

**THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH PODCAST
TRANSCRIPT**

**EPISODE 96:
FROM ALPHA TO OMEGA**

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Welcome to the History of English Podcast – a podcast about the history of the English language. This is Episode 96: From Alpha to Omega. In this episode, we’re going to look at an early vowel shift that took place in early Middle English. This vowel shift helps to illustrate a basic link between the ‘A’ sound and the ‘O’ sound throughout the history of English. As we look at this sound change, we’ll also continue our overall historical narrative, and we’ll explore the bitter feud between King John and the man who was Pope during his reign. That man was Pope Innocent III. And we’ll see how that feud led to the closing of all the Churches in England during John’s reign.

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/historyofenglish. And as always, you can reach me by email at kevin@historyofenglishpodcast.com

So let’s turn to this episode, and this time, I want to begin the story far away from England and far away from the early Middle English period. I actually want to begin in Greece and the first Greek alphabet that was developed nearly 3000 years ago. As we know, the Greeks didn’t invent the alphabet – they borrowed it from the Phoenicians. And the Phoenicians spoke a Semitic language which was very rich in consonant sounds, but was more limited in its vowel sounds. In fact, the Semitic alphabet didn’t have any letters for vowel sounds. But the Greek language was just the opposite. It was very rich in vowel sounds. And when the Greeks borrowed the Phoenician alphabet, they needed to create letters for the vowels.

Now the Greeks could have just made up some new letters, but what they chose to do instead was to take some of the extra Phoenician letters that they didn’t need, and they just used those for the Greek vowel sounds. That’s what they did with the first letter which was called *aleph* in the Phoenician alphabet. It represented a consonant sound that the Greeks didn’t have, so the Greeks used it to represent the /ah/ vowel sound. And *aleph* became *alpha* in the Greek alphabet. And it retained its position at the front of the line. Of course, this is the ultimate ancestor of our modern letter A, and it remains the first letter of the alphabet to this day. But rather than its Modern English /ay/ sound, it originally had the /ah/ sound. And throughout the Middle Ages, most western European scribes used the letter A for that /ah/ sound.

Now in the middle of the Phoenician alphabet was a letter that came after the early version of letter N and before the early version of letter P. So it occupied the position of our modern letter O, and in fact it was the original version of letter O. But again, it represented a consonant sound. It was a guttural consonant sound in the back of the throat that didn’t exist in Greek. The letter was called ‘ayin’ which meant ‘eye,’ and the letter was originally a simple representation of an eyeball. So it was circle-shaped. Once again, the Greeks took this letter and decided to use it for their /oh/ vowel sound. And this became the letter O.

Now as I've noted before, vowel sounds can be pronounced short or long, and the Greeks used their individual vowel letters for both the long and short sounds – just like we do today. But sometime between 600 BC and 700 BC, the Greeks decided that they needed to distinguish the short 'O' sound from the long 'O' sound. So they decided to use their early version of letter O in the middle of the alphabet for the short 'O' sound – like in *hop* or *dog*, and they decided to create a new letter O for the long 'O' sound – /oh/ – like in *hope* or *snow*. The original letter O came to be known as 'O micron' – which meant 'the little O' – since it represented the short O sound. The new letter O was called 'Omega' – which meant 'the big O' – since it represented the long O sound. Since this new letter O called *Omega* was a brand new letter, it was added to the end of the Greek alphabet.

By the time the Greeks came up with Omega as a distinct letter, the alphabet had already been adopted by the Etruscans, and from there was on its way to being adopted by the Romans, and then the Anglo-Saxons. So those versions of the alphabet never had Omega at the end. The original letter O in the middle of the alphabet was used for both the long and short sounds of O. And that's the way we still use it today.

But the Greek version of the alphabet was different in that it had Omega at the end. So the Greek alphabet began and ended with a vowel. The first letter was alpha – or A – and the last letter was Omega – the 'big O.' Whereas today, we might describe the entirety of something as "everything from A to Z" (or "A to zed"), the Greeks referred to "everything from alpha to omega."

Most of the New Testament of the Bible was composed in Greek, and this helps to explain the context for the well-known passage from Revelations where Christ speaks through an angel and says, "I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, the first and the last." This passage uses the names of the Greek letters *alpha* and *omega* to illustrate the idea of being the first and the last.

So by this point, you're probably asking, "What do the Greek letters alpha and omega have to do with Middle English in the early 1200s?" Well, the English language has experienced several important sound changes over its history. But around the current point in our story, an important early vowel shift occurred. The Old English long /ah/ sound – represented by letter A – started to change – and it eventually evolved into our modern /oh/ sound – represented by letter O. So this vowel change was essentially a shift from A to O – or in the language of the Greeks – from alpha to omega. Again, the changes began in early Middle English, but it was really a two-step process. The first step took place around the current point in our story, and the second step took place during the Great Vowel Shift near the end of the Middle English period.

The net result of these changes is that most words that had the /ah/ sound in Old English have the /oh/ sound in Modern English. The Old English word *ban* (/bahn/)– spelled B-A-N – became our modern word *bone*. The Old English word *gat* (/gaht/) – spelled G-A-T – became our modern word *goat*. *Hlaf* became *loaf*. *Mast* became *most*. And *mal* became *mole*. There are many more examples of this basic sound change, and we'll look at a lot more as we go through this episode.

But before we go any further, let's take a closer look at the way this sound changed. When we talk about the changes that have occurred to English vowels over the centuries, we usually focus on the major set of changes that took place in the 1400s and 1500s – generally known as the Great Vowel Shift. This series of sound changes was one of the most important events in the history of English because all of the long vowel sounds shifted around. But vowel sounds were unstable in English throughout the Middle English period. There were some subtle shifts and changes before the Great Vowel Shift, but this early shift involving the /ah/ sound was more significant. So I wanted to focus on it in this episode.

I should also note that I talked about vowels back in Episodes 88 and 89. And I discussed some vowel changes in those episodes, but I mostly focused on changes in length or quantity. So I explained how some short vowels become long vowels, and long vowels that became short vowels. But I didn't discuss how one vowel sound shifted to a completely different vowel sound. That was a more significant change. And that type of change wasn't very common in Old English. But during the 1100s and 1200s, these types changes started to occur and they became more common throughout the Middle English period – culminating in the Great Vowel Shift.

As we look a little closer at vowel changes throughout the history of English, we see a consistent connection between the 'A' sound and 'O' sound. Think about words like *what* and *swan* – spelled with an A – and *hot* and *not* – spelled with an O. All of those words have the same vowel sound despite the difference in spelling. Now even though American speakers and British speakers tend to pronounce that vowel sound a little differently, each set of speakers tend to pronounce the vowel in all of those words the same way. So in those cases, we are using the letters A and O to represent the same sound. And that is a clue that there is some fundamental connection between these sounds.

Now if you think back to some of the early episodes of the podcast, I talked about the front vowels and back vowels. The front vowels were those pronounced toward the front of the mouth, and the back vowels were those pronounced in the back of the mouth or the throat region. And here is where we start to find that fundamental connection between A and O. They were both back vowels in Old and Middle English.

The vowel sound that is pronounced farthest back in the throat is the /ah/ sound – which was the traditional sound of the letter A. If we raise that sound toward the middle part of the back of the mouth, we get the /oh/ sound. So /ah/ is pronounced lower and /oh/ is pronounced higher. And if we continue to raise that sound to the top part of the back of the mouth, we get the /oo/ sound – which was represented by letter U.

In fact, if you say those three sounds in succession – /ah-oh-oo/ – you can feel it raise in the back of the mouth. But let's just focus on the first two sounds – /ah/ and /oh/ – the original sounds of letters A and O. If you say those two sounds very slowly and blend them together – so /ah—oh/ – you might notice that there is another vowel sound in between /ah/ and /oh/. It's the /aw/ sound in words like *law* and *call* and *ball*. And in fact, this sound is also a bit more rounded than /ah/ and /oh/, so the lips are more rounded when we pronounce this sound. So to break that down, it goes /ah/ - /aw/ - /oh/. Each sound is progressively higher in the back of the mouth.

Now if you follow that progression from /ah/ to /aw/ to /oh/, you can hear how the sound evolved within many English words. In fact, as a general rule, when English vowel sounds have changed throughout history, they have tended to be raised – moving slightly higher in the mouth. And that’s what happened with this change as well.

The first shift from /ah/ up to /aw/ occurred at the beginning of Middle English. And the second shift up from /aw/ up to /oh/ occurred at the end of Middle English during the Great Vowel Shift. So these changes book-ended the Middle English period. And it means that the words affected by this change were pronounced differently during each period of English.

So let me give you some examples of this change. In keeping with the overall theme of this episode, let me begin with the word *holy*. In Old English, it was *halig* (/hah-lee/). Then in Middle English, it became /haw-lee/. And then in Modern English, it became *holy*. The vowel sound was raised with each period of English.

Now one of the basic concepts within Christianity is the idea of the Trinity – the father, the son and the holy ghost. And just like the word *holy*, the word *ghost* also underwent this same sound change. It was *gast* (/gahst/) in Old English. Then it became /gawst/ in Middle English. And then it became *ghost* during the early Modern English period.

This process also converted *ban* into *bone* – /bahn/ - /bawn/ - /bone/. It converted *gat* into *goat*. *Hlaf* into *loaf*. *Mal* into *mole*. And so on. And we’ll look at a lot more examples throughout this episode.

Now you may be wondering how modern linguists know that this vowel sound changed from /ah/ to /aw/ in the early Middle English period. After all, there were no tape recordings. Well, part of the answer lies in the fact that scribes changed the way these words were spelled in early Middle English. In the words that experienced this change, they routinely replaced the A with an O. So the word *bone* was spelled B-A-N in Old English, and around the current point in our story, when English writing started to re-emerge, it was routinely spelled B-O-N. This spelling change occurred in most words that had a long /ah/ sound in Old English. And that was a signal that people were pronouncing that vowel sound differently. The sound had been raised closer to the /oh/ sound, so scribes started to spell those words with a letter O. Since there wasn’t a specific letter for the /aw/ sound, scribes apparently felt that it was best represented by letter O. By the way, this was primarily the case in southern and central England. This change didn’t really happen in the north, and northern scribes tended to retain the letter A when they spelled these words.

