

**THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH PODCAST
TRANSCRIPTS**

**EPISODE 72:
THE DARK AGES OF ENGLISH**

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Welcome to the History of English Podcast - a podcast about the history of the English language. This is Episode 72: The Dark Ages of English. In this episode, we're going to look at the linguistic situation in England in the early part of the 12th century. By this point, English writing had almost disappeared. And as far as the spoken language was concerned, it had to compete with Latin and French which were both considered to be much more prestigious than English. Not only were Latin and French held in high regard, but English itself had fractured into a variety of regional dialects. And some of those dialects could no longer be understood by English speakers in other parts of the country. The linguistic situation on the ground was more muddled and confused than at any point since the English language had emerged. In many ways, these were the Dark Ages for English. In fact, the English language that everyone knew was dying out. And it wasn't entirely clear that any form of English would survive. So this time, we'll take a look at the state of English in the early part of the 12th Century.

But before we begin, let me remind you that the website for the podcast is historyofenglishpodcast.com. And you can always reach me directly by email at kevin@historyofenglishpodcast.com. And I'm on twitter at [englishhistpod](https://twitter.com/englishhistpod).

I also have one quick clarification regarding the last episode. Last time, I discussed certain words related to hunting, and I noted that the words *venison* and *venery* were cognate with the words *venerate* and *venereal*. Well, several of you contacted me to note that *venereal* was derived from the name of the goddess Venus. And that is true. But all of those terms – *venison*, *venery*, *venerate*, *venereal* and *Venus* – all came from a common Indo-European root word that meant 'desire.' Now I do need to make one correction. In the episode, I said that the common root word was a Latin word. But as I just noted, the root word was actually an older Indo-European root word. So I did want to make that note, and I have actually gone back and made that correction in the episode itself.

So with that, let's turn to this episode. And speaking of hunting, let's pick up where we left off last time with the death of William Rufus while hunting in the New Forest. As we saw last time, William Rufus was killed on that hunting trip. He had an older brother and a younger brother. The older brother was Robert – the Duke of Normandy. But Robert was away in the Near East having participated in the First Crusade which just came to an end. The younger brother was Henry, who was with William Rufus in the New Forest when William Rufus was killed. When William Rufus fell to the ground and died, young Henry seized the opportunity, and he headed straight to Winchester and secured the treasury. He was crowned as the new king of England just three days later, and he thereby became Henry I of England.

Just as Henry was securing the English throne for himself, his older brother Robert was returning to Normandy to resume his position as the Duke of Normandy. And Robert wasn't exactly happy that Henry had seized the English throne. And Henry knew that his position in England was shaky.

He knew that Robert was probably going to claim the English throne as the eldest brother. And he also knew that many of the Norman nobles in England were going to side with Robert.

As we saw last time, many of those nobles had lands in England and Normandy, and they preferred a single lord rather than two different lords. They didn't want to deal with conflicting loyalties. And if they were forced to choose, Henry knew that many of them would choose his older brother Robert. Robert was the eldest son, which meant he was the presumed heir under Norman tradition. He was also a returning hero, having led forces in the First Crusade. And then there was that suspicion that Henry may have played a role in his brother's death in the New Forest.

So Henry realized that he needed to shore up his support in England to fend off any challenge from Robert. In order to build that support, he did two things.

First, he did what a lot of new kings did. He promised to rule as a good king and to avoid the abuses of William Rufus. He made some concessions to the leading barons, and he issued his promises in a written document called the Charter of Liberties. The Charter began with a greeting from 'Henry, king of the English' to ". . . all his barons and faithful, both French and English."

This greeting is notable because it shows that a distinction was still being made between Frenchmen and Englishmen. They were not yet one people. They were still distinct groups in England living separately from each other and speaking different languages. But here, Henry made an appeal to both groups. He sought to bring the both together under his new Charter of Liberties.

In his Charter, Henry agreed to abolish the abuses of William Rufus. Certain debts and past offences were to be forgiven. He agreed to stop claiming excessive fees and fines. As I mentioned last time, when an abbot or bishop died, William Rufus would leave the position vacant so he could collect the rents and the income of the church or the monastery. Henry promised to stop that practice, and that helped him to secure the support of the clerics and Church officials. Henry also agreed to restore the laws of Edward the Confessor, who was honored by both the Normans and the Anglo-Saxons.

