

**THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH PODCAST
TRANSCRIPT**

**EPISODE 88:
THE LONG AND SHORT OF IT**

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Welcome to the History of English Podcast – a podcast about the history of the English language. This is Episode 88: The Long and Short of It. In this episode, we’re going to turn our attention to the changing vowel sounds of Middle English. And we’re also going to explore the concept of long vowels versus short vowels. This concept has been around since Old English, and it created problems for early scribes because there was no way to distinguish those sounds with the limited letters of the alphabet. But in the late 1100s, a scribe in the East Midlands came up with a way to distinguish long vowels from short vowels. That scribe was Orm – the man who composed that Middle English text called the *Ormulum*. So this time, we’ll see how he dealt with this problem. And we’ll see how Orm’s reforms mirror certain spelling techniques that are still used in Modern English.

But before we begin, let me remind you that the website for the podcast is historyofenglishpodcast.com. And you can sign up to support the podcast at [Patreon.com](https://www.patreon.com/historyofenglishpodcast). Just go to historyofenglishpodcast.com and link from there.

So last time, we looked at consonant sounds in early Middle English. And we examined how French scribes applied the alphabet to those sounds. This time, we’re going to shift our focus to the vowels. Unfortunately, the story of the vowels is a bit more complicated than the consonants. And that’s because vowel sounds are inherently fluid and variable. Unlike consonants, which tend to be pronounced in very specific parts of the mouth, vowels are pronounced in the open part of the mouth cavity. The actual sounds are shaped by the tongue. So that allows us to move the vowel sounds around in the mouth with relative ease. We can even make them flow into each other. So I can say A-E-I-O-U without ever pausing between them. One vowel sound flows right into the next.

That means that vowel sounds have a tendency to shift and change over time. And it also means that vowel sounds have been variable throughout the history of English. At any given time in history, people in different parts of the English-speaking world have pronounced their vowels a little bit differently. And that’s still true today. It gives life to the many different English accents that exist around the world today.

The problem with all of this is that we don’t really have a good way to represent all of the English vowel sounds with our alphabet. There simply aren’t enough letters for all of the vowels that exist in English.

If you’re like me, you probably learned in school that there are six vowel letters in the alphabet – A, E, I, O, U and sometimes Y. And that’s true. But the problem is that Modern English has at least a dozen different vowel sounds. And I say “at least” because there is some variation among English dialects. And, in addition to that, we also have 9 different diphthongs which are vowel sounds formed by putting two different vowel sounds together thereby producing a new vowel sound.

We can hear some of those different vowel sounds in the following words: *bead, bid, bed, bad, bard, bod, board, bud, bood, bird, bayed, bode, bide, bowed, boyd, beard, baird* and *bored*. That’s 18

different vowel sounds. Again, there are a few more that we could add to the list, but we only have 6 vowel letters to work with.

That means that our vowel letters have to do double-duty – and sometimes triple duty. Take the letter A. We use it for the /ay/ sound in words like *fate* and *hate*. But we also use it for the /æ/ sound as in the words *fat* and *hat*. And sometimes we use it for /ah/ sound in words like *father* and *calm*.

And think about the number of ways we use the letter O. We use it for the /oh/ sound of ‘so,’ and the /oo/ sound of ‘do,’ the ‘uh’ sound of ‘son,’ and the /ah/ sound of ‘got.’ And we sometimes give it other pronunciations as well.

So we ask our modern vowel letters to do a lot of work. And frankly, it’s a bit of a mess in Modern English. Most scholars think that the vowel letters were more orderly and consistent in Old English. As we know, the Anglo-Saxons had borrowed the alphabet from Latin. And the vowel letters represented specific vowel sounds in Latin. So those letters originally represented the same sounds in Old English.

But even during Old English, a vowel sound could be pronounced long or short. And when I say long and short – I mean literally long or short. Sometimes a vowel sound was stretched out a little bit, and sometimes it was pronounced short and quick.

Now we still talk about long and short vowels in Modern English, and today that really refers to slightly different sounds or tonal qualities. But in Old English, it really meant a more literal time difference.

So when we talk about long and short vowels in Old or Middle English, we’re not necessarily talking about the same sounds that we have in Modern English. In fact, in most cases, the sounds were completely different.

The best way to break this down is probably to go through the sounds letter by letter. So let’s start with letter A.

In Old English, letter A represented the ‘ah’ sound – still found in a word like *father*. That was really the long sound. When pronounced short, it was basically the same sound pronounced much more quickly. So long /aahh/ and short /ah/.