Now all of this raises another interesting question. If the scribes started to spell these words with an O, how do we know that the words weren’t pronounced as /oh/ – which was the traditional sound of letter O. Well, the answer has to do with historical linguistics and the Great Vowel Shift that was to come later. The short answer is that the /oh/ sound has its own unique history, and it experienced its own sound changes that are different from the changes I am describing in this episode. So if these /ah/ words had been pronounced with an /oh/ sound in Middle English, they would have undergone the same changes as other /oh/-sounding words. But they didn’t. So

linguists are confident that this new sound was distinct from the /oh/ sound. /ah/ was raised to /aw/, but it never quite merged with the /oh/ sound.

So once again, Old English *halig* (/hah-lee/) became Middle English /haw-lee/, and then later, during the Great Vowel Shift, it became *holy*. And *gast* (/gahst/) became /gawst/, and during the Great Vowel Shift, it became *ghost*.

So if the Old English /ah/ sound changed in this manner, why didn't the /ah/ sound completely disappear from English? Well, part of the answer is that shortly after this change occurred, in early Middle English, lots of French and Latin words were borrowed into English with the /ah/ sound – still spelled with the letter A. And since those words came in after this sound had changed in English, they filled the gap that was left behind. So a French word like *dame* came in after this change. And it came in with its original French /ah/ sound – as in Notre Dame. But again, thanks to the later Great Vowel Shift, the /ah/ sound shifted to an /ay/ sound in the 1500s, and that gave us the modern long sound of letter A. So the French and Middle English word /dahm/ became /dame/ around the time of Modern English. And the French and Middle English word /fahm/ became *fame* in Modern English. French and Middle English /cahge/ became Modern English *cage*. And French and Middle English /chahs/ became Modern English *chase*.

So those are the two basic rules we have to keep in mind when we think about words with the /ah/ sound. In the case of very old words from Old English, most of them underwent this gradual shift from /ah/ – to /aw/ – to /oh/. These words were affected by sound changes at the beginning and at the end of Middle English. But for newer words that were borrowed during the Middle English period with the same /ah/ sound, they only experienced the later sound change at the end of Middle English – from /ah/ to /ay/. Remember these later changes were part of the Great Vowel Shift. So the Great Vowel Shift affected these words differently because they had distinct vowel sounds when the Great Vowel Shift occurred.

Now all of this helps linguists to identify when a word entered English. If a word was pronounced with an /ah/ sound, and it was in the English language before the early 1200s, it typically took the first course and is pronounced today with an /oh/ sound. But if the word came in after the early 1200s, it took the second course and it pronounced today with an /ay/ sound. And if a word was borrowed in Modern English – after the Great Vowel Shift – it didn't experience either sound shift, and so it is still pronounced with its original /ah/ sound.

One of the best examples we can use to illustrate this history is the word *papa* which we sometimes use today as another word for *father*. Believe it or not, it has been borrowed into each stage of English – Old English, Middle English and Modern English. And each time it was borrowed, it came in with the same /ah/ vowel sound. But each version was affected by the sound changes I just described. And thanks to those changes, it gave us the modern words *papa*, *papal* and *Pope*. So let's take a closer look at what happened.

The word *papa* is ultimately a Greek word. It was *papas* in Greek, and it passed into Latin as *papa* – spelled P-A-P-A. It is related to the Greek and Latin words *pater* – which meant 'father.'

After the advent of the Christian Church, the head of the Church was like the head of a family. He was the ‘father’ of the Church, so he was known as *papa*. And when St. Augustine brought Christianity to Canterbury around the year 600, the term *papa* also passed in Old English. But it specifically meant the head of the Church.

Then, in early Middle English, around the current point in our story, the first sound change affected the word *papa* (/pah-pah/), and it became /paw-peh/ – increasingly spelled with an O. Then at the end of the Middle English period, during the Great Vowel Shift, it became *Pope* /pope/. So since this was an old word in the language, and it took that first linguistic course, and it experienced both sound changes – from /ah/ to /aw/ to /oh/.

Now in 1300s, after the current point in our story, English borrowed the word again – this time as an adjective and this time from French. The word was *papal* (/pah-pul/), and it was used to describe things associated with the Pope. It came in from French with its original /ah/ sound. But since this word came in after that initial sound change, it took the second linguistic path from /ah/ to /ay/ – so from *papal* (/pah-pul/) to *papal* (/pay-pul/). In other words, it was only affected by the second sound change during the Great Vowel Shift.