All of this was promised just as his brother Robert was returning from the First Crusade. So it was part of Henry's effort to shore up his support within England.

Henry also did something else to shore up his support among the native Anglo-Saxons. He decided to get married. And that was kind of a big deal, especially given who the bride was. Her name was Edith, and she was the sister of the King of Scotland. So why was Henry so interested in Edith? Well, it was because of her uncle Edgar the Aetheling – remember him? A little bit? Well, let me refresh your memory.

He was the very young grand-nephew of Edward the Confessor. He was actually the great-grandson of Aethelred the Unready by Aethelred's son, Edmund Ironside. Edmund's children had

been exiled in Hungary during Cnut's reign, and young Edgar was born and raised in Hungary. He also had two sisters.

Late in the reign of Edward the Confessor, when it became apparent that Edward wasn't going to have any children, there was an attempt to track down Edgar in Hungary and bring him and his sisters back to England. In England, he became known as Edgar the Aetheling, which meant 'Edgar the Noble' because he was the last known male heir in the Wessex royal family.

But as we know, he far too young to be accepted as king when Edward the Confessor died. So Harold Godwinsson became king. But Edgar and his sisters were still out there. And some of the rebellions after the Norman conquest were aimed at getting Edgar on the throne as the last surviving Wessex heir. But when those rebellions were crushed, Edgar ended up in Scotland with his sisters. Well, Edgar's sister Margaret married the King of Scotland. Their son later succeeded to the Scottish throne, and their daughter Edith was single and available for marriage.

So Edith was the sister of the King of Scotland, and she was also the niece of Edgar the Aetheling. And that made her a direct descendant of the traditional Anglo-Saxon ruling family.

So if you followed that little bit of genealogy, you might be able to see why young King Henry was so interested in her. By virtue of her lineage, she was popular among the Anglo-Saxons of England. And by marrying her, Henry could effectively unite the Norman kings with the old Anglo-Saxon line of kings. Their children would be descended from both lines – half Norman – and half West Saxon. And that was something that his brother Robert couldn't offer the people of England.

Of course, she also had the advantage of having a brother who was the king of Scotland. So it was a strategic marriage on many levels.

With his quick marriage to Edith, Henry secured the support of many of the Anglo-Saxons who fought in the English fyrd or militia. And as I noted earlier, his promises to protect the Church's property won him the support of the clerics. And many of the nobles also threw their support to Henry. But others continued to side with his brother Robert in Normandy.

The support Henry had managed to muster within England was essential for his survival because Robert soon arrived from Normandy. He arrived the following year, and he was quickly joined by the barons who had favored him as the successor to the English throne.

The two brothers collected their respective forces and met at Alton near the southern coast. But rather than fight a great battle, the two brothers decided to negotiate. Robert probably realized that Henry was in a much stronger position than he had expected. So the two sides agreed to a peace treaty.

The gist of the Agreement was that Henry would be allowed to remain as King of England, and Robert would remain as Duke of Normandy. Each brother released any claims to the other's lands. At least for now, the brothers had agreed to a truce.

The peace treaty secured Henry's position within England. And once again, it left England and Normandy with different rulers. As we'll see, Henry wasn't content with this arrangement because he really wanted to rule Normandy as well, just as his father and brother had. But more on that later. For now, Henry I sat comfortably upon the throne of England.

Now, I mentioned that marriage between Henry and Edith because it is important to our story for several reasons. It helped Henry secure some support from his English subjects. And it also united the Norman and Wessex bloodlines.

A few episodes back, I noted that the later English monarchs claimed descent from both Alfred the Great and William the Conqueror. One way they did that was through William the Conqueror's wife who was a direct descendant of Alfred the Great. But that claim was very remote. You had to go all the way back to Alfred the Great's daughter to find that family connection. The other way that later monarchs traced their lineage back to Alfred the Great was through this marriage of Henry and Edith. And in many ways, this was the preferred line to use because Edith's line included most of the major Anglo-Saxon kings – Alfred the Great, Aethelstan, the various boy kings, Aethelred the Unready and so on. So thanks to this marriage, the old Wessex line of kings did continue on after this point – all the way to today.

But this marriage was important for another reason. It symbolized a process that was starting to take place throughout England. Frenchmen were starting to marry English women. And they were producing children who were half-Norman and half-English. And it appears that many of those children were bilingual.