Now again, the vowel sounds have changed over the centuries. So today, when we talk about the long A and the short A, we’re talking about the /ay/ sound and the /æ/ sound. It’s the difference between *hate* and *hat*. *Hate* has the long sound, and *hat* has the short sound. But again, these sounds represent more recent developments in the language.

So what about letter E? Well, in Old English, it represented the /ay/ sound. Today, we generally have to look for borrowed words to find the letter E representing that sound. We see it in a word like *café* from French. That was the original long sound. But when that sound was pronounced short and

quick, the overall sound and quality of the vowel tended to change. Long /aaay/ became short /eh/. And that's actually a different sound or phoneme. So letter E actually represented two different sounds – /aaay/ and /eh/. Now we still use that same short /eh/ sound in Modern English. We see it in words like *pet* and *set*. But today, the long sound of E is /ee/. In fact, there's an easy rule to help you remember that. Today, the long sound of a vowel letter is the actual name of the letter. So the long sound of letter E is /ee/ – as in *enough* and *even*. So again, E had kept its traditional short sound, but it has acquired a new long sound.

What about letter I? In Old English, the letter I represented the /ee/ sound – as in *king* and *ring* and *think*. So we can see how these sounds have gotten mixed up. When that long /ee/ sound was pronounced short, it came out as /ih/. So that was the short sound of I. And again, we still use the letter I for that short sound. We see it in words like *sit* and *hit*. But the long sound of I has changed to its current name – /eye/ – as in *bike* and *time*. So again, letter I has kept its traditional short sound, but it has acquired a new long sound.

Now let's turn to letter O. In Old English, letter O represented the /oh/ sound which we find in words like *no* and *so*. The short sound was something like /o/. We don't really have that short sound in Modern English, so it's hard to present it here. Now in Modern English, we know that the long sound of O is the same as its name – so it is /oh/ – as in *hope* or *boat* or *go*. But linguists would tell you that the modern /oh/ sound is little different from the traditional Old English sound. The modern sound is really a diphthong. But just to keep this simple, we can say that the modern sound is very similar to the traditional sound.

The what about the short sound of O? Well, I noted that the original short sound has disappeared, and today the pronunciation of that short sound actually varies. We can hear the short sound in a word like *lot*. But Americans and Brits tend to pronounce *lot* a little bit differently. Standard American English pronounces the short O as /ah/ – *lot*. But in standard British English, the short O is not quite as open. It comes out more like /lot/. So American /laht/ and British /lot/. Well, that's close enough that you can get the idea.

So all of that means that the long sound of O is still very similar to the original Old English sound, but the short sound has changed over time.

So that takes us to letter U. In Old English, it represented the /oo/ sound which we hear in words like *clue* or *true*. But when pronounced short, it came out as /u:/ – as in *put* and *look*. But what about today? Well, today, the long sound of letter U is its name – /yoo/ – as in *tube* and *cube*. But the traditional Old English long sound – /oo/ – still survives. We hear it in *rude*. Now there is a very subtle difference there – /yoo/ and /oo/. /yoo/ has a little 'y' sound at the beginning. And sometimes, we hear both pronunciations as in /tyube/ – and /toob/. Anyway, either pronunciation can be considered a long pronunciation of the letter U.

So what about the short sound? Well, as I noted, it was originally the /u:/ sound in *put* and *look*. And that's still the short sound in some places like the north of England. But in most of the English speaking world, it has shifted to the /uh/ sound in words like *hut* and *cup* and *shut*.

So again, we still hear the traditional long and short sounds of U in words like *rude* and *put*. But today, official long and short sounds can be heard in words like *cube* and *cub*.

Now I should note that the Anglo-Saxons also used to other letters as vowels. Just like today, they also used the letter Y as a vowel, but it represented a very specific sound which we no longer have in Modern English. It was the /ü/ sound which is still found in other languages like French. You basically pronounce the /ee/ sound with rounded lips. So the letter Y was used for that sound. And it could also be pronounced either long or short.

The Anglo-Saxons also had a letter called ‘ash’ which I mentioned in the last episode. It was one of those unique Anglo-Saxon letters, and it looked like an ‘A’ and an ‘E’ pushed together. It represented the /æ/ sound which we have in words like *hat* and *bad*. So the sound has shifted to the Modern short sound of letter A. Again, in Old English, the letter ash could be pronounced both long and short.