Then, after the Great Vowel Shift in the 1600s, English borrowed the word *papa* again from French – this time as another word for ‘father.’ And since it came in after the Great Vowel Shift, it retains its original /ah/ sound unaffected by any vowel shifts.

So this basic word *papa*, and its variants *Pope* and *papal*, illustrate the history of these sound changes in English. The specific vowel sound we use today depends entirely on when that version of the word was borrowed, and therefore, which set of sound changes it experienced.

Now let me leave the linguistics there for a moment and focus on the word *Pope*. As I noted, the word was probably pronounced something like /paw-peh/ in the early 1200s. One of the reasons why we know the vowel in this word was changing around this time is because Layamon used the word *Pope* several times in his poem called ‘Brut,’ which we explored a couple of episodes back. In the original version, it was spelled with an A, but when the later scribe copied the poem in the mid to late 1200s, he spelled it with an O. So the second scribe changed the spelling to indicate this change in pronunciation.

Now at this time, in the early 1200s, the Pope was Pope Innocent III. He was a very important and influential figure, and he was also VERY dogmatic. He believed in the power of the Church and the Papacy, and he thought that the Church even had supremacy over the kings of Europe. Of course, the kings didn’t tend to share that opinion.

Innocent organized the Fourth Crusade which was intended to reclaim Jerusalem, but the plans went awry, and the Crusaders ended up sacking Constantinople – the capital of the Eastern Orthodox Church. Around this same time, he launched an offensive against a break-away Christian sect in southern France that he deemed to be heretics. He sent in an army of knightly Crusaders to wipe out this new sect, but in their zeal, they ended up wiping out most of the troubadour culture in southern France as well. Many of the troubadours fled to Spain and Italy.

Most of the troubadours who remained decided to stop singing about earthly love, and they started composing songs with religious themes. So the early troubadour period of southern France came to an effective end around this time.

As I noted, Innocent felt that his authority extended over all Christians in Western Europe – and that included the various kings of Europe. But up in England, one King John had other ideas. And it was probably inevitable that the two leaders would come into conflict. And that's exactly what happened when the Archbishop of Canterbury died in the year 1205.

The Archbishop was named Hubert Walter. Walter had accompanied Richard the Lionheart on the Third Crusade, and he helped to raise the money for Richard's ransom when Richard was taken prisoner on his way back home from the Crusade. He was later rewarded by Richard with the position of Archbishop. In fact, when Richard made the selection, he didn't even consult with the English bishops, but the Pope at the time consented to the appointment anyway.

Now in the year 1205, when Walter died, there was a new Pope and new king. The new Pope was Innocent III, and the new king was John, and they were destined to butt heads over the selection of Walter's successor.

I should note that the exact procedure for selecting a new Archbishop wasn't exactly set in stone. Technically, the monks of Canterbury Cathedral had a right to select the Archbishop, and they usually consulted with the bishops of England. But the king traditionally claimed a role in the process. Using his influence over the bishops and local clerics, the king usually let his preference be known. Usually, the various parties agreed on a choice, and that person was then consecrated by the Pope. But sometimes, that process broke down. And that's what happened here.

John wanted an archbishop who would be a loyal ally, so he put forth the bishop of Norwich named John Gray. Gray was a judge and diplomat who had served as John's secretary. But down in Canterbury, the monks had other ideas. They ignored John's wishes and chose their subprior named Reginald. They knew that the Pope had to approve and sanction the choice, so they sent Reginald to Rome to inform the Pope that he had been elected by the monks.

When John got word of this, he hit the roof. He couldn't believe that the monks in Canterbury had completely defied his wishes. I mean, who did that think they were? So John headed down to Canterbury to give them a piece of his mind.

Now as I said, the process for selecting an archbishop wasn't exactly set in stone, but there was something in Canterbury that was set in stone. And that was Canterbury Cathedral. The Cathedral had its origins in the time of St. Augustine and the first Christian missionaries over six centuries earlier. But it had been damaged by fire several times over the centuries and had been repaired and re-built each time. A massive fire had occurred there about 30 years before in the year 1174. After that fire, the cathedral underwent major renovations and expansions, and it started to take the shape it has today.

Most notably, the new design used a brand-new style of architecture which we know today as ‘Gothic.’ I talked about that word in an early episode about the Goths. As I noted in that episode, the word *Gothic* doesn’t really have anything to do with the Goths, but it was becoming the popular construction style during this period. And Canterbury Cathedral reflects that style with its flying buttresses and pointed arches.

The construction required a lot of stone – much of which was imported from Normandy. And it wasn’t just Canterbury Cathedral that was being designed in this style. During this period in the early 1200s, many castles started to be built in this style. Up to this point, most castles were constructed of wood, but around this time, designers started to build elaborate stone castles.

And I mention all of this new stone work because *stone* is another word that has undergone the changes I described earlier. It was *stan* (/stahn/) in Old English – usually spelled S-T-A-N. But by this point, it was probably pronounced as /stawn/ in southern and central England. And the word started to be spelled with an O to reflect that change. In fact, Layamon’s Brut also captured this change. Once again the original version of the poem usually spelled the word with an A, but the later scribe changed the spelling to an O. So *stan* was probably /stawn/ by this point – well on its way to becoming *stone* by the end of the Middle English period. But again, this change didn’t occur in the north of England and Scotland. And I’ll have more to say about that a little later.