I have alluded to this process in earlier episodes. The two great historians of this period were William of Malmesbury and Orderic Vitalis, and both were the products of these types of marriages. Both had French fathers and English mothers. Part of the reason why these marriages were so common is because most of the people who had re-located from France were men. The nobles, the bureaucrats, the traders, the craftsmen, the scribes – most were men. It appears that relatively few women made the trip. So once those Frenchmen were in England, they looked for English wives. And within a generation or two, there were a lot of these mixed marriages.

As I noted, it is generally assumed that many of the children of those marriages spoke both English and French. In fact, these were the first developments in a long process that saw the gradual fusion of the two peoples. That process would take a while, but about a century later, there were already reports that it was difficult to distinguish Frenchmen from Englishmen.

Those mixed marriages, those bilingual children, and the fusion of the French and English – all had an impact on the language over time. Those developments contributed to the emergence of a new type of English. But before that new type of English could emerge, the old form of English had to die. And in the early 1100s, that was exactly what was happening.

The language that Alfred the Great had worked so hard to preserve was disappearing. And at this point, it was unclear what would replace it. With the heavy influence of French and Latin, Old English took a big hit. It was ridiculed and mocked by almost everyone in a position of authority.

We get a sense of the low status of English from the writings of William of Malmesbury – who I’ve mentioned before. He was one of the great historians of the period. William was born in Wiltshire in southern England. He lived and wrote around this time in the early 1100s. I noted earlier that he was a product of one of those mixed marriages. His father was French and his mother was English. Like many of those children, he could speak both English and French. And he wrote in Latin. But his writings indicate that English not only lacked respect, it was barely tolerated.

In one account, he wrote about his monastery. He recalled that education in the monastery had been conducted in English before the Norman Conquest. But afterwards, Latin education was re-introduced. And Latin became a point of emphasis. He wrote, “the monks, who used to babble only with vernacular letters, became fully educated.” [*SOURCE: England Under the Norman and Angevin Kings, 1075-1225, Robert Bartlett, p. 484*]. So in William’s view, when the monks spoke their native English language, they were merely ‘babbling with vernacular letters.’ So English had to go, and it had to be replaced with the only proper language to be used in the Church which was Latin.

The elevated status of Latin was only part of the problem for English. The other part of the problem was French. French was now in common use among the nobility, and it also was considered to be superior to English. More and more people may have been bilingual – speaking both English and French – but they knew that each language had its place. You spoke French whenever you could, and you spoke English when you had to. Most of the peasants only spoke English, so you had to speak to them in their own language. But otherwise, if you were in a position of authority, you didn’t really use English. In fact, English didn’t really have a purpose other than being the language of the peasants. It wasn’t being taught in schools, and neither the Church nor the government had much use for it.

English was mocked and ridiculed. It sounded rough and unsophisticated to French ears. They even called it a barbarian language. Modern linguists would say that it was stigmatized. And when a language becomes stigmatized, that perception can even spread to the native speakers of the language.

That’s why many stigmatized dialects die out over time. People start to become ashamed of the way they speak. And they try to adopt a more acceptable way of speaking.

And in England, the same thing was starting to happen to the English language itself. Anglo-Saxons were becoming self-conscious and ashamed of the language they spoke. They didn’t want to be seen as rubes or hillbillies. So Old English was under assault both externally and internally.

The best evidence of this process can be seen in what was happening to personal names during this period. There wasn’t much English writing. As we know, most writing was in Latin. But those official Latin documents do record people’s names. And scholars who have looked closely at those names have discovered something very interesting. In the 1100s – a little more than a generation after the Norman Conquest – a large percentage of people in England stopped using

Anglo-Saxon names, and they started using French names instead. This happened very quickly, and it happened throughout England.

Under Norman influence, French names became very popular. Parents started to give their children names like William, Stephen, Henry, Robert, Richard, Roger and Hugh. The influence of the Church also came into play. Some parents named their children after saints or other religious figures, so names like Thomas, John, Nicholas, Katherine, Margaret and Mary became very popular.

But just as those French and Church names came in, most of those Anglo-Saxon names went out. People were starting to be embarrassed by those funny-sounding Anglo-Saxon names. Parents stopped giving their children names like Aethelbert, Alric, Ordric, Godgifu and Stigand. In fact, only a few Anglo-Saxon names have survived. That includes names like Alfred, Edgar, Edwin and Edward. Edward continued to be a popular name in part because Edward the Confessor was so admired and he was claimed by both the English and the Normans. A few Anglo-Saxon female names also survived – names like Edith and Ethel. But most of those old names disappeared over the next century or so.