So that’s a quick overview of the difference between Old English vowels and Modern English vowels. Obviously, there has been a lot of change over the centuries. The sounds have gotten all mixed up in English. And the major culprit here is the series of sound changes known as the Great Vowel Shift. Those changes will take place a little later in our story of English in the 1400s and 1500s. So I’m not going to go through the details here. We just have to keep in mind that the vowel letters once represented very different sounds.

The other important thing to keep in mind about these vowel letters is that the length of the sounds have always varied. Each vowel letter has always represented a short sound and a long sound. And as I noted earlier, that created a lot of problems for scribes over the centuries because there was no accepted way to distinguish those long and short sounds.

So when an Anglo-Saxon scribe spelled the word G-O-D, it could be pronounced as either /god/ or /goad/. /god/ referred to a deity, and it’s the early version of our modern word *God*. Meanwhile, /goad/ referred to something pleasant or nice, and it’s the early version of our word *good*. Today, we distinguish those words by giving *good* an extra O. But in Old English, both words were spelled the same way.

Let’s also consider the word that was spelled I-S. When pronounced as /is/, it was the original version of our modern word *is*. But when it was pronounced as /ees/, it was the original version of our modern word *ice*. Again, those words have different spellings today, but they were spelled the same way in Old English.

So Old English didn’t really have a way to distinguish these pronunciations in writing. And that created confusion. Scribes had to rely upon context to make the meaning clear. They assumed that no one would confuse *God* and *good* – and *is* and *ice*.

Now today, we have some words that are spelled the same way but have different pronunciations and different meanings – words like *bass* and *bass*, and *bow* and *bow*, and *live* and *live*. But there are only a few of those, and context will still make the meaning clear. But in Old English, this was a

much common problem because there were lots and lots of these words where the pronunciation of the vowel made all the difference. And in writing, there was no way to indicate that difference.

So that was the state of things in Old English. And then the Normans arrived. And when French-trained scribes tried to write down English words, they felt the need to distinguish those pronunciations. That was especially true if the text was intended to be read aloud. And that was problem that Orm encountered when he composed the Ormulum.

As we know, the Ormulum was one of the first major documents composed in English after the Norman Conquest. It was a religious document, and Orm intended it to be read aloud to English-speaking congregations. The people who would be reading from the text were likely to be priest, and many of them spoke French as their native language. Some didn't speak English at all, and the ones who did probably didn't speak it very well. Orm knew that they would have a problem pronouncing all of those English vowels. And if the vowels were pronounced incorrectly, the English congregations wouldn't understand the message.

Orm was apparently very concerned about this problem. So he invented a way to distinguish the long vowels from the short vowels in the Ormlum. And he used it consistently throughout the text.

The main technique he used was to double the consonant after a short vowel. So take the examples I used earlier. The words G-O-D and I-S. When those words were pronounced with a long vowel – like /goad/ or /ees/ – Orm would have left them as they were – G-O-D and I-S. But when the words were pronounced with a short vowel – like /god/ or /is/ – Orm would double the consonant after the vowel – so G-O-D-D and I-S-S.

The reason why we know that Orm did this on purpose is because he tells us so in the text itself. In the Preface to the Ormulum, he specifically states that he wants copiers to pay attention to his double letters. He says that those letters should be copied and written down twice just as he had written them. So he wanted scribes to make sure that they copied his spellings letter-for-letter. And that was actually unusual because spellings were very fluid at the time. There were no dictionaries, and there were no standard spellings. So scribes were free to innovate and add their own personal touches. But Orm instructed other scribes to stick to his original spellings and leave them as they were. Here is what he wrote – first in a Modern English translation, then in the original early Middle English.

And whoever shall will this book to be written again at another time,
Annd wha-se wilenn shall þiss boc efft operr sipe writenn.

him I ask that he write it down right in the same way that this book teaches him.
himm bidde icc þatt he't write riht, swa-summ þiss boc himm tæcheþþ.

all after the way that it is, upon this first example
all þwerrt-ut affterr þatt itt iss uppo þiss firrste bisne,

with all such rhyme as here is set with all the many words;
wiþþ all swillc rime alls her iss sett, wiþþ all þe fele wordess;

And I ask that he look well that a letter is written twice.
annd tatt he loke wel þatt he an bocstaff write twi33ess,

Everywhere that it upon this book is written in that way
e33whær þær itt uppo þiss boc iss writenn o þatt wise.

Look well that he it wrote so,
loke he well þatt he't wrote swa,

for he must not else in English write rightly the word that he should know well for sure.
forr he ne ma33 nohht elless onn Ennglissh writenn riht te word, þatt wite he wel to soþe.