So John arrived in Canterbury with its new Gothic Cathedral and fancy stonework. And he proceeded to lay into the clerics at the Cathedral about the selection of the new archbishop. He ultimately forced them to change their selection and go along with John’s choice. But the bishops never approved the change.

Meanwhile, down in Rome, the Pope was faced with two different options for the new archbishop. There was John’s choice, John Gray. And there was the monk’s choice, Reginald, which the monks had technically rescinded under pressure, but Reginald was still being supported by the bishops. If Pope Innocent sided with John’s choice, he would alienate the bishops and much of the clergy, but if sided with the clergy, he would alienate John. So the Pope contemplated the decision for a few months.

I mentioned that John had traveled down to down to Canterbury, and he wasn’t the only one. Canterbury had become a haven for pilgrims, most of whom traveled there to see the shrine dedicated to Thomas Becket. I talked about Becket a few episodes back. He was the archbishop who fought with John’s father – Henry II. And Becket ended up dead. It was one of the few setbacks that Henry had to deal with during his reign. Henry struggled to deal with the fallout from that murder. And it was a reminder of the dangerous stakes that were at play when the King battled with the Church.

During this period in 1205, John was also dealing with another problem. He had lost control of Normandy the year before, and there was fear that the French king Philip was going to invade England and do away with John for good. John mobilized his defenses and – he ordered every

boy and man over the age of 12 to swear an oath to defend the country and preserve the peace. Failure to take the oath was treated as an admission of treachery.

Now I mention this oath because its another word that underwent the changes I described earlier. It was *að* (/ahth/) in Old English – spelled with an A. But around this time, it became /awth/ – and on its way to becoming *oath* in Modern English. But again, these changes didn't happen in the north.

By the summer of 1205, it became apparent that Philip was not going to invade England. And John was confident enough in his position, that he decided to turn the tables and launch an invasion of Normandy to take back the land he had lost. It was designed to be a two-pronged attack with a separate force landing in northern Aquitaine to recapture some territory that had been lost there as well.

John ordered the largest military mobilization since the Third Crusade. He seized all of the boats and shipping vessels that could be converted and used for war. This enabled John to amass a considerable navy which had been growing since Richard's expedition to the Holy Land a few years before. England was well on its way to having a formidable navy, something Philip didn't really have in France.

Now I mention the boats that John seized because *boat* is another word that has undergone the changes I mentioned earlier. It was *bat* (/baht/) in Old English – spelled B-A-T. But around this time, it was probably pronounced as /bawt/ – on its way to modern *boat*.

Now unfortunately for John, his massive army and navy couldn't go anywhere because his most prominent nobles balked at the expedition and refused to support the mission. This was really one of the first signs of trouble between John and his nobles. It was a conflict that would eventually lead to civil war, and ten years later would lead to Magna Carta.

At this point, the nobles hadn't been forced to choose sides between John and Phillip, and they were trying to hold onto their lands on both sides of the Channel,. They feared that John's expedition would fail and Philip would confiscate their lands in Normandy if they sided with John. So at the same time that John was dealing with difficult monks down in Canterbury, he was also dealing with uncooperative nobles throughout England.

He had already lost most of his territory in France. Rumors were spreading that he had killed his nephew Arthur. He had killed 22 prisoners in Aquitaine – most from noble families – by starving them to death. He already had a bad reputation, and he was making it worse. And it was becoming apparent that he didn't have a lot of friends in the nobility or the Church.

So it was this point that John went on a mission to make some friends. Many of the nobles in southern and central England had indicated their reluctance to support John's mission in France, so John decided to head north to meet with the nobles there. As I've noted before, most English kings rarely traveled to the north of England unless they were engaged in a military expedition

there. So John saw an opportunity to win over the northern nobles by meeting with them face to face.

Now when John traveled to the north of England, he traveled along primary roads that had been in place since the Roman period. Beyond four or so main roads that criss-crossed the country, there were a variety of smaller roads that were really little more than paths or trails. When the king traveled, he was accompanied by a large group of retainers and courtiers. So when the traveling court left the main roads, the movement tended to slow to a crawl. It is reported that John often rode ahead of the court, and when he arrived at the next stop, he would go hunting while waiting for his traveling court to catch up.

One of the biggest obstacles to travel by road was rivers and streams. Each one required a bridge, and many of the bridges had fallen into disrepair over the centuries. Even London Bridge had become impassable. It is reported that John needed a boat to take his traveling court across the Thames late in his reign. So during John's reign, he continued a bridge-building program that had begun a few years earlier in the late 1100s. Most of the old bridges had been built out of wood, but the new ones were mostly built with stone – making them more permanent and reliable. By the way, this included London Bridge. The old wooden bridge was finally replaced with a stone bridge. The work began in 1176 and was completed in the early 1200s. The bridge-building program was so important – and such a burden on local towns who had responsibility for the bridges – that a portion of Magna Carta (Clause 23) was devoted to the issue to give the towns some relief from the obligations.