The fact that so many Anglo-Saxon parents dropped those names is evidence in itself that those names had lost favor and were being ridiculed by the Norman upper classes. But we actually have some surviving accounts from this period that shed more light on what was happening.

According to one story, some of the Norman nobles in England were unhappy when Henry married Edith since she wasn't Norman. Of course, Edith had an Anglo-Saxon name. So the disgruntled nobles mocked the couple behind their backs. Rather than referring to the couple by their proper names, Henry and Edith, they referred to them in private as 'Godric' and 'Godgiva.' It was intended as an insult.

In fact, the name Edith was so derided that she was given a new name when she became Queen. She thereafter became known as Matilda. Matilda was a very popular Norman name, so much so that it creates a lot of confusion for histories of this period. As we'll see, there were lots of Matildas. But it was better to be Matilda than Edith in Norman England.

The historian Orderic Vitalis told a similar story. He traveled to Normandy in the year 1085 as a child to join a monastery there. When he arrived in Normandy, he recalled that the Norman monks hated his English name Orderic. They thought it sounded too harsh. So they gave him the Latin name Vitalis. And that's how he came to be known as Orderic Vitalis. [*SOURCE: England Under the Norman and Angevin Kings, 1075-1225, Robert Bartlett, p. 539*]

So we get a sense of how much the Normans hated the harsh sounding Anglo-Saxon names. And from that, we can infer that that was their general opinion of English as well. It sounded harsh and rough and barbarian to their ears.

What's so interesting is that Anglo-Saxons at every level were affected by this perception – and even the peasants dropped those old names over time.

According to one account from this period, a young boy was born in Whitby in the north of England around the year 1110. He was given the name Tostig which was a Scandinavian name, but had become common in northern England. That's a name we've seen before. But the boy's friends mocked his name so much that he eventually changed it to William.

Now here's the thing about those Norman names. The Anglo-Saxons were adopting those names, but there were only a few of them, mostly the ones I've already mentioned. So thousands of young Anglo-Saxons were being given – or were adopting – just a handful of popular names from France. And when that young boy in Whitby changed his name from Tostig to William, he joined lots and lots of other kids with the same name.

A few decades later, when Henry's son Henry II was king, he held court in Normandy one year (1171) at Christmastime. The chroniclers tell us that the guests at court included 110 different knights all named 'William.' [SOURCE: *England Under the Norman and Angevin Kings, 1075-1225, Robert Bartlett, p. 540*] So that's how popular that particular name was.

Sometimes parents would have so many children that they would run out of names, and they had to give the same name to more than one child. One charter issued by a Ralph son of Thorald was witnessed by "lady Inga my wife with my son Roger and my other son Roger." (Now if you're old enough to remember the sitcom *Newhart*, I know what you're thinking – 'Hi. My name is Larry. This is my brother Daryl. And this is my other brother Daryl.')

Now with all of those people having the same name, it created some unique problems – like a royal court with 110 different knights named William. So in that environment, it became important to find ways to distinguish all those people with the same name. And up to this point, most people just used a personal name. Over the next couple of centuries, surnames began to develop. Those were based on things like a person's occupation – Carpenter, Baker, Taylor, Weaver, and so on. Some were based on where a person was from – so Lincoln, or Washington, or Hill, or Rivers or Bush. Some were based on ancestry – so Jackson was the 'son of Jack.' This was a naming technique that we've seen before. The Vikings used it. Well, over the next couple of centuries is produced surnames like Harrison, Richardson, Thompson, Stevenson and many, many more. We'll look more closely at the development of surnames in an upcoming episode, but part of the reason why surnames became necessary is because so many people now had the same first name.

I noted that the name William was especially popular. So it is probably no surprise that when King Henry had a son, he named him William. He was the only legitimate son born to Henry and Edith – now Henry and Matilda. So young William became the designated heir. They also had a daughter named (you guessed it) Matilda. And both of those children are going to be very important to our story. But we'll look at them in an upcoming episode.

