

**THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH PODCAST
TRANSCRIPTS**

**EPISODE 141:
THE GREAT VOWEL SHIFT (Part 1)**

Presented by Kevin W. Stroud

EPISODE 141: THE GREAT VOWEL SHIFT (PART 1)

Welcome to the History of English Podcast – a podcast about the history of the English language. This is Episode 141: The Great Vowel Shift (Part 1). In this episode, we’re going to delve into the Great Vowel Shift by looking at a series of changes of that affected certain vowel sounds pronounced in the front part of the mouth. We’re going to focus on the two highest front vowels, and we’ll explore how the sound of those vowels evolved in the late Middle English period. Those were some of the earliest developments in the major event that’s known today as the Great Vowel Shift. Over the next couple of episodes, we’ll continue our look at changes that took place in other parts of the mouth. Collectively, these changes will help to mark the transition from Middle English to Modern English. So over the course of these episodes, we’ll break down the Great Vowel Shift piece by piece, and we’ll see how those changes shaped the language we speak today.

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 and get bonus episodes and transcripts at Patreon.com/historyofenglish.

Now before we begin, let me make a quick programming note. Last time, I mentioned that I would going to discuss the Great Vowel Shift over the course of two episodes – one focusing on the front vowels and one focusing on the back vowels. Well, as I started to delve into this episode, I realized that I couldn’t really cover the front vowel changes in one episode. There’s an extra vowel sound in the front of the mouth, and the changes there were a bit more complicated. So I’ve decided to break the discussion of the Great Vowel Shift into three parts. In this episode, we’ll focus on the two highest front vowels. Next time, we’ll look at the lower front vowels and what happened to them. And then in the third episode, we’ll explore the changes to the back vowels. I don’t usually divide a topic into multiple parts like this, but this one of those topics that deserves some attention. And I know from the feedback I’ve received that many of you are interested in this topic. So we’re going to spend the next three episodes on this important event in the history of English, and then we’ll pick back up with our regular historical narrative and move into the 1500s.

Now one of the reasons why the Great Vowel Shift is so important to the history of English is because it marks a transition point in the language. Over the course of the podcast, there are two events that seem to come up over and over again. The first is the Norman Conquest of England in 1066, and the other is the Great Vowel Shift. Both of those events come up a lot because they’re transition points. The Norman Conquest helped to trigger the transition from Old English to Middle English. And Great Vowel Shift was a major factor in the transition from Middle to Modern English. The vowel shift re-shaped the pronunciation of the language into the language we have today.

Now even though the Norman Conquest and the Great Vowel Shift are very important events in the history of English, there is a big difference between the two. The impact of the Norman Conquest is well-known and generally understood, but the Great Vowel Shift is shrouded in a bit of mystery. While it’s easy to say that the long vowel sounds in English shifted around during the

1400s and 1500s, it's difficult to convey the details. