

**THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH PODCAST  
TRANSCRIPTS**

**EPISODE 57:  
THE WESSEX LITERARY REVIVAL**

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## EPISODE 57: THE WESSEX LITERARY REVIVAL

Welcome to the History of English Podcast – a podcast about the history of the English language. This is Episode 57: The Wessex Literary Revival. In this episode, we're going to move the story of English forward to the second half of the tenth century. With the defeat of the Vikings in York, the Anglo-Saxons were now permanently unified. And that unification was accompanied by a brief lull in the Viking invasions. That meant there was an extended period of peace and prosperity. It also led to a revival of the monasteries. And that monastic revival led to the last great period of Old English literature. So this time, we will explore this massive literary revival.

But before we begin, let me remind you that the website for the podcast is [historyofenglishpodcast.com](http://historyofenglishpodcast.com). And you can always reach me at [kevin@historyofenglishpodcast.com](mailto:kevin@historyofenglishpodcast.com). Also, I want to give you a quick update on the transcripts for the old episodes. Originally, I planned to release those as basic PDF files. But several listeners suggested a proper ebook format which would be available on the Kindle and iPad. So that's what I'm working on. I am going to bundle the transcripts together and make them available on those platforms. And that's why it's taking it little longer than I had anticipated. I will be sure to make an announcement when they're ready for those of you have required a written version of the material in the podcast.

So with that piece of business out of the way, let's turn to this episode. And let's return to the actual history on the ground in England in mid-900s. Before we digressed into the history of Old English grammar, we were looking at the history of the Vikings in early England. And when we last left the story, the Vikings had finally been defeated in the north, so England was permanently unified under Wessex rule. So now we're going to move the story forward to see what happened after that Viking defeat. But we're not completely finished with the Vikings yet. They'll soon return, and they will be a key part of the story in the lead-up to the Norman Conquest. And with respect to the English language itself, we'll continue to see some Scandinavian influences on the language.

In fact, most of the Scandinavian influence won't actually appear in writing until the Middle English period. As I've noted before, relatively few documents were produced in the north of England after the Vikings arrived. Most of the texts during the late Anglo-Saxon period were written down in Wessex in the local West Saxon dialect. And that dialect was largely unaffected by the Viking settlements in the north and east. So Old English really became synonymous with the dialect of Wessex, and the Viking influence on the language wouldn't really be seen in writing until that dialect lost favor. But until that happened, that West Saxon dialect dominated Old English literature. So it is very important to the history of English. And this episode is really the story of that dialect.

During the 900s, a series of events took place which led to the use of that dialect on an unprecedented scale. A literary revival was about to occur. And it really began with a young cleric living in Wessex named Dunstan – later known to history as St. Dunstan. And in many ways, the rise of the West Saxon dialect is directly tied to the rise of Dunstan as a religious and political figure in tenth century England.

Before we look at Dunstan's life, let's quickly review the state of literacy and writing in Anglo-Saxon England. As we saw in earlier episodes, the Vikings had wreaked havoc on the churches and monasteries. In fact, the monasteries were early targets of the Vikings. They were wealthy, easily accessible, and poorly defended. By the time of King Alfred, most of the monasteries had either been destroyed or fallen into decay. Most of the land which had been granted to monasteries in earlier centuries had been re-appropriated by the kings and the nobles. Land was more important to pay off soldiers and nobles who would join the fight against the Vikings. But that further weakened the monasteries. And since the monasteries were the primary source of literacy and education, their decline also meant the decline of writing and education. King Alfred lamented that he couldn't find a teacher as a child and barely anyone was left in England who could speak proper Latin.

After Alfred defeated the Danes and secured Wessex, he tried to reverse that process. He directed the translation of some important Latin texts into English. A few churches were restored, and some new monasteries were constructed. But the improvement was incremental.

Even when monasteries were built – or re-built – that didn't really solve the literacy problem. Ultimately, it was just brick and mortar – or wood and thatch. In such troubled and uncertain times, the monasteries provided a degree of comfort and security. So lots of people were attracted to them. And many of them weren't motivated by spiritual concerns – or literary concerns. Feasting and drinking became a regular activity in many monasteries. Discipline declined. Services were neglected. Secular priests became common. Many priests were actually married and had children. They often lived in separate houses with their own families. Monastic dress was abandoned. And monastic schools were neglected. And so, literacy and learning remained limited, and in many places, it was virtually non-existent.