Now I noted that this was a period of decline for Old English. People were abandoning English names in favor of French names. And in the year 1109, early in Henry's reign, the scribes at Canterbury realized that English might be on its way out. They had been keeping one of the few surviving chronicles in English. Together with the monks up in Peterborough, these were the

only scribes maintaining annual chronicles in Old English. And in the year 1109, the monks at Canterbury decided that it was pointless to continue using English. So in that year, they switched to Latin. And all subsequent entries were written in Latin. Thankfully, as we'll see later, the monks at Peterborough decided to buck the trend. They continued to maintain their Chronicle in English.

The bigger point here is that almost all new manuscripts composed in England during this period were being composed in Latin. That included almost all government and Church documents. But Latin was about to get a rival, and it wasn't English. It was French.

During Henry's reign, French started to emerge as an alternative to Latin. The French-speaking royal court were patrons who supported the production of French manuscripts. We have to keep in mind that most people were still illiterate, and books were valued possessions. So when it came to literature – things like histories, and poetry and romances – those were almost always composed for the aristocrats who could read and who could afford those manuscripts. And in England, most of those aristocrats spoke French. So they wanted texts written in French.

So over the next century, official documents continued to be produced in Latin. But other literature started to be composed in French. Now I say, that those works were composed in French, but I should be more specific. They were composed in the French dialect that was being spoken in England.

We have previously seen that the Norman dialect was a little different from the dialects spoken in other parts of France like Paris. But initially, the Norman dialect of England was the same as the Norman dialect of Normandy because it was the same people. But now, almost a half century later, the Norman dialect of England was starting to become distinct from the dialect spoken back in Normandy. Historical linguists refer to this emerging Norman dialect in England as 'Anglo-Norman' – as distinguished from just 'Norman.'

This Anglo-Norman dialect was actually quite prestigious during the early 1100s. The composition of literary works like poetry and romances was still a new phenomenon in France. But England had a long tradition of that type of literature. Of course, it had always been composed in English. But now, scribes in England started to produce that same type of literature in French, and specifically in the Anglo-Norman dialect that was spoken in England. And much of that literature made its way across the Channel to France.

In fact, much of the earliest French literature was actually composed in England in the Anglo-Norman dialect. And that often comes as a surprise to a lot of people.

One of the great French epics is 'The Song of Roland.' It is an epic poem based on a battle during the reign of Charlemagne. It is generally considered to be the oldest surviving major work of French literature, and it survives in several manuscripts. But the oldest surviving manuscript was actually composed in England in the Anglo-Norman dialect. Along the same lines, many of the earliest works about the legend of King Arthur were also written in Anglo-Norman. And those works proved to be very popular in France as well.

Even French speakers may be surprised that this Anglo-Norman dialect had an effect on early French. The typical histories of this period focus on the words that were passing from French into English. But what often gets overlooked is that some English words were also passing into French. And this was the process by which that happened.

That's why the French word for 'boat' is *bateau*. It was an English word that passed into French during this period when Anglo-Norman literature was being exported to France. The Old English word was *bat*, and it passed into French as *bateau*. In English, the four points of the compass are *north*, *south*, *east* and *west*. And those also passed into French during this period. In Modern French they are *nord*, *sud*, *est* and *ouest*. So they also came from English.

This is an important point because it confirms that language mixing was taking place in England. We already know that a lot of French words were starting to pass into English. And here we have evidence that English words were being adopted by French speakers as well. Of course, they were much smaller in number, but they were being adopted.

There were lots of opportunities for English speakers and French speakers to exchange words. Many Anglo-Saxons probably had no choice but to learn some French words and phrases. They needed to communicate with their supervisors and superiors who spoke French. Merchants also needed to speak some French to communicate with buyers and sellers who spoke French. Many people had also emigrated from France looking for economic opportunities. That included commoners like craftsmen, traders, cooks and other laborers. So even in everyday life, people encountered lots of French speakers.

By the same token, the French nobility had to communicate with their vassals and underlings and servants, most of whom spoke English. The Norman administrators had to communicate with the townspeople and peasants who spoke English. The Norman military leaders had to speak to their Anglo-Saxon soldiers. So in this environment, many of the French speakers in positions of authority probably learned some basic English words and commands. If a Frenchman married an English woman, he had to communicate with her as well. The young children often had English women as nurses. And as we've seen, the children often grew up in an environment where both languages were being spoken, at least to a certain extent. So each language picked up words from the other.