So Orm developed this unique spelling system, and he wanted to make sure that any scribe who copied his words followed that system.

Now I should note that modern scholars have been able to determine most of the original vowel sounds in Old English words. They did that in part by comparing Old English words with related words in the other Germanic languages. But Orm makes it crystal clear, and that's why his spellings are really a goldmine for historical linguists.

His spellings not only confirm that vowels were pronounced both long and short, they also confirm that the vowels were undergoing changes at that time when he was writing in the late 1100s.

For example, let's consider the word *Christ*. The name has the long I sound today – /Christ/. But remember that the original long sound of the letter I was actually /ee/ – as in *king* and *ring*. So the name was pronounced /Chreest/ in Old English and early Middle English. And Orm confirms this with his spellings. He spells the name C-R-I-S-T. He doesn't double the S, so that confirms that the letter I was pronounced long – as /ee/.

But when he writes down the word *Cristenndom*, he doubles the S. He spells it C-R-I-S-S-T-E-N-N-D-O-M. So it was /Creest/ but /kris-ten-dom/. And that's the same distinction we have today. We pronounce the name with a long vowel as /Christ/, but we pronounce the words *Christian* and *Christmas* with a short vowel. And thanks to Orm, we know that this distinction was already in place in the late 1100s.

Historical linguists have developed some very specific and very complicated rules to try to explain why long vowels became short, and vice versa. And I'm not going to attempt to go through all of those here. But one of those rules is that the first syllable tended to be pronounced short in a 3-syllable word. Since a word like *Christ* is a single syllable, it tended to retain its long sound. But a word like *Christendom* is three syllables, so the first syllable tended to be pronounced quick and short. That might explain the difference that Orm noted between *Christ* and *Christendom*.

This rule also explains some other pronunciations in Modern English. Take the word *halibut* – for a type of fish. It was a type of fish that was often eaten on holy days. And an Old English word for a flatfish was *butte*. So this particular fish was called a *hali-butte* – literally a ‘holy fish.’ And of course, we still have the word *holy*. But notice that *holy* is pronounced with a long /oh/ sound – /holy/. But *halibut* is pronounced with a short /æ/ sound – /hæl-eh-but/. Theoretically, it should be pronounced /holy-but/, but it’s a 3-syllable word. And over time, that first syllable tended to be pronounced short. So it became /hæl-eh-but/ instead of /holy-but/.

This rule also helps to explain the difference between the words *south* and *southern*. Notice that it’s not *south* and ‘*south-ern*’ – its *southern*. The /ow/ sound in *south* is a diphthong, so it tends to be pronounced long. But *southern* has a short vowel – the /uh/ sound. Well, all of this starts to make some sense when we consider that the word *south* was originally pronounced /sooth/, and *southern* was pronounced /soo-ther-neh/. So it was a 3-syllable word. And like most 3-syllable words, the vowel in the first syllable became short over time. So it went from /soo-ther-neh/ – to /suh-ther-neh/ – to /southern/. And that gave us the modern distinction between *south* and *southern*.

Anyway, when Orm tells us that *Christ* had a long vowel, but *Christendom* had a short vowel, he is confirming that some of these types of changes had already taken place by the late 1100s. And that’s important because it confirms that vowel sounds were shifting in this period between Old English and Middle English. We don’t have to wait for the Great Vowel Shift in the 1400s and 1500s to find vowel changes. They were already changing a few centuries earlier.

So that’s why scholars are so fascinated by the Ormulum. It documents a lot of changes that were taking place at the time. And if other scribes would have adopted this spelling technique, we would probably know even more about the pronunciation of Middle English vowels. But unfortunately, Orm’s spellings didn’t gain widespread acceptance at the time. Scribes had to write each letter by hand, and doubling the consonants meant that there were a lot more letters to write down. That made the text longer, and it required more time to write or copy. So even if other scribes came across Orm’s system, they weren’t inclined to use it.

But as the Middle English period progressed, scribes increasingly realized that they needed to find a way to distinguish the sounds of the vowels. They needed to come up with ways to indicate if a vowel was pronounced short or long. And they came up with several techniques to show the difference.

I’m going to discuss some of the techniques they came up with in the next episode, but I should note here that one of the techniques they invented was this exact same technique that Orm used in the late 1100s. The later scribes also doubled the consonant after a short vowel. Now there is no evidence to suggest that they actually borrowed this technique from Orm. It appears that later scribes came up with the same idea on their own. But either way, we still use this technique today.