This was the situation which existed in the early 900s in the years which followed Alfred's death. During that period, a child named Dunstan was born to a noble family in Wessex. He grew up near Glastonbury in southwestern England. Glastonbury had once been home to a great abbey. But like most abbeys, it had fallen victim to the Viking invaders. Despite the damage, a group of Irish monks continued to live there in the ruins of the old abbey. And as a young man, Dunstan joined them, and he learned from them. He dreamed of a day when the abbey would be re-built. And even though he was a young monk living in a dilapidated abbey, he had a couple of things going for him. As I noted, he was born the son of a Wessex noble. And his uncle was actually the archbishop of Canterbury. And those connections enabled Dunstan to become a member of the court of Aethelstan – Alfred's grandson and the first king of all of the Anglo-Saxons. Dunstan actually became very close to the king.

But Aethelstan died in 939 when Dunstan was about 30 years old. As we saw in earlier episodes, Aethelstan was succeeded by his two younger half-brothers, Edmund and Eadred. Dunstan remained a part of the Wessex royal court when the first brother Edmund became king. But he and Dunstan had a very rocky relationship. In fact, Edmund nearly exiled Dunstan. But around the same time, Edmund had a near fatal accident while hunting. His horse almost threw him over a cliff. But he survived, and he was so shaken by the near-death experience, that he re-considered the way he had treated Dunstan.

To make amends, Edmund told Dunstan that he could stay, and Edmund actually appointed him as the Abbot of that Abbey in Glastonbury in 944. And that was very significant because Edmund wanted to re-establish that monastery. As I noted, Dunstan had studied there as a young man, and he dreamed of re-building the abbey. So once he was made abbot, Dunstan set about restoring the decayed buildings. But he didn't just repair the old buildings. He did something else which would prove to be very important. He decided to clean up the structure of the monastery as well. And he did that by imposing the strict rules of the Benedictine Order. And this really marks the beginning of so-called 'Benedictine Reforms' in England.

Benedict was a Roman who had lived several centuries before. He had been shocked by the state of the Church in Rome, so he had settled in the country to live the life of a hermit. He was soon joined by other monks and they built a monastery. And Benedict had composed a set of strict rules for the monastery which dictated how the monks should dress, eat, pray, study and worship. It also included three specific vows. The monks vowed never to marry, so no more spouses and children. They also took a vow of poverty. And they took a vow of obedience. So these were very strict rules. But over time, this type of monastery became very popular, and they spread across Europe. The Benedictine Rule gradually emerged as the standard monastic rule in western Europe.

Meanwhile, back in England, Dunstan was rebuilding and reforming that abbey at Glastonbury. He had visited some of those Benedictine monasteries on the continent, so he decided to use them as a model for Glastonbury.

While the work at Glastonbury was proceeding, King Edmund died, and the other brother Eadred became king. And Eadred actually brought Dunstan even closer into his circle of advisors. In fact, he appointed Dunstan as his chief advisor. And this is another very notable event. Up to this point, most of the kings closest advisors were warriors or nobles. But Eadred relied upon the advice of Dunstan who was a cleric. In fact, Dunstan may have been the first priest to serve as the primary advisor to an English king. The term didn't exist yet, but Dunstan was sort of an early version of what would become known as 'prime minister.' He was the top advisor. And that unique position allowed him to emerge as a central figure in English politics and religion over the next generation.

During Eadred's decade as king, Dunstan continued to emphasize the need for Benedictine Reforms in the monasteries. One of his students at Glastonbury was a young priest named Aethelwold. Aethelwold was also very close to the royal court. And he wanted to travel to the continent to study the Benedictine Rule more intensely there. But King Eadred considered Aethelwold far too important and too valuable to be allowed to leave England. So in order to entice him to stay, the king gave him an old monastery at Abingdon in the Thames Valley west of London. Like most of the monasteries, the Abingdon monastery had become neglected. And its land had reverted to the king. So the king gave the monastery to Aethelwold, and Aethelwold established a second Benedictine monastery there. Like Dunstan, Aethelwold will also emerge as a very important figure in our story. He was one of the primary figures behind the establishment of that West Saxon writing standard used for most Old English texts.

But in the year 955, King Eadred died. Eadred had succeeded his two older brothers. And with Eadred's death, that generation of rulers came to an end. The Wessex monarchy now moved down to the next generation. The last king Eadred had no children, but his older brother Edmund had a couple of sons, Edwy and Edgar. And they were destined to continue the line of the so-called 'boy kings.'