But notice the contrast between the thousands of words that passed into English versus the small handful of words that passed into French. Those numbers are telling. It shows how prominent French was and how stigmatized English was. Words tend to flow from the top down, not from the bottom up. And it was very clear that French was on the top and English was on the bottom in 12th century England.

And as we've seen, the flow of words from French to English not only included basic nouns, and verbs and adjectives and adverbs, it also included personal names. So English speakers were abandoning English words and names in favor of French alternatives.

So it seemed like English was on its way out. And in a way it was. The Old English of Alfred the Great, and Beowulf, and the Exeter Book was definitely on its way out. In fact, in many respects, it was already gone.

This is why we have to think of these years as the ‘Dark Ages’ of English. As we’ve seen before, the period of Greek history between the Mycenaean civilization and the classical Greek period is called the Greek Dark Ages in part because writing disappeared during that period. So there were no written accounts to tell us what was going on. Along the same lines, the period immediately following the collapse of the western Roman Empire is sometimes called the European Dark Ages because there was a similar loss of writing and literacy.

By analogy, when English writing largely disappeared after the Norman Conquest, there was a similar Dark Age for English. Of course, it wasn’t a Dark Age for England because civilization and literacy continued on. But it continued on in Latin and French – not English. So modern scholars only have a vague idea of what was happening to the English language during this period.

And when I say ‘this period,’ I don’t just mean the years immediately following the Norman Conquest. I am really referring to the prior two centuries going all the way back to the 900s. Even before the Conquest, the nature of English throughout the country was masked by the fact that almost all writing was being composed in the standard dialect of Wessex. I’ve alluded to this before. Scribes in the north used the Wessex dialect when writing, even if it didn’t reflect the way people actually spoke in the north. And scholars know that speech in the north was heavily affected by Viking settlement. So the surviving Old English manuscripts are misleading because they imply a uniformity that didn’t really exist on the ground.

Now in Wessex, the written language probably reflected the way people spoke because it was their dialect that was used for writing. But outside of Wessex, the dialects of English could be very different, especially in the former Danelaw regions. So in those places, there was a major distinction between the way people spoke and the way scribes wrote.

So modern scholars think there was a great deal of diversity in English even before the Norman Conquest. We just can’t see it in the surviving documents.

But then the Normans came, and English stopped being used for formal education, and the West Saxon writing standard disappeared altogether. By the time we get to the second half of the 1100s, scribes began to write some documents in English again. And as we’ll see over the next few episodes, those documents were very different from those composed prior to the Conquest. Some of them show some French influences, but that’s not the biggest difference between the new English documents and the old English documents. The biggest difference is that the new documents were no longer being written in a common, uniform dialect. In those new documents, the scribes just wrote the way they spoke. So they wrote in their own local dialects. And those documents show a tremendous diversity in the language.

Some of the early Middle English documents composed in the north of England actually show more Norse influences than French influences. So those documents finally start to reveal the changes which had probably been underway there for at least a couple of centuries.

So in that sense, written English lagged behind spoken English. It took some time for the documents to reflect the changes that had been taking place on the ground. Many scholars think that English had already lost most of its inflectional endings in everyday speech by the time of the Norman Conquest, especially in parts of the north. And in the north and the east, English had already borrowed a lot of Norse words. So the developments that led to Middle English were well under way before the Norman Conquest. The Norman Conquest just accelerated those changes. And it allowed those changes to be fully revealed in English writing for the first time in the 1100s.

If we accept this theory, and I think most modern scholars do accept these basic developments, then it means that what we know as Old English was already gone in much of England by the time Henry I came to power in the 1100s. It may have still existed down in Wessex, but in much of England, people no longer spoke the language of Alfred the Great or Beowulf or the Exeter Book. In that sense, Old English – or what we think of as Old English – was dying out or was already dead in most of the country.

The loss of English education, and the loss of the West Saxon standard, probably contributed to this process. It allowed regional dialects to evolve in their own directions. The fact that peasants became tied to local manors may have also contributed to this process. It meant that people in the countryside rarely traveled much beyond their local manor or village. So that also allowed local dialects to become more and more distinct.

And then there was the fact that English had become stigmatized even among many English speakers. It was a peasant language, mocked and ridiculed. People weren't proud of it. In fact, it appears that many were ashamed of it. When people didn't care about the language, it wasn't maintained and kept in good order. Grammar broke down. Inflectional endings continued to deteriorate. New words came in. Old words disappeared. But those changes took place region by region. The words borrowed in the north weren't always borrowed in the south – and vice versa. Words that disappeared from one region were kept in another region. Some inflectional endings disappeared in one place, but they kept in another place.

