explain why the early English scribes equated the letter 'F' with the 'V' sound, and it explains why they elected to use the letter 'F' for the 'V' sound. The two sounds were closely related the 'F' sound would sometimes switch to a 'V' sound in certain words.

But the second reason why that internal sound change from the 'F' sound to the 'V' sound is so important is because we still have lots of those words in Modern English.

Think about a word like *wife*. In Old English, the word was spelled W-I-F, and it was pronounced /weef/ with an 'F' sound at the end. But when the word was made plural, the plural version was spelled 'W-I-F-A-S.' So that meant the unvoiced F was now located between two

voiced sounds. Again 'W-I-F-A-S.' So that meant the F also became voiced. So it switched from an 'F' sound to a 'V' sound. So *wif* (/weef/) became *wifas* (/wee-vas/). And we still have that today as *wife* and *wives*. The 'F' still switches to a 'V' sound.

This also happens with words like *knife* and *knives*. *Thief* and *thieves*. *Wolf* and *wolves*. *Elf* and *elves*. *Leaf* and *leaves*. *Life* and *lives*. *Shelf* and *shelves*. And there are a lot more of those in English. So when words like this became plural in Old English, the unvoiced F in that environment became voiced since it was now surrounded by voiced sounds on each side. So that is a fancy linguistic way of saying that the 'F' sound switched to 'V' sound in those plural versions because that plural ending led to a natural sound change. And that's why we still have those pronunciation and spelling changes in Modern English.

So by now, you can see why the early English scribes used the letter F for both the 'F' and the 'V' sounds. Remember there was no V in Old English. So all of those words were spelled with an F, even where the sound was 'V'.

So when the Norman French got hold of those words after 1066, they decided to fix those spellings. By that point, during the period of Middle English, the 'V' sound had fully developed within French. And the letter V had evolved as the specific way of representing the 'V' sound (/v/). So all of those Old English words got new spellings with a 'V' instead of an 'F'.

Actually, I should say that 'most' of those Old English words got new spellings. A few words slipped thru the cracks in their original form with an F still representing the 'V' sound. Some linguists think that a modern word like *of* (O-F), it is one of these stragglers. The word was spelled the same way in Old English – O-F, but its current pronunciation may be the same as it was in Old English. And if so, it's one of those words which retains the F for the 'V' sound.

By the way, in the same way that the F was used for both the 'F' and 'V' sounds in Old English, the letter S was used in a very similar way. S (or /s/) is an unvoiced sound. The voiced version of the sound is the 'Z' sound (/z/). And just like with F, the Anglo-Saxons used the letter S for both sounds. And the S was pronounced as 'Z' is the same situations where 'F' was pronounced as 'V' – in other words when it was found between two voiced sounds. That means that the Old English scribes didn't use the letter Z. They just used the S and let the context dictate the pronunciation.

So we've seen how the early scribes dealt with the consonant sounds of English, but what about the vowel sounds? Well, for the most part, they just applied the Roman vowel letters to the English vowel sounds. So this was a pretty straight-forward application.

However, we have to keep in mind that the vowel sounds of English have changed significantly over time. So when we look back at Old English words, we have to keep in mind the original sounds of those vowel letters – not the modern sounds.

So the letter A in Latin represented the /ah/ sound. That is still the general pronunciation of the letter A in much of continental Europe.

So that means that the letter A represented the /ah/ sound in Old English, not the /ay/ sound which we use today.  Now of course, we still have words where the letter A represents the /ah/ sound.  Words like *father* and *what* and *car*.  Most of those words are either words which have survived from the time of Middle English with their original vowel sound in tact, or they're words which have been borrowed in recent centuries from other languages where the vowel sound never changed.   So for example, we have words like *taco* from Spanish, *pizza* from Italian, *sofa* from Turkish, *fiancé* and *corsage* from French.  And of course, there are many, many more of those words – probably thousands.   So English still has that original A sound of /ah/ in some words.