The older brother Edwy succeeded his uncle Eadred. Edwy was only 14 or 15 years old. And he proved to be a major disappointment. Being so young, he ruled with the help of Dunstan who continued his role as royal advisor.

As we've seen, Dunstan had been a very close advisor to the prior king Eadred. And Eadred apparently appreciated that advice. But the new king Edwy didn't really care for Dunstan's input at all. And Dunstan probably didn't show the young king the proper respect either. So we have an older, strict cleric and a young, unruly teenage king. And they mixed like oil and water. According to one legendary story, the fallout between the young king and his older advisor began with the young king's coronation. After the coronation, there was large banquet. During the banquet, the young king disappeared. And Dunstan went looking for him. Dunstan found him in bed with a young woman and the woman's mother. The crown was lying on floor beside the bed. Now we don't know exactly what happened next, but it is assumed that Dunstan started to rail against the boy king for his behavior. And the reason why that is assumed is because young King Edwy soon sent Dunstan packing.

But without Dunstan's counsel, everything started to fall apart for young Edwy. Dunstan's exile alienated the other church leaders. And then Edwy alienated the local officials in Mercia and Northumbria as well. Two years after he became king, the Mercians and Northumbrians rebelled and drove Edwy out of those northern regions. They then elected Edwy's younger brother Edgar to be their king. A civil war between the two brothers seemed inevitable, but it was averted when Edwy died a short time later. The exact cause of Edwy's death is unknown, but it is considered to be very suspicious given the numerous enemies which he had acquired. With Edwy's death, his younger brother Edgar became king of all of England. And he continued the line of boy kings. He was only 16 years old.

Despite his youth, Edgar proved to be a great king. In fact, the period of his rule is generally considered the high-point of Anglo-Saxon England. It was a period of peace and great prosperity. The nation was well administered. And England's culture was once again on the rise. Later generations looked back to this period as a Golden Age. And this is where the story of Dunstan and the boy kings intersects with the story of English because that great cultural renaissance in the mid-900s produced most of the surviving Old English literature. And King Edgar actually contributed to that renaissance.

Shortly after he became king, Edgar recalled Dunstan from exile. And he made Dunstan the Archbishop of Canterbury. As a child, Edgar had been educated under the supervision of that other priest I mentioned earlier, Aethelwold. And now Aethelwold was also given a promotion. He was made bishop of Winchester, which was the de facto capital of Wessex near the southern coast of England.

Together, Dunstan and Aethelwold had the full support of the new king. Edgar was their patron and he strongly encouraged their reforms and the expansion of the monasteries. Dunstan also continued to be a close advisor to the king. It is very likely that he dictated most of the policies of Edgar's reign. In fact, this was a period in which distinctions between church and state started to become blurred. In Dunstan's mind, church and state were one and the same. And the king was the head of both. So he saw no conflict between his role as Archbishop of Canterbury and his role as the king's primary advisor.

So with the full support of the King, Dunstan and Aethelwold moved forward with the reform and expansion of the monasteries along the Benedictine lines. They had previously established Benedictine monasteries in Glastonbury and Abingdon. Now they had the opportunity to direct and oversee a large-scale Benedictine Reform throughout the entire country. They were joined in this movement by a third cleric named Oswald who became the Archbishop of York in the north. But Dunstan was really the elder statesman of the group.

At Dunstan's direction, the monastic infrastructure was re-built. New monasteries were constructed. Some churches were even converted into monasteries. Lands which had reverted to the king during the period of the Viking invasions were now granted to build new monasteries. So monastic wealth and power started to increase significantly.

Over the next 40 years, around fifty monasteries were established or re-established. It should be noted that most of those new monasteries were located in the south and in the Midlands. Relatively few were actually established in the north. And that was partly because the Wessex kings and nobles didn't really own land in the north. So they didn't have land which they could donate to build churches or monasteries there.

The key to all of this wasn't just the fact that new monasteries were being built. It also had to do with the nature of those new monasteries. They were built or reformed along the strict Benedictine model. The old secular priests were pushed out in favor of abbots and monks who followed the new rules. For example, when Aethelwold was brought to Winchester, he brought his monks with him from Abingdon. And those new monks replaced the old clergy. So this was the model going forward.