All of these developments meant that English became heavily fractured. English dialects varied so much around the country, that they were barely recognizable from one region to the next. So if we think of English as a standard, uniform language, this was the Dark Age of that language because it was fracturing into local dialects.

As we'll see, this process was gradually reversed. But had it not been reversed, it could have led to the death of the language. It could have split and fractured into a variety of daughter languages. That was what happened to the original Indo-European language. As tribes migrated, the original language fractured into a variety of daughter languages. The same thing happened to the original Proto-Germanic language. It also fractured and gave way to the various Germanic

languages we have today. This can be the ultimate fate of a language once it starts to fracture so much that it can't be understood from one region to the next. And English appeared to be headed in that direction in the early 1100s.

William of Malmesbury gives us an indication of how close English was to that tipping around this time. In the year 1125 – still during the reign of Henry I – William wrote a Latin manuscript called *Gesta Pontificum Anglorum* – literally the 'Deeds of the English Bishops.' In it, William wrote "The whole language of the Northumbrians, especially in York, is so grating and uncouth that we Southerners cannot understand a word of it." William's account confirms that Old English as we knew it had already come to an end, at least in the north. It was so different, that the people of Wessex couldn't even understand it.

During this period, English wasn't so much a language as a collection of local dialects. And in order to understand what happened to the English language, we have to focus on these local dialects because they were the incubators for a new type of English. Scholars of this period have identified five major dialect regions in England after the Norman Conquest. Now we have to accept that one dialect often flows into another so that there are rarely clear boundaries between them. Generally speaking, the Middle English dialects were an extension of the Old English dialects. But under Viking influence in the Danelaw, the northern and eastern dialects had experienced a lot of changes.

So the best way to look at these areas is to compare them to the dialect regions that existed in the Old English period. And to make it a little easier for you to see these regions, Louis Henwood has prepared a map showing the Middle English dialect regions. Just go to Episode 72 at historyofenglishpodcast.com. And I have included maps of both the Old English and the Middle English dialect regions. So you can see how these regions developed and changed over time.

The first thing you will notice is that the Middle English dialect regions are actually very similar to the Old English dialect regions. The south remains much the same. South of the Thames was the region of Wessex and in the far southeast was Kent. Those regions had distinct dialects going back to Old English. And those regions were still distinct in Middle English. The Wessex region is generally referred to as the 'Southern' region during the Middle English period.

The major changes occurred in the regions north of the Thames. And most of these changes there had to do with the influence of the Old Norse language in the Danelaw. In Old English, the region immediately north of the Thames was Mercia, and it had a distinct Mercian dialect. But as we know, Mercia had become divided after the Viking invasions. The eastern portions of Mercia became part of the Danelaw, and the western portions of Mercia remained independent and were eventually allied with Wessex. And that division had major linguistic consequences. The Mercian dialect didn't change much in the west of Mercia, but in the east, it changed quite a bit under Viking influence. So by the 1100s, Mercia was divided into two separate and quite distinct dialects. Modern linguists have names for these two dialect regions. The dialect spoken in eastern Mercia came to be known as the 'East Midlands' dialect. The dialect spoken in the west of Mercia came to be known as the 'West Midlands' dialect. But the important point here is that the Midlands of England had become divided linguistically.

Finally, we have the region north of Mercia, which was Northumbria – the northernmost region of England. In Old English, the Northumbrian dialect was similar to the Mercian dialect, both having derived from the Angles. But Northumbria was the heart of Viking settlement in England. It was home to York which was essentially the capital of the north. And that was where the language had really changed over the prior couple of centuries. The language was very different in the north. The dialect of this region became known as the ‘Northern’ dialect during the Middle English period.

And that was the dialect that William of Malmesbury was referring to when he said that people in the south couldn’t understand the language in the north. References to dialect differences can be found in the Old English period, but you don’t really find statements to the effect that people in other parts of the country can’t be understood. But now, those references start to appear. And for the next few centuries, the surviving documents contain lots of references along these same lines.