And some English dialects tend to use that original A sound more than others.  It is a much more prominent feature of British dialects than American dialects.  So when Americans attempt to effect a British accent, we tend to emphasize the /ah/ sound. And that's what converts a word like /to-may-to/ into /to-mah-to/.

But the important point here is that the letter A was never used for the /ay/ sound in Old English. As we'll see that was reserved for the letter E.

So in Modern English, the letter A sometimes has the /ah/ sound which is the original sound of the letter.  And it sometimes has the /ay/ sound which is a much more recent development.  But we also have the /ae/ sound like in *hat* and *bat* and *slap*.  That sound also existed in Old English, but the original Old English scribes didn't like to use a vowel letter for more than one vowel sound. So they actually used a separate letter for the /ae/ sound.  The letter was called 'ash.'

You may have seen this letter before. It is a letter that looks like an A and an E pushed together into a single letter.  This was actually a letter which was sometimes used by Latin scribes. So the early Old English scribes also decided to use it.  Even though the letter itself had it origins in the Roman alphabet, the name of the letter came from the Germanic runes.  The runic alphabet had a symbol for the 'A' sound called 'ash.' So the Old English scribes applied that name to this new letter.  Again, this was the /ae/ sound, and the letter A represented the /ah/ sound.

But what about the modern 'ay' sound. Well, in Latin and Old English, that sound was represented by the letter E.  So again, if you've studied other European languages – especially Romance languages – that will seem very familiar to you.  And in fact, since English has borrowed a lot of words from those languages, we have words in modern English where the letter E still has that original /ay/ sound.  So for example, words like *café* and *latte*.  And in combination with either I or Y, we have words like *obey* and *survey* and even the word *eight*. But it is actually pretty rare to find the letter E by itself representing the /ay/ sound in Modern English. And when we do find it, it tends to be a word borrowed from another language.  And it tends to be a word borrowed in the Modern English era - in other words, since the vowels shifted around in the 1500s.

So if the letter E represented the /ay/ sound in Old English, what letter represented the /ee/ sound? Well, that was the next vowel letter - I.  And I mentioned that briefly in the last episode.

And I noted that a word like *king* still has that original 'I' sound. Other examples in Modern English include *bring*, *ring*, *thing*, *think*, *sink*, and so on. So that was the original sound of I.

The letter O represented the /oh/ sound, but Modern English actually has several sounds for the letter 'O.' We have the /ah/ sound of *hot*, *not*, *rock* or *stop*. We have the sound found in words like *long* and *gone*. We have the /oo/ sound of *do* or *room* or *move*. We have the sound found in words like *look* and *book* and *foot*. And sometimes the letter 'O' has the /oh/ sound – what we call the 'long O' today. We have it in words like *go* and *show* and *old* and *open*. Well, that /oh/ sound was the original sound of the letter 'O' in Old English. As you can tell, that letter has acquired a lot of different pronunciations over the centuries. And that is yet another reason why Modern English spellings are so complicated.

The letter 'U' also had a specific pronunciation in Old English. It was the /oo/ sound. We have that sound today in words like *rude*, *prude*, *June* and *attitude*.

And last time, I noted that the letter Y also had a distinct vowel in Old English. It was the /ü/ sound. We have a few words in Modern English which have a very similar sound – words like *use*, *tune*, *music* and *cute*. All of those words today use the letter U. But that type of sound would have been represented by the letter Y in Old English.

I should also note that Old English did have long and short vowels, but they were literally long or short. Unlike today where the sounds of the long and short vowels are actually different phonemes, in Old English the long and short versions were the same sound or phoneme, the long version was just pronounced a little longer. And the short version was pronounced shorter.

Now the point of going through all of those original vowel sounds was to emphasize how simple vowel spellings were in Old English compared to the much more complicated way of spelling vowels in Modern English. And a major reason why vowel spellings are so variable today is partly because the vowel sounds have changed over the years, And it's also partly because English has borrowed so many words from other languages where the spellings were different.