The new monks pledged that Benedictine vow of chastity, obedience and poverty. And a strict daily routine was imposed. Everything was regulated. Every day was a regular routine of church services and communal prayers, with intervening periods of manual work and reading. There were also periods of silence during the day when the monks weren't allowed to speak at all. And that meant they had to communicate with hand signals and sign language. They even kept manuals which outlined the proper hand signals to use during those periods of silence. Interestingly, one such text from around this time period survives in the British Library in London. It was actually part of Robert Cotton's library. You might remember that Cotton was the book collector who also owned the Beowulf manuscript. After he died, his library was moved to a house called the Ashburnham House. And there was a fire in that building, so 'Ashburnham' was an appropriate name for the house. Several old manuscripts were lost in that fire, but most

of the books were saved including the Beowulf manuscript and this particular manuscript with the hand signals.

Now I should note that the word *signal*, as well as the closely related word *sign*, are both from Latin. And they came from the same root word. And they both came in after the Norman Conquest. Before that, in Old English, the native Anglo-Saxon word was *tacen*. That word actually survives as the modern word *token*. And *token* still carries that original sense of ‘sign’ when we use the phrase ‘a token of my appreciation.’ It means a sign or evidence of my appreciation. That sense also survives in the phrase ‘a token gesture,’ which means ‘a symbolic gesture.’ So in this particular Old English manual, the hand signs or signals are referred to as *tacen*.

According to the manual, if you were a monk eating a meal, and you wanted some honey, you would place your finger on your tongue. In Modern English, the passage reads: ‘Honey’s token is that you set your finger on your tongue.’ In the original Old English, it reads: “Huniges tacen is þæt þu sette þinne finger on þine tungan.”

If you didn’t want to make a mess, you might need a napkin. And the manual has the specific signal for requesting a napkin. Once again, *napkin* is a French word which came in with the Normans. A lot of words having to do with cooking and eating come from French. The French word was *naperon*. It meant a towel, cloth, or a small table cloth. *Naperon* became *napkin*, but it also produced another word – *apron*. And the history here is basically the same as the word *adder* for ‘snake,’ which we saw in an earlier episode. You might remember that *adder* was originally *nadder*, so you had ‘a nadder.’ But people became confused and thought it was ‘an adder.’ They shifted the ‘N’ forward to the article, and that left ‘adder’ without its ‘N’. Well, the same thing happened here. *Naperon* was ‘a naperon. But people thought it was ‘an aperon.’ They moved that forward ‘N’ to the article, and *apron* was born. So *apron* and *napkin* are cognate. They both came from the same French word which meant ‘a towel or cloth.’

But in Old English, the word for napkin was *wapan* from the same word which gives us *wipe*. So a ‘wiping cloth’ was a *wapan*. They also sometimes simply called it a *sceat*, which is the original version of the word *sheet*. And for monks in the monastery, there was a specific signal for that *wapan* or *sceat*.

In Modern English, the instruction reads, ‘If you want to have a sheet or a napkin, then place your two hands over your lap and spread them as if you were stretching out a sheet.’ In the original Old English it reads: “Gyf þu sceat habben wille oððe wapan, þonne sete þu þine twa handa ofer þinum bearme and tobræd hi swilce sceat astrecc.”

The sign language manual even includes a hand signal for a fish. I should note that *fish* is an Old English word. But in Old English, the word sometimes had a more general sense of any creature that lives in the water. And that’s why we still have terms like *shellfish*, *starfish*, *jellyfish*, and *crayfish* – or *crawfish*. So those names still use that term *fish* in the original Old English sense of the term as a water or marine animal.

So if you were a monk, and you wanted to make a hand signal for a fish, you just waved your hand like a fish swimming through the water.

In Modern English, the text reads, ‘When you want to have fish, then wave your hand in the way a fish does its tail when it swims.’ And here is the same passage in the original Old English: “þonne þu fisc habban wylle þonne wege þu þyne hand þam gemete þe he deþ his tægl þonne he swymð.” [SOURCE: ‘Complete Old English,’ Mark Atherton, p. 195-6.)

So within those Benedictine monasteries, certain periods when silence were required. And as I noted earlier, the daily routine was highly regulated. Specific times were set aside for prayer and meals. And specific times were set aside for manual labor. For literate monks, that work included teaching and copying texts in the scriptorium. And some skilled monks even composed new works. And as more and more of these monasteries were established, more and more manuscripts were copied and produced. And as far as the history of the English is concerned, this was an extremely important development.

For the first time, a large body of English literature was being written down and preserved. Some of the manuscripts were service books for daily use in the chapel, and others were intended for the monastic school and library. The old art of illumination was also revived.