So as John traveled to northern England in early 1206, he was traveling on bridges and roads that had been upgraded for the first time in centuries. And I mention this because the word **road** is another word that underwent the changes I discussed earlier. It was originally **rad** (/rahd/) in Old English – spelled R-A-D. It is related to the word **ride** – and **rad** originally meant 'the act of riding.' By the time John traveled to northern England, it was probably pronounced /rawd/. And a few centuries later, it would be known as a **road** – the sense having evolved from 'the act of riding' to 'the place where riding takes place.'

So John's English-speaking courtiers probably called this process /rawd/. But when they arrived in the north, they probably heard people referring to the same thing as /rahd/ – the way the word had been pronounced in Old English. And that's because, as I noted earlier, this particular sound change didn't really occur in the north of England and Scotland. So southern /rawd/ was northern /rahd/.

This difference in pronunciation is evident from manuscripts composed during the 1200s. As we've seen, southern texts spelled these words with an O, but northern texts continued to use an A. Now you might think that northern scribes were just more conservative in their spelling, but this difference was consistent throughout Middle English. Nearly two centuries later, Geoffrey Chaucer wrote about all of those pilgrims traveling down to Canterbury to visit Becket's shrine. Of course, that was the Canterbury Tales. And when he introduced characters from the north of England, he would try to mimic or represent their accent. I've noted this before. So when one of his northern characters would speak, he would spell the words in their dialogue with an A where

he would normally spell those words with an O elsewhere. In doing this, Chaucer was trying to show that northerners still pronounced those words with the original /ah/ sound rather than the southern /aw/ sound.

For example, in the Reeve's Tale, a couple of northern students ask a miller to grind some corn, so they can carry it "ham" – spelled H-A-M. This is the original version of the word *home*. In the south of England, people said /hawm/ and /rawd/, and they spelled those words with an O. But in the north, people still said /hahm/ and /rahd/, and still spelled those words with an A.

Now let's think about that northern accent for a moment. They were still pronouncing those words with an /ah/ sound. And I noted earlier that English was borrowing more and more French and Latin words with that /ah/ sound. And a few centuries later – during the Great Vowel Shift – that /ah/ sound became an /ay/ sound. And a word like *dame* (/dahm/) became *dame* (/dame/). And a word like *fame* (/fahm/) became *fame* (/fame/).

Well, these later changes associated with Great Vowel Shift also affected dialects in the north – though not to the same extent. And this /ah/ sound also shifted to /ay/ in the north during the Great Vowel Shift. And since northern English speakers still had a lot of those Old English words with the /ah/ sound, those words also experienced the same sound change – from /ah/ to /ay/. So *ham* (/hahm/) – meaning the place where you live – became *home* in the south, but it became *hame* (/hame/) in the north. And *ban* (/bahn/) – meaning a part of the body – became *bone* in the south, but *bane* (/bane/) in the north. And *stan* (/stan/) – meaning the stuff bridges and castles were made of – became *stone* in the south, but *stane* (/stane/) in the north. All of these northern variations – *hame*, *bane* and *stane* – can still be found in the modern Scots dialect in Scotland.

Along the same lines, the word *rad* (/rahd/) became /rawd/ and then *road* in the south, but it became *raid* in the north. And that northern variation eventually filtered back south. In the north, the word *rad* had acquired a different meaning over time. From its original sense as 'the act of riding,' it later came to mean 'an attack on horseback.' Thanks to the literature of later writers like Sir Walter Scott, the northern form *raid* passed back to the south, and it entered the English dialects spoken there in the 1800s. So all of that means that *road* and *raid* are just two different versions of the same word – one southern and one northern. And both are cognate with the word *ride*.

So John's retinue 'rode' north on the revamped 'roads' of Britain and tried to gain support for a 'raid' on France. And the trip was successful. John secured the support of the northern nobles – and in early 1206, he was finally able to launch his invasion.

As I mentioned earlier, part of northern Aquitaine had been lost to the French king Phillip, and John headed there first. He was able to take back the lost territory in Aquitaine, and he then headed north. But John soon realized that Phillip was too powerful in the north, and he didn't have enough men or resources to take back Normandy. So in October of 1206, John and Phillip agreed to a truce, and John headed back to England – having only secured his position in Aquitaine.

Many historians think that John's failure to reclaim Normandy drove him to build up a massive war chest that would be capable of supporting a full-fledged invasion of France. John knew that he needed as much money as possible to build a war machine and pay the mercenaries that would be required to defeat Philip in northern France. Whatever his ultimate motivation, there is no doubt that John spent much of the remainder of his reign nickle-and-diming the people of England for every bit of revenue he could gather. And this will be a major factor leading the revolt of the barons – which we'll explore next time.