A couple of centuries later, in the 1300s, we get another account of the dialect differences in England. The source was a monk named Ranulph Higden. He wrote a very popular history book in Latin called Polychronicon. It meant ‘Universal History.’ A few years later, Higden’s book was translated into Middle English by John Trevisa, who was a writer from Cornwall. And a couple of passages from the book discuss the regional dialects in England in the 1300s in the heart of the Middle English period. Again, this is a couple of centuries later in our story, but it confirms how fractured the language was.

In one passage, the text notes that the English language had always had regional varieties – Northern, Middle and Southern. But it notes that the people of England had mixed and mingled with the Danes, and then with the Normans. And as a result of that mixing, the English language had changed. Trevisa writes,

‘In many, the country’s language is impaired’
“in menye þe contray longage ys apeyred”

‘and some use strange stammering, chattering, snarling, and gnashing teeth-grinding’
“and som vseþ strange wlaffyng, chyteryng, haryng and garryng grisbittyng.”

[SOURCE: *John of Trevisa on the English language in 1385 (I)*, Freeborn. Page 190.]

So the text basically describes these dialects as little more than stammering and snarling. In the author’s opinion, they barely constitute a language at all.

The text then says that English is in such a sad state because school children are not taught in their native language. They are forced to do their school lessons in French. The text says that it is amazing that the native language of the English people is so diverse, but the French language – which is a relative newcomer – has one common pronunciation and it is spoken correctly by everyone.

Now that might be an exaggeration, but Higden was onto something. Most people spoke the same form of French because the schools taught children how to speak it correctly. But English was fractured and broken because children didn't learn how to speak it correctly in a uniform way. Each region spoke their own dialect as they saw fit.

The text then re-iterates what William of Malmesbury wrote in the 1100s. It says that "All the languages of the Northumbrians, and especially those at York, are so sharp, piercing and shapeless that we Southerners can hardly understand their language."

The text also describes how the north-south differences formed a continuum. The people at one end couldn't understand the people at the other end. But in the middle around Mercia, the dialects were sort of a blend between the two extremes, so the people in the Midlands could understand the people at both ends. Here's the passage in Modern English and then in the original Middle English of John Trevisa:

'Therefore Mercians, that are the men of the middle of England, and as it were partners of the end, understand better the language to their sides, the Northern and Southern, than the Northerners and Southerners understand each other.'

And now in Middle English:

"Perfore hyt ys þat mercii, þat buþ men of myddel engelond, as hyt were parteners of þe endes, vnderstondeþ betre þe syde ongages, norþeron and souþeron, þan norþeron and souþeron vnderstondeþ eyþer oþer."

Now this is another very important statement because it provides a clue about the ultimate destiny of English. If English was to survive, a dialect had to emerge as a standard form for the whole country to follow. And in order to that to happen, it needed to be a dialect from the middle of the country.

A northern dialect was incomprehensible in the south. And the traditional Wessex dialect of the south was of little use in the north. But the people in the Midlands spoke a dialect that could be understood by the people at both ends. So if light was to be brought to the Dark Ages of English, it would have to come from the Midlands.

And since we know that English did survive those Dark Ages, you might have already figured out where this story is headed. As we work our way through the Middle English period, one of the underlying themes is going to be slow, gradual emergence of the East Midlands dialect as the new standard for English. That dialect region included London, and London was about to emerge as the new capital of England. London was also home to Geoffrey Chaucer, who was probably the most important writer of the entire Middle English period. His writings confirmed the re-emergence of English as a literary language in the 1300s. The East Midlands region also included Oxford and Cambridge, and those two towns were about to become home to great universities. All of that contributed to the prestige of the East Midlands dialect throughout the Middle English period.

So in that sense, the resurrection and rise of English from its lowly state in the 1100s is directly tied to the rise of towns and cities like London, Oxford and Cambridge.

So that's where we will turn our attention next time. We'll see how London started to emerge as the national capital during the reign of Henry I. We'll also look at life in the emerging towns and villages. And we'll start to see how the monks at Peterborough refused to give up on English as a written language. Peterborough also happens to be located in the East Midlands. And the Peterborough monks maintained their English version of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle even after a fire destroyed their original copy. After they found an old version of the Chronicle and copied it, they decided to keep it going. But they did so in a unique way. Going forward, they decided to compose all of the new entries in their own local vernacular – the way people actually spoke. It represented a new era of English. The West Saxon mask was removed and English could finally present its true self. And that true self was the beginning of Middle English.

So we'll look at those developments next time. Until then, thanks for listening to the History of English Podcast.