Now I realize that much of this sounds like *deja vu*. We looked at the importance of monasteries in earlier episodes, especially during the period of the Northumbrian Renaissance. But that was in the 600s and 700s. So that was over a couple of centuries earlier. And that literary period declined when the Vikings invaded and when scholars moved to Charlemagne’s Frankish court. But most of the literature composed during that earlier period had been composed in Latin. Scribes would sometimes write English translations in the margins, but relatively little English literature survives from that earlier period. We’ve actually explored most of the important English texts and inscriptions from that period in earlier episodes of the podcast. But this new literary renaissance was different. English now took a place beside Latin in England. Works in both languages were copied and preserved. And education was taught in both languages. So these developments had two consequences for the English language. First, it meant a new group of Latin words were entering the English vocabulary. And secondly, it meant that lots of manuscripts were being preserved in Old English.

Let’s look at the Latin influence first. And let’s keep in mind that Latin was still the dominant language of western Europe. It was still the official language of the Church. And throughout the region, it was the language of learning and literature. And as we’ve seen before, a few Latin words had entered English during that earlier period before the Vikings arrived. But now, with the Benedictine Reforms and the literary revival which followed, a new round of Latin words came in.

As we might expect, a lot of those new Latin words related to the Church. They included words like *antichrist*, *apostle*, *cloister*, *creed*, *demon*, *dirge*, *idol*, *prime*, *prophet*, *sabbath*, and *synagogue*.



It also included the word *clergy*. The related word *cleric* came in a bit later. And the word *clerk* also came from the same Latin root. But *clergy* was the earliest borrowing. Before that word came in, Old English used a native expression – “þæt gastlice folc” – which was literally ‘the ghostly folk or spiritual folk.’ You might remember that *gast* was an early version of *ghost*, and it meant ‘spirit’ in Old English. So now, the English ‘ghostly folk’ became the Latin ‘clergy.’

Other Latin words which had an association with the Church include *serve* and *service*. Today we tend to think of *service* as the act of serving or assisting someone. But the original sense of the word was a ‘church service.’ So *serve* and *service* both came in.

As I noted, the Benedictine Reforms led to a great literary revival, so not surprisingly, a lot of Latin literary terms also came into English. They included words like *accent*, *paper* and *title*. The word *brief* was also borrowed from Latin originally as verb, as in ‘to brief someone.’ But when those instructions were written down, it became a noun, as in a brief or summary.

And for our purposes, it is important to note that the word *history* entered English after the Benedictine Reforms. Of course, it was originally a Greek word. And it may seem obvious, but *history* and *story* share the same Latin root. *History* came first, and just as today, it meant a narrative about the past. But over time, the word *story* became a distinct word which referred to any kind of narrative. So *story* developed a more general sense, while *history* retains its original meaning.

And the Latin word *term* also entered English during this period. I should actually say that it re-entered English. The word *term* had been borrowed earlier in the sense of a specific period of time or the end point of a period of time. So in the sense of ‘short term’ or ‘long term.’ So it had to do with setting boundaries or outer limits. But now it came in as a literary term, as in, well, ‘literary term.’ So it came in as a synonym for *word*, as in ‘what term should I use,’ ‘how do you define that term.’

The connection there to the original meaning is that a *term* is a word or a way of describing something, and when you describe something, you establish the definition or the boundaries of the meaning. So you are establishing the outer limits of the meaning. So in that sense, *term* came in as a literary ‘term.’

This was also the period in which the word *cell* entered English from Latin. Now I recently had an email exchange with listener Scott concerning that word. Scott asked if *cell* was related to *cellar*, and it is. *Cell* which meant a small room or a storage room, and within Old French, an underground storage room was called a *cellar* from that same root word. So both words come from the same Latin root.

But for purposes of this episode, it is important to note that the word *cell* was once closely associated with monasteries. When the first monks decided to live in solitude, they tended to live in small huts. And those huts were called *cells*. And as monasteries grew into larger buildings, that term was extended to those newer monasteries. A small monastery was sometimes called a *cell*.

By analogy, the term was extended to the larger monasteries. Within those larger monasteries, the small rooms where the monks lived were called *cells*. And that's where we got the notion of a *cell* being a small room within a larger building. In the 1700s, it was extended to prisons, and we got the term 'prison cell.'

It was also applied to science in the 1800s. A human body was composed of many smaller units, which came to be known as *cells*. And batteries were often divided into smaller parts called *cells*. And that produced the word *cellular*, as in 'cell phones.'