Think about the difference between *hoping* and *hopping*. *Hoping* has the long vowel – /oh/. And it is spelled H-O-P-I-N-G. But *hopping* has the short vowel – /ah/. And notice how it is spelled – H-O-P-P-I-N-G. You may not have ever realized it, but that double P is telling you something. It’s telling you to pronounce the preceding O short. So *hopping* instead of *hoping*.

Here are some other examples. Compare *write* and *written*. *Write* has a long I spelled W-R-I-T-E. But *written* has a short I, and its spelled W-R-I-T-T-E-N. So the double T tells you to pronounce the I short.

What about *diner* and *dinner*? *Diner* has the long vowel, and it's spelled D-I-N-E-R. But *dinner* has the short vowel spelled D-I-N-N-E-R. Again, the double N tells you to pronounced the I short.

Compare *taping* and *tapping*. Same thing. *Taping* has a long A and it's followed by a single P, and *tapping* has a short A and it's followed by a double P.

And also consider *biter* and *bitter*. Again, *biter* has a long vowel with a single T, and *bitter* has a short vowel with a double T.

So we still use Orm's spelling system, even though it appears that later scribes came up with the same idea independently of Orm.

Now all of this raises a very interesting question. Why would later scribes have come up with the same idea as Orm? It seems odd that they developed the exact same idea on their own a few centuries later. Well, the answer isn't really clear, but it seems that Orm and these later scribes were picking up on the same idea. In Old English and Middle English, there was a tendency to pronounce a vowel as a short vowel if it appeared before doubled consonants. So scribes just extended this idea by doubling consonants after short vowels. So let me try to unpack that for you.

Let's consider how letters were pronounced in Old English. Remember that there were no dictionaries yet and no standard spellings. Almost all words were spelled phonetically. Scribes didn't really have all of the complicated spelling rules that we have today. So when a scribe spelled a word, he tried to spell it exactly like it sounded. And that's why Old English spellings vary so much. But they also reveal how words were typically pronounced at the time.

So when a scribe wrote down a double consonant – like TT, or SS, or BB – he was usually indicating that both consonants were pronounced. So it would be like the sound we hear if we actually pronounced both consonants in /hop-ping/ – and /bit-ter/ – and /tap-ping/. So both consonants would be pronounced back-to-back. Otherwise, the scribe would just write a single consonant. So why is that so important? Well, in that situation, where one syllable ends in a certain consonant sound, and the next syllable begins with the same sound, there is a natural tendency to pronounce the first vowel as a short vowel.

Now this fact is important for two reasons. First, as I noted, Orm and other scribes probably noticed this tendency, and they decided to use it as a way to distinguish short vowels from long vowels.

But the other reason why this linguistic tendency is important is because it helps to explain some other changes that took place during this period. Sometimes the pronunciation of a word changed so that it acquired this double consonant sound in the middle. Before the change, it had a long vowel, but after this change, there was tendency to shorten that initial vowel. So let me give you a few examples.

Take the word *bleed*. In Old English, it was *blēde* (/blay-deh/) – usually spelled B-L-E-D-E. So it had a long vowel and a single D after that vowel sound. Nothing surprising there. But in the past tense, the single D became a double D. So it went from *blēde* (/blay-deh/) to *blēdde* (/blayd-deh/). And the spellings tend to reflect that with that double D. The past tense version is usually spelled B-L-E-D-D-E. Well, as we just saw, when a vowel appeared before a double consonant, it tended to be pronounced short. So the pronunciation shifted from /blayd-deh/ to /bled-deh/. And if you followed that, now you know why we have present tense *bleed* and past tense *bled*. *Bleed* has the long vowel sound – /ee/, and *bled* has the short vowel sound – /eh/. And *bled* has that short vowel because it once had a double D at the end.

The same thing happened with *feed* and *fed*. The present tense word was *fēde* (/fay-deh/) – F-E-D-E. But in past tense, it became *fēdde* (/fayd-deh/) – with a double D. So in that environment, (/fayd-deh/) became (/fed-deh/). And that gave us the modern distinction between *feed* and *fed*.

The same thing happened with *meet* and *met*. The present tense word was *mēte* (/may-teh/) – M -E-T-E. But in past tense, it became *mētte* (/mate-teh/) – with a double T. So in that environment, (/mate-teh/) became (/met-teh/). And that gave us the modern distinction between *meet* and *met*.