But even when we look solely at Old English words where the vowel sounds have changed over the centuries, they didn't always change uniformly. The sounds changed in some words, but not in others. And sometimes the vowels sounds changed in some dialects, but not in other dialects. So today, there is a great deal of variation in the pronunciation of English vowels, and we have lots of different spellings to represent those various vowel sounds.

I thought it might be interesting to get a sense of how much the vowel sounds have changed since the time of Old English. So let me read a couple of sentences in Modern English, and then I'm going to read them again with the Old English vowels. Again, these are Modern English sentences – not Old English.

So in Modern English, we have a sentence like: "He had fun hitting the ball and playing the game." But if we pronounce that sentence with the Old English vowels, it would read like this: /hay hahd foon heeting they ball ahnd plah-ying they gah-meh/.

Or we might have this sentence: "She ran out of time on her way to the finish line." With the Old English vowels, it would read: /Shay rahn oot of tee-meh own hair why to thay fee-neesh lee-ne/.

So all I did there was switch the vowels back to the way they sounded in Old English. And you can see that that simple change has a huge impact on the way English is pronounced.

As I have noted from time to time in the podcast, the biggest change in the English vowel sounds occurred at the end of the Middle English period – around the year 1500. And that change was so great that it marks the change from Middle English to Modern English. But of course, we'll explore the later changes in English vowels when we get to the periods of Middle English and Modern English.

So let me make a few final notes about the original English alphabet before I conclude.

When the first Old English scribes adapted the Roman alphabet to English, there were only 23 total letters in the Roman alphabet. The letters J and W didn't exist yet, and U and V were considered one letter at the time, just written two different ways. So that left the Roman alphabet with 23 letters.

The Old English scribes also didn't generally use the letters Q, X or Z. Since the letter Q is basically another letter for the 'K' sound, the Old English scribes just let the letter C do all of the work for that sound. And they didn't generally bother with the letter Q at all. The sound of X is really just a 'KS' sound. So we don't really need the letter X. We can just use the KS letter combination or CS combination to represent that sound, and that's what the Old English scribes did as well. And even though the letter X did start to make a comeback in Middle English, it is still a rarely used letter in Modern English.

The letter Z is also rarely found in Old English writings. As I noted, the 'Z' sound was seen as a variation of the 'S' sound, so the letter S was typically used for that sound.

So if we consider the fact that the Latin alphabet only had 23 letters at the time, and Old English didn't really use 3 of those letters, that meant the Anglo-Saxons used 20 Latin letters.

They then added the two Old English letters for the 'TH' sound - thorn and eth. And they added that runic letter for the 'W' sound – wynn. And they added that vowel letter ash which was the short 'A' sound in a word like *hat*. So that brings the grand total of Old English letters to 24. 20 Roman letters and 4 Old English letters.

And by the way, linguists have estimated that there were approximately 37 specific sounds or phonemes in Old English. But the Old English scribes generally used letter combinations to represent the other dozen or so phonemes that weren't represented by the 24 Old English letters.

By the way, in comparison, Modern English has about 44 specific phonemes with some dialects having fewer. So Old English had seven fewer phonemes than Modern English. And that just

reflects how much English has grown over the centuries. Not only has it added lots of new words, it has actually added new sounds which didn't exist in Old English.

Let me conclude this episode by making a few comments about punctuation in Old English. First of all, sometimes there was little or no punctuation at all. And when it did exist, it was often inconsistent. So, for example, a dot was sometimes used to indicate a pause in a sentence, but it wasn't a modern period or comma. It didn't necessarily represent the end of a sentence or thought. It just represented a pause in reading. Sometimes, it could appear in the middle of a sentence. And instead of being placed at the bottom of the line like a modern period, it was generally placed above the line so it floated in mid-air above the line.