But you might remember from an earlier episode that the original Indo-European word produced the Germanic word *hell* under Grimm's Law. It was literally the underworld, so it was a concealed room or place under the living world. So based on all of that, if you find yourself in 'cell phone Hell,' you can at least rest assured knowing it was probably meant to be since *cell* and *Hell* are cognate, having come from the same root word.

But the bigger point here is that the word *cell* once had a close association with monasteries, and it came into English after the Benedictine Reforms.

Another Latin word which entered English during this period was the word *collect*. And you may wonder what the connection is between *collect* and monasteries. You might think it has to do with passing a collection plate. But to see the real connection, we have to break the word down to its two components. *Collect* is actually a combination of the Latin prefix *com-* meaning 'together' and *legere* which meant 'to gather,' and *legere* still exists in the word *lecture*. So it had an original sense of gathering together for a lecture or other purposes. It was also used in religious services to mean a short prayer. So *collect* came in.

Some plant names also came in from Latin, presumably from those monastery kitchens. They include plants like *coriander*, *ginger*, *periwinkle* and *parsley*. A few tree names also came in, words like *cedar*, *cypress* and *fig*.

And monasteries often cared for the sick and disabled. They were the de facto hospitals in many places. So not surprisingly, a few medical terms were borrowed from Latin. They included words like *cancer*, *paralysis* and *plaster*.

Now, I should note that some of these words weren't attested in writing until the Normans arrived about a century later, so it can get a little confusing with all of the Latin and French terms which came in with the Normans. In some cases, there is an argument to be made that the Normans brought the Latin word with them, but since most of these words are closely associated with the Churches and monasteries, many linguists are convinced that they came in through the Church Latin used in those monasteries after the Benedictine Reforms. But again, some are not actually attested in writing until the Normans arrived.

So that was the first consequence of the Benedictine Reforms on English. It brought new Latin words into the language. The other consequence was the great literary revival itself and all of those Old English manuscripts which were produced. In an earlier episode, I discussed Old

English poetry. And I noted that most of the surviving poetry from that period survives in four distinct manuscripts which have survived the centuries. Well, all four of those manuscripts were compiled around this time in the mid to late 900s. Of course, a lot of religious texts were preserved in English. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle was being maintained. And government charters and writs were also being written in English. Nowhere else in western Europe did a local vernacular have that kind of prominence.

Winston Churchill wrote in his well-known ‘History of the English Speaking Peoples’ that this period marked “the beginning of our native English literature.” And that was the real difference between this literary period and the earlier Northumbrian Renaissance. English now took a place right beside Latin. And in some respects, it was even preferred over Latin.

Another difference between this period and the earlier period was the fact that earlier Old English writing typically reflected the local dialect in which it was written. So texts in Northumbria were usually written in the local Northumbrian dialect of the scribe. And texts from Mercia written by Mercian scribes reflect that local dialect.

But now, with England under the rule of the Wessex monarchy, and with most of the documents being produced in Wessex, that West Saxon dialect emerged as the standard written dialect for all English documents. That process really began with Alfred’s reforms. And now, Wessex was clearly the center of power in the kingdom. So the West Saxon dialect became the standard dialect for all of those manuscripts.

I noted earlier that Dunstan’s student Aethelwold had established that second Benedictine Monastery in Abingdon. And Aethelwold became the Bishop of Winchester, which was effectively the capital of Wessex. He and Dunstan were largely responsible for the Benedictine Reform movement in England. And he was actually one of the key figures behind the creation and development of this literary dialect.

In Winchester, Aethelwold began to focus on establishing a common writing standard. Remember that there were no dictionaries, and there was no standard English grammar. Documents were written down the way people spoke, and words were spelled the way they were pronounced. But all of that varied from one region to the next. And the use of inflectional endings was often inconsistent and variable. And as we’ve seen over the past few episodes, the pronoun forms varied and the forms of the verb ‘to be’ varied. So Aethelwold tried to resolve these inconsistencies. He wanted to create a standard way of writing which was consistent across the board in terms of script and spelling and dialect and inflections.

The new writing standard also tended to choose certain words and disregard others. So for example, in third person singular, some people said ‘he is’ – *he is* – and some people said ‘he be’ – *he biþ*. So this new standard actually settled on *biþ* which was more common in the south. Another example is the word which meant ‘foreign.’ There were two versions in Old English, one was *fremde* and the other was *ælfremed*. During this period, the scribes settled on *ælfremed*. So most texts used that particular version of the word. So some words were selected and some words or word forms were dropped.