This also happened with *hide* and *hid*. The present tense word was *hyde* (/hü-deh/) – H-Y-D-E. But in past tense, it became *hydde* (/hüd-deh/) – with a double D. So in that environment, (/hüd-deh/) became (/hid-deh/). And that gave us the modern distinction between *hide* and *hid*.

So let's think about what was going on there. Because if you can understand the dynamics at work, you can get a really good sense of how short vowels and long vowels work in Modern English. Why did those double consonants change the vowel sound?

Well, the answer has to do with that first syllable in a two syllable word. So let's focus on that initial syllable. Compare *blēde* (/blay-deh/) and *blēdde* (/blayd-deh/). The initial syllable goes from /blay/ to /blayd/. In the case of /blay/, the vowel sound /ay/ is left at the end of the syllable. Linguists call that an open syllable because there is nothing to box the vowel in. It is just hanging there at the end. So when the vowel in the first syllable of a two syllable word is left open, it tends to be pronounced long.

So let's consider the second example – /blayd/ – with a D on the end. Now the vowel in that initial syllable is boxed in at the end. So again from /blay/ to /blayd/. When that D is added to the end of that first syllable, it is called a closed syllable. It's closed because of that consonant at the end of the syllable. And in an initial syllable, when a vowel is closed in this manner, it tends to be pronounced short. And that explains why those double consonants were so important.

A single consonant was usually pronounced at the beginning of the second syllable, and that left the first syllable open and long. So listen. *blēde* (/blay-deh/) – *fēde* (/fay-deh/) – *mēte* (/may-teh/) – *hyde* (/hü-deh/). All of those initial syllables were left open. So the vowel remained long. That gave us *bleed*, *feed*, *meet* and *hide* – all with long vowels.

But when the consonant was doubled, it was now pronounced at the end of the first syllable and the beginning of the second syllable. So that had the effect of closing the first syllable. That initial vowel was now boxed in with that consonant on the end, and in made the vowel pronunciation short. So listen. *blēdde* (/bled-deh/) – *fēdde* (/fed-deh/) – *mētte* (/met-teh/) – *hydde* (/hid-deh/). And that gave us *bled*, *fed*, *met* and *hid* – all with short vowels

If you understand this basic idea, and you understand that a lot of our modern one-syllable words once had two syllables, then the history of English vowels starts to make a lot more sense.

What we're looking for are 2-syllable words where the first syllable ended in a consonant and the second syllable began with a consonant. That was the perfect setup for a vowel to become short. It happened with those double consonants, but it could happen in other situations as well.

That's how we got the difference between *keep* and *kept*. *Keep* was *cēpe* (kay-peh) in Old English. /KAY-peh/ with a long /ay/ sound. The first syllable ended in that vowel sound, so the vowel stayed long. And it gave us the modern word *keep* with its long E sound. But in past tense, the word was *cēpte* (kape-the), so a T sound was added in the middle. Now the first syllable ended in a P and the second syllable began with a T. Again, *cēpte* (kape-the). Now we have that perfect setup. The first syllable ended in a consonant the second syllable began with a consonant. So the first vowel was shortened over time. And it became /kep-teh/. And thus, modern *keep* with its long vowel and *kept* with its short vowel.

This rule also helps to explain the difference between *five*, *fifteen* and *fifty*. *Five* has a long I sound, but *fifteen* and *fifty* have a short I sound. Again, this general rule explains the difference. As I noted, *five* had a long I sound in Old English, and it has retained that sound over time in part because it is a one syllable word. But when suffixes were added to the word to create *fifteen* and *fifty*, we now have our classic setup – a 2-syllable word where the first syllable ends in a consonant and the second syllable begins with a consonant. That shortened the first vowel. So again, we ended up with *five* with its long vowel and *fifteen* and *fifty* with their short vowels.

Another pair of words that developed through this same basic process were the words *wise* and *wisdom*. *Wise* was a single syllable word with a long vowel, so it has kept a long vowel over the centuries. But when the word *wise* was converted into a noun, the suffix *-dom* was added to the end. That made it a 2-syllable word. Again, we have our classic setup. A 2-syllable word where the first syllable ended in a consonant and the second syllable began with a consonant. That meant that the first vowel tended to be pronounced short. So we ended up with the modern distinction between *wise* and *wisdom*.

This process also gave us the difference between *break* and *breakfast*. As a single syllable word, *break* had a long vowel, and when *fast* was added to the end, we have the scenario where that first vowel became short. And '*break-fast*' became '*breakfast*.'