Also, just like today, the word *and* was a very common word, so the Anglo-Saxon scribes looked for a quick way to write it. Today we have the ampersand which is sometimes used for the word *and*. The ampersand symbol has its origins in classical Latin, but Latin actually had two different short-hand ways of writing the word for *and*, which was *et* in Latin. One way was a shorthand symbol that looked like a modern number 7. They called it *et* because it represented the word *et* or 'and' in Latin. This was the symbol which the Irish monasteries generally used, so that was the version which passed into Old English. And most Old English manuscripts use this symbol for the word *and* which again resembled a modern number 7.

The other shorthand way of representing the word *and* in Latin was the ampersand, which we still have today. And again, this is yet another example of the Norman French scribes replacing the Irish-derived symbols in Old English which the French symbols which the Normans were more accustomed to using. The ampersand basically replaced that Old English symbol which looked like the number 7.

The ampersand began as a simple spelling of the word *et*, which again meant 'and' in Latin. So it was a combination of the letters E and T. But in the flowing handwritten scripts of the early Middle Ages, the shape evolved into the curvy shape that we have today. By the way, we have that word *et* in the term *et cetera* and the abbreviation *etc. Et cetera* literally means 'and the rest.'

Now even though we call that symbol for 'and' an *ampersand* today, that name *ampersand* is a relatively recent name for the symbol. In fact, it's as recent as the 1800s. Since the English word for 'and' is *and*, the symbol was usually just called *and* for the same reason it was just called *et* in Latin.

So how did it get the name *ampersand*? Well, in order to understand where the name came from, you have to understand two things about the English alphabet in the 1700s and 1800s – especially in early American schools. First, it was very common in schools to add this particular symbol for 'and' to the very end of the alphabet. So after the letter Z was this symbol for the word *and*.

And the other thing you need to know is that when a symbol or letter could also be used for a word – like the letter A or the letter I – it was common to refer to the letter or symbol with the Latin term 'per se' meaning 'by itself' or 'standing alone.'

So the letter A could also represent the word *A*, and the letter I could also represent the word *I*. So if you were just referring to the letter A as the letter, you would called it 'per se A' meaning the letter A by itself – not representing the word *A*. And the same thing for I. When you were just referring to the letter I, you might call it 'per se I' meaning just the letter I – not the word *I*. And the same thing was done for the symbol for *and*. When you were referring just to this symbol, you would call it 'per se and' meaning the symbol for *and* by itself, but not the word *and*.

And remember that this symbol for *and* – the 'per se and' – was often added after the letter Z in the alphabet. So when school children recited the alphabet, they would conclude by saying, "X, Y Z and per se and." Over time, that ending phrase "and per se and" was slurred together, and it became *ampersand*. And so today we just call that symbol *ampersand*, but that name literally means 'only the symbol and' – not the word *and*.

And one final note, I mentioned that the Old English scribes used an alternative symbol for *and* which looked like a number 7. So you may be wondering if that symbol ever got confused with the number 7. And the answer is 'no' for a very simple reason. The Anglo-Saxons didn't use the modern Arabic numerals which we use today. Being influenced by Rome, they used Roman numerals. So 7 was written VII. The Arabic numerals didn't arrive until much later.

So that gives you an overview of the Old English alphabet. And the more you know about that alphabet, the easier it is to follow the changes which led to the modern alphabet which we use today. It helps us to see how some of the strange spellings which we have in Modern English evolved from a system that was once much more orderly and logical than the system which we use now.

So that concludes most of what you need to know about that original alphabet. We'll look at the English alphabet again when we get to Middle English because as I've already noted, the Middle English scribes made lots of changes which we still live with today.

Next time, I'm going to move the story of English forward. The past few episode have focused on events which were taking place early in the seventh century. In the next episode, I'm going to return to the history of the Anglo-Saxons, and I'm going to explore what happened in the decades following the death of King Aethelbert of Kent. These events will actually lead us to the next major landmark in the history of English – the first poem written in the English language. So next time, we'll explore those events, and we'll examine that first Old English poem.

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