Along the same lines, certain spellings were adopted as ‘more-or-less’ standard spellings in this written dialect. And the reason why that is so significant is because the West Saxon dialect used a lot more diphthongs than the other English dialects. I actually discussed this back in the very first episode about Old English – Episode 32.

In Wessex, it was common to stretch out the vowels. So a single vowel was often broken into two vowels, thereby creating a diphthong. So a word like *ward* was pronounced more like *weard* with an /ay-ah/ sound in the middle. And so the spelling reflected that pronunciation. It was spelled ‘w-e-a-r-d.’ A word like *sold* was pronounced more like *sealde*, and the spelling reflected that. It was ‘s-e-a-l-d-e.’ Words like *seven* and *heaven* were *seofan* and *heofan*. And their spellings were ‘s-e-o-f-a-n’ and ‘h-e-o-f-a-n.’ The F represented the ‘v’ sound in that context between the vowels. So the main point is that when we read Old English texts, we see those unusual spellings. And it makes it difficult to recognize words which we still have in Modern English. I mean, would you guess that ‘s-e-o-f-a-n’ was the number 7? But that was the literary standard in written Old English.

But the Modern English which we speak today didn’t really develop from this West Saxon dialect. It actually developed from the dialect spoken in and around London, which was traditionally a Mercian city. At this point, it wasn’t the capital of England yet. The royal court was still in Winchester near the southern coast. London didn’t really emerge as the center of government until the Normans arrived.

But as London grew in population and importance, the London dialect became the standard dialect. And it didn’t have all of those West Saxon diphthongs. It didn’t tend to break the vowels or stretch them out. And that’s why many of those West Saxon spellings died out in Middle English. As Middle English scribes began to focus on the way words were actually being pronounced in and around London, they altered a lot of those West Saxon spellings. *Seofan* (‘s-e-o-f-a-n’) became *seven* (‘s-e-v-e-n’) to reflect the London pronunciation. And *weard* (‘w-e-a-r-d’) became *ward* (‘w-a-r-d’). And *sealde* (‘s-e-a-l-d-e’) became *sold* (‘s-o-l-d’).

But a few of those West Saxon spellings survived. Whereas *seven* became ‘s-e-v-e-n,’ note that *heaven* became ‘heaven.’ Today, we pronounce them the same way except for the initial letter – *seven* and *heaven*. But *heaven* retains much of that earlier spelling. Along the same lines, *bread* as in a loaf of bread and *bred* as in a well-bred person are both pronounced the same way today. But the food – ‘b-r-e-a-d’ – was /bray-ahd/ in Old English. And its modern spelling still reflects that original pronunciation.

A word like *year* also retains that original West Saxon ‘e-a’ in the middle. It was originally pronounced more like /yay-arr/ in Wessex. So some of our modern spellings still reflect those older pronunciations. However, don’t assume that an ‘e-a’ spelling in Modern English came from the West Saxons. There were lots of spelling innovations in Middle English and Modern English. I just wanted to note that some of those older spellings linger into Modern English.

Now sometimes when I am pronouncing those Late West Saxon words in the podcast, I feel like I am pronouncing those words with a heavy southern accent – as in the American South. Diphthongs are also a very distinctive feature of Southern accents in the United States. So a word like *house* sometimes becomes /how-use/. And a word like *car* can become ‘cah-er.’ And *heaven* can become ‘he-a-van’ – not that different from West Saxon *heofan*. And those similarities are not an accident.

When the earliest British settlers came to North America in the 1600s, they didn’t just migrate in some random manner. People from specific parts of Britain tended to settle in specific parts of North America. And they brought their local dialects with them. And this fact contributed to the development of regional accents in North America. We’ll look at all of this in much more detail when we get to the early Modern English period when these migrations occurred. But in this episode, I just want to touch one aspect of those migrations – the West Saxon dialect.

One of the earliest regions settled in North America was the colony of Virginia. The majority of the earliest settlers in Virginia hailed from sixteen counties in the south and west of England – so basically Wessex. The migration was particularly heavy from counties like Gloucester, Somerset, Devon, Dorset, Wiltshire, and Hampshire – all in the heart of the old Wessex kingdom. Now over time, the migration patterns shifted, but that early settlement established a local dialect in Virginia which was reminiscent of the dialects spoken in part of southwestern England. And one of the distinctive features of that dialect was the old West Saxon diphthongs.