Now up to this point, we've been focusing on long vowels that became short, but I should note that this same process also worked in the other direction. It could also convert a short vowel into a long vowel.

In our classic set-up, we have a 2-syllable word where the first syllable ends in a consonant and the second syllable begins with a consonant. That shortened the first vowel. But if the first syllable ended in a vowel – a so-called ‘open syllable’ – the vowel tended to stay long.

We sometimes we had this setup with a short vowel at the beginning, and because it was an open syllable, people tended to stretch it long. That was especially true if the syllable was stressed – or emphasized – in the pronunciation.

Were it not for this process, the word *bake* would probably be pronounced as /back/ today. It had a short vowel in Old English, and it probably would have kept that vowel. It was actually a 2-syllable word – *bacan* (/bah-can/). So that initial syllable was open – in ended in a vowel – the short /ah/ sound. But in that environment, people tended pull on that vowel in that open syllable. And the word evolved from *bacan* (/bah-can/) to *bāken* (/baahh-ken/) with a longer vowel. And after the Great Vowel Shift, it became *bake*.

The same process gave words like *hope*, *ride*, *smoke* and *nose* their long vowel sounds. They originally had short vowels.

There was also another process that was working to stretch out short vowels and make them long. And this process didn’t require a 2-syllable word. It worked even in single-syllable words. There were certain consonant combinations that also tended to pull on the preceding vowel and make it long.

One of those was the sound created when you put an L and D together. That is the sound at the end of words like *bold* and *cold*. When a short vowel appeared before this ‘-ld’ sound, it tended to become long. This is why the word *tell* has a short vowel sound, and *told* has a long vowel sound. That ‘-ld’ converted *tealde* into *told*.

We can also hear this vowel lengthening in the words *shield* and *shelter*. Did you know that those two words are related? The original word was *sceld* (/sheld/) with a short E sound. It meant ‘shield’ just like today. And over time, that ‘-ld’ at the end of *sceld* pulled that E and made it long. Today, the standard pronunciation is /sheeld/ with a long vowel sound.

Now when warriors were fighting in combat, they would protect themselves from arrows or other projectiles by placing their shields above their heads, thereby forming a shield wall above their heads. And from the word *sceld* (/sheld/), we got the word *shelter* to describe that type of protective cover. But note that *shelter* doesn’t have that particular ‘-ld’ sound to pull on the vowel. So the vowel remained short. And that gave us the difference between *shelter* and *shield*.

The same thing happened with *child* and *children*. These words actually came up in an early episode of the podcast. There was the question of why we have one *child* – with a long I sound – but several *children* with a short I sound. Well, now we know the answer.

In Old English, the word was *cild* (/chihld/) with a short I sound. But that ‘-ld’ after the I tended to stretch out the sound and make the I a long I. It became /cheeld/. And Orm actually spelled the word

as C-H-I-L-D. He didn't double the L, so that tends to confirm that the letter I was pronounced as a long I at the time he wrote the Ormulum. And after the Great Vowel Shift, when the sound of the long I shifted from /ee/ to /eye/, the word /cheeeld/ became *child* with its modern long I sound. So all of that makes sense, but what about *children*? Why didn't *children* become /child-ren/.

Where the answer is a quirky little exception. The pull of the '-ld' was negated where there was a second syllable that began with a consonant. This is basically our classic setup that we saw earlier where vowels tended to stay short. And that's what happened here. *Children* retained its original short I at the beginning. That second syllable negated the pull of the '-ld' sound.

This process also explains the difference between *mild* and *Mildred*. Did you know that the name *Mildred* came from the word *mild*? It actually combines the original version of the word *mild* with the word *ðryð* meaning power or strength. So '*Mildðryð*' meant 'mild strength.' It was an Old English name. And the same thing that happened here that happened with *child* and *children*. As a single syllable word, that '-ld' pulled on the vowel and converted /mild/ into *mild*. But as a 2-syllable word, *Midred* retained its short vowel.

When you compare *mild* and *Mildred* – and *child* and *children* – you can hear something going on there, you just might not have known what it was. Well, now you know.

This process also explains the difference between *old*, *elder* and *eldest*. The original Old English word was 'eald' (/eld/) with a short vowel. And again, that -ld at the end pulled on the vowel and made it long. Over time /eld/ became ald (/aahhld/) with a long vowel, and after the Great Vowel Shift it became *old* with its modern long O. So in that single syllable version of the word, the vowel was made long.