By the time John returned to England in late 1206, he had another rival to contend with – and that was Pope Innocent III. I mentioned earlier that John and monks at Canterbury had each favored different contenders for the vacant position of Archbishop of Canterbury. Well, the Pope had been pondering that decision, and he finally made up his mind. Rather than siding with John or the monks, Pope Innocent decided to go in a completely different direction (in March of 1206). He recommended that the position of archbishop be filled by a man named Stephen Langton. Langton was an English cardinal who had been teaching theology at the university in Paris. He was very distinguished and well-known among the scholars in Paris, but he was largely unknown in England.

As soon as the Pope proposed Langton for the position, he was promptly elected and approved by the monks at Canterbury. Langton was later consecrated as archbishop in Rome in June of 1207.

Now I should mention one interesting bit of trivia about Stephen Langton. I noted that he was a well-respected scholar of theology. Well, he is the person credited with dividing the books of the Bible into the chapters that are used today. Previously, there has just been blank lines to separate the various passages within each book. But Langton divided them into numbered chapters, and those are the standard chapters still used today.

So by the middle of 1207, Langton was now officially the Archbishop of Canterbury. He had been selected by the Pope and approved by the monks at Canterbury. But there was one person who had not approved the selection. And that was King John. And let's just say that he was not very happy about the choice.

While John had been away gathering support to invade France – and then actually invading France – he thought that his choice for archbishop was destined to be approved by the Pope. But then he got word that the Pope had chosen someone altogether different without even consulting him about the choice. John probably had visions of another Thomas Becket coming to England to tell him how to run the Church. And he wasn't having any of it.

Not only did John reject Langton as Archbishop, he refused to even allow Langton to enter the country. He declared the Langton an enemy of the Crown. But he wasn't done. John wanted to send a message to the Pope, so he drove all but the oldest monks at Canterbury into exile. And he took possession of the see at Canterbury. He confiscated the estates of the archbishop, and he seized all of the property held by Canterbury Cathedral. John probably thought that he had sent a clear message to Rome. But he was dealing with a Pope that just as hard-headed as he was.

The following year (1208), Pope Innocent put England under interdict. Now you may be wondering what that means. Well, it was something that was actually pretty rare and had never happened in England before. It was basically a general strike by the Church and its clergymen. Almost all Church services were suspended. There were to be no more sacraments of the Church. No masses, no confessions, no church burials, no sins forgiven, no Church bells were rung. It was basically an order to shut everything down until the king got back in line. There were a few minor exceptions. For example, baptisms and last rites were still permitted in some cases. But for the most part, the Church business in England came to an end.

Now as we know, this was an age in which the Church permeated every corner of society. Most people were Christians, and they lived their life surrounded by Christian rituals – from baptism, to Christian marriage, to regular confessions, to mass, to even the last rites given in death. It was a very religious age. So for the Pope to order the Churches to be closed and Church business to be suspended – well that was a big deal. It affected every almost aspect of their life – and death. Without Christian funerals and burials, people didn't know what to do when a family member died. Bodies were buried in woods and ditches. There are even reports of bodies left unburied in churchyards.

Now you might think that this would have been enough to get John back in line, but it wasn't. If John had been a pious king – like Edward the Confessor – it might have worked. But John wasn't pious at all. And he wasn't about to be dictated to by some Pope down in Rome. So all of this just made John even more angry and furious.

John decided to push back even harder. He now seized the property of any and all clergymen who complied with the interdict. If they refused to carry out services, John took their property.

As it turned out, all of this proved to be really good business for John. Whenever John seized a piece of Church property, he was able to take all of the revenues from the property. When he seized the property held by Canterbury Cathedral, he was able to claim nearly 1,500 pounds a year in extra revenue. When he seized the property of clergymen, he would not only take the income, but sometimes he would often turn around and sell the property back to them. He would make them purchase the right to hold their own lands. So rather than punishing John, the Church restrictions actually made John even richer.

By the following year – 1209 – it had become apparent to Pope Innocent that the Interdict wasn't working. So the Pope decided to raise the Church's punishment to the next level. In January, he started the proceedings to excommunicate John. This process was completed and made official in November. This was the most serious personal punishment that the Pope could deliver to a king. But alas, John was no typical king. He didn't really seem all that bothered at all by the punishment. In fact, John just used it as an excuse to seize more Church property.

In fact, John now turned from claiming fees and revenues to outright plunder. He seized communion vessels and decorative items from Churches and melted them down for their silver and gold.

During this period, there was a mass exodus of clergymen from England. Every single bishop left the country except for one – the bishop of Winchester named Peter des Roches. So England was basically left with this one single bishop. He was the only one. And that term ‘only one’ is kind of important. Because it is yet another example of the sound change we’ve examined throughout this episode.

As I’ve noted before, the word *one* is a native Old English word – as are most of our numbers. But in Old English, it was pronounced *an* (/ahn/) – spelled A-N. So based on the sound change rules I’ve discussed in this episode, *an* should have become /awn/ around the current point in our story – and should have become /own/ in Modern English. But of course, we don’t say /own/ – we say *one* (/wun/). So what happened?