So when people say that southerners talk slowly or they speak with a drawl, what they’re really saying is that they are stretching out their vowels, which is ultimately an inheritance from Wessex.

In fact, linguists who have studied the earliest writings from Virginia in the 1600s find direct correlations to dialects in the Wessex counties which I mentioned earlier. And some fascinating Old and Middle English words survived in that early Virginia dialect. For example, instead of *unknown*, it was common to say *unbeknownst*, which still lingers in Modern English. So there you have *beknown* instead of *known*. And you also have an ‘-ST’ ending which was ultimately derived from Old English. So *unknown* becomes *unbeknownst*.

And there were lots of other words borrowed directly from the counties of Wessex and Sussex – words like *flapjack*, *innards*, and *chitterlings* which became *chitlins*. And believe it or not, the word *moonshine* was borrowed from Sussex dialects. It originally meant moonlight, and then took on a sense of something fake, unreal or allusive. It’s well-attested in the 1400s and 1500s in England. And it became associated with bootleg liquor in southern United States, but that was actually a later development of the word.

Now again, I don’t want to jump ahead to Modern English yet. I just wanted to make the point that the Last West Saxon writing standard reflected common pronunciations at the time in Wessex. And some of those pronunciations still linger in a few Modern English dialects – not only in Britain, but also in the parts of the United States.

Now dialects are constantly evolving, just like language in general. So the modern dialects of the American South and the West Country of England are quite different today. But some American dialects haven't evolved as much as others, and they show much closer similarities to the West Country accents. For example, in certain coastal communities in places like Virginia and North Carolina, the local dialects were isolated on barrier islands for several centuries. So they haven't changed as much, and they remain very distinct. And in some respects, these Tidewater accents are still remarkably close to some of the older rural dialects of southwestern England.

For example, both dialects tend to convert the 'I' (/eye/) sound into an 'oy' sound. So that is a type of diphthong. So *line* become 'loin.' And *time* become 'toim.'

In North Carolina, the people who speak those coastal dialects are sometimes called the 'hoi toiders' because that's how they pronounce 'high tide.' So a phrase like "It's high tide on the sound side" becomes 'It's hoi toid on the sound soid.' And that's actually pretty close to some of the rural dialects in the West Country of England. But again, they share a common West Saxon heritage. So when we talk about that ancient West Saxon writing standard, it isn't as remote as you might think. Certain aspects of that dialect still linger in some regional accents on both sides of the Atlantic.

As I noted, that West Saxon dialect with its broken vowels evolved into a fixed written form over time. And we can see that in some well-known writers from the period like Ælfric who we'll look at more closely next time. Ælfric was a student of Aethelwold at Winchester. He became the most prolific writer of the Late Anglo-Saxon period, and he was another key person responsible for the formulation of this Late West Saxon writing standard. In fact, he began writing before that standard form has been fully developed. And his early writings were much more inconsistent. But as an older writer, that standard had become widely adopted, so he actually went back and re-wrote some of his earlier works in that established standard.

The development of that standard also helps scholars to trace the history of certain manuscripts. Take the Beowulf poem. It was written down in its surviving version around this time in the second half of the tenth century. But many scholars are convinced that it was copied from a much older manuscript because it has some non-standard Anglian forms from the north. So scholars think it was copied several times through the centuries with some of those older forms being retained. But having said that, most of Beowulf adheres very closely to the Late West Saxon standard.

Now I should note that modern linguists still debate whether that West Saxon written dialect actually reflected the way people spoke in Wessex. Some scholars believe that it was originally based on the local spoken dialect, and over time it evolved into more of a literary dialect. But either way, it became the standard form of Old English writing in this last Golden Age of Old English literature.

Next time, we're going to continue to look at this literary renaissance. We'll look at some of the important writers from this period. And we'll also explore some of the important texts which were composed. In addition to religious works, the four great codices of Old English Poetry were

compiled and preserved. That included the Beowulf manuscript. And it included the famous Exeter book with its wonderful collection of poems and riddles. So we'll look at some of those as well. And we'll also continue to explore the life and legacy of Archbishop Dunstan and King Edgar. Interestingly, Edgar put off his coronation for almost 14 years. And when he finally got around to it, it was unprecedented in its scale and scope. In fact, it served as the model for all future coronations, including that of Elizabeth II in 1953. So we'll also look at Edgar's coronation and why it was so significant for the English language.

So maybe we can cram all of that into the next episode. Until then, thanks for listening to the History of English Podcast.