But notice what happened in the versions with 2-syllables – *elder* and *eldest*. The second syllable negated that pull, and the first vowel remained short. By the early Modern English period, an English speaker would use the words *old*, *elder* and *eldest*. At that point, there was no such thing as *older* or *oldest*. But the influence of that long O in *old* eventually spread to those other two words. And in early Modern English, people started to say *older* and *oldest* instead of *elder* and *eldest*. Today, we have both versions of those words. But we only have one version of *old* – the version with the long vowel thanks to that '-ld' sound at the end.

So we've seen how that '-ld' sound tended to pull on the preceding vowel in a single syllable word. Well, the exact same thing happened with you put an N and a D together. That's the sound at the end of words like *sound* and *found* and *find*. That '-nd' combination also pulled short vowels and made them long.

So let's look at a few of those examples. Let's consider the words *kin* and *kind*. They both come from the same Old English root word which had a short vowel. That original root word could mean family or relatives, but it could also meant a part or portion of something larger. And if you think about it, your family is a portion or subset of a larger community or group of people. So that was the connection between the two meanings. *Kin* ended in a simple 'n' sound, so it kept its short vowel.

But *kind* ended in an ‘-nd’ sound, and that sound pulled the vowel and gave it the long I sound that it has today.

Orm actually used the word *kind* in the Ormulum, and he spelled it K-I-N-D-E. He didn’t double the N, so that seems to confirm that it had a long vowel sound in the late 1100s.

This same process also gave words like *bind*, *blind*, *grind* and *find* their long I sounds. And Orm confirms that *find* was also undergoing this change when he wrote the Ormulum. He spelled it F-I-N-D-E-N-N, which suggests that it had a long I sound.

This process also gave us the verb *wind* (/wynd/) its long I sound. But what about *wind* (/win-d/) – with its short I sound? What happened there? Why do we *wind* (/wynd/) a clock, but the *wind* (/win-d/) blows during a storm. Well, the answer is that both words were pronounced *wind* (/wynd/) at one time thanks to the pull of the ‘-nd’ at the end. Even Shakespeare spoke of the *wind* (/wynd/) that blows outside. And we know that he used that pronunciation because he rhymed it with words like *find*, *mind*, *unkind*, and *behind*. So why did the noun revert from *wind* (/wynd/) back to *wind* (/win-d/). Well, the answer probably lies in the word *windmill*.

The windmill was introduced to Europe from Persia – and it was a relatively new technology at the current point in our story in the 1100s. It was spreading around Europe, and in England, the word *windmill* first appears in a document composed in the late 1200s. But the word *windmill* was pronounced /wind-mill/ – not /wynd-mill/. So why was that? Well, remember, the pull of that ‘-nd’ sound was negated if there was a second syllable – especially a second syllable that began with a consonant. So that’s why we have *child* and *children*, *mild* and *Mildred*, *wise* and *wisdom*. And here, we got /wynd/ and *windmill*.

But it must have seemed odd to English speakers that windmills were powered by /wynd/. And it was probably inevitable that speakers would try to resolve that difference by pronouncing both words the same way. They could have gone with /wynd/ in both cases. They could have had /wynd/ powered /wyndmills/. But ultimately, they settled on *wind* and *windmill*. So *wind* reverted back to its original pronunciation with a short vowel.

I should note that there are exceptions to all of these rules, and in fact, there were a lot more rules and a lot more exceptions. But the important point to take from all of this is that long vowels and short vowels underwent a lot of changes in late Old English and early Middle English. Whatever the cause, it was a bit of a mess in early Middle English because scribes didn’t have a way to mark the differences in pronunciation.

Again, that’s why the Ormulum is so significant. It was one of the rare attempts to make those pronunciations clear. But Orm’s spelling innovations didn’t gain widespread acceptance at the time. Later scribes would have to figure all of this out. They would have to come up with their own spelling innovations to represent the English vowel sounds.

The good news is that later scribes did just that. They actually solved a lot of these problems. The bad news is that the Great Vowel Shift was yet to happen. And when it did happen, all of those

spellings became antiquated and they no longer reflected the way a lot of words were actually pronounced. Furthermore, English continued to borrow lots of words from other languages. And most of those words came in with their own unique spellings. But nevertheless, we do have some general rules to handle the spelling of vowels in English. And next time, I'm going to shift focus from the pronunciation of the vowel sounds to the actual spelling of those sounds.

We'll look at how Middle English scribes tried to sort through some of these spelling issues, and we'll see how they came up with some of the general spelling rules that we still use today. And you might not even realize that you're using specific rules. But they're there. So we'll look at those rules next time.

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