Well, first of all, everything I just said ‘should’ have happened actually ‘did’ happen. The word *one* was pronounced /own/ shortly after the Great Vowel Shift in the 1700s. And that pronunciation still survives in lots of variations of that word – like the word *only*. *Only* is literally ‘one-ly.’ But it retains its original pronunciation from Early Modern English.

Let’s also consider the words *alone* and *atone*. I noted back in Episode 86 that *alone* is actually a combination of the words *all* and *one*. It meant ‘all by oneself.’ Again, the modern pronunciation of *alone* preserves the pronunciation of *one* as /own/.

The word *atone* has a similar history. It is actually a combination of the words *at* and *one*. So the original sense of *atone* was to be ‘at one.’ It basically meant a state of harmony. Sometimes writers wrote about ‘at onement’ – or /at-ownment/ – to mean ‘at one or in harmony with something else.’ Over time, these phrases were adopted by writers who wrote about Christianity. They used the phrases ‘at one’ (/at-own/) and ‘at onement’ (at-ownment/) to refer to the reconciliation of God and man through Christ. And in the 1500s, those words contracted into single words, and that produced the words *atone* and *atonement*. And notice how those words have retained the original pronunciation of the number *one* as /own/.

So if words like *only*, *alone* and *atone* all preserve that original pronunciation, what happened with the number *one*? Well, the short answer is that it has its own unique history, and it developed some unique sound changes over time that led to its modern pronunciation.

When we look at *one* as a distinct single syllable word – so not in a multi-syllable construction like *only* or *alone* or *atone* – but just by itself, it started to acquire a slight ‘w’ sound at the front as early as the 1400s, but becoming more and more widespread throughout the 1500s and 1600s. Initially, this pronunciation was restricted to the west of England and Wales. So it was very much a western pronunciation, and it is reflected in some documents that were composed in those regions. It actually became common for a while to put a slight ‘w’ sound before words that began with an /oh/ sound – especially if they were short single-syllable words.

The word *oats* began as the Old English word *atan* (/ah-tan/). In keeping with the sound change rules I've discussed, it became /aw-tes/ in Middle English, and *oats* in Modern English. But some documents spell the word as W-O-T-E-S – suggesting that it was sometimes pronounced /wotes/.

I mentioned the word *oath* a little earlier in this episode. It began as Old English *að* (/ahth/) – then became Middle English /awth/ and then Modern English *oath*. But again, some old documents spell the word as W-O-T-H-E – suggesting that it was sometimes pronounced /woath/.

Oak has the same story. In Old English, it was *ac* (/ahk/) – spelled A-C. It then became Middle English /awk/ and Modern English *oak*. But some documents spelled it W-O-K-E – suggesting that *oak* was sometimes pronounced /woke/.

And the word *old* has the same history. From *ald* (/ahld/) to /awld/ to *old*. It had the same sound change, but it was sometimes spelled W-O-L-D – suggesting a pronunciation as /wold/.

And the words *one* /own/ and *once* /ownce/ were the early versions of *one* and *once*, but they were sometimes spelled W-O-N and W-O-N-S, respectively. So this initial 'w' sound was once a common pronunciation, at least in some regional dialects, but it was short-lived. By the late 1600s, most of these 'w' pronunciations had disappeared. But for some unknown reason, they survived in the words *one* and *once*. And by the 1700s, the initial /w/ sound had become standard throughout English.

So that helps to explain the initial 'w' sound, but the history of the vowel sound is far more complicated. It is always had a lot of regional variation, but the standard pronunciations today in America and England show evidence that the sound was raised to an long U – or /oo/ – sound (/woon/), and was then shortened to short U sound, ultimately giving us the modern pronunciation *one* (/wun/). Again, the vowel sound has a unique history, and has been the subject of extensive and detailed studies.

But the main point I wanted to make is that even though the word *one* has a unique history, other variations of the word followed along quite nicely with the general sound changes that I have highlighted in this episode. And that explains how we went from *an* (/ahn/) – to /awn/ – to *only*, *alone* and *atone*.

And speaking of *atone*, it had become increasingly apparent by this point that King John had no intention to atone for his sins by giving in to the Pope.

This was the sad state of affairs around the years 1210 and 1211. England was under interdict. Church doors were locked. England was down to only one bishop. And the king had been excommunicated. Meanwhile, John was getting rich by taking advantage of the whole process.

Next time, we'll complete our look at John's reign. We'll see how the strains ultimately led to a showdown with the barons and a civil war that culminated in the Magna Carta – which was literally the 'Great Charter' – or the 'Big Charter.' In fact, the word *magna* in Magna Carta

comes from the same Indo-European root as the word *mega* in the Greek letter Omega. So Omega – or the ‘Big O’ – is actually cognate with the Magna Carta – or the ‘Big Charter.’ Next time, we’ll move on from the ‘Big O’ to the ‘Big Charter,’ and we’ll explore the events that led to one of the most important documents in English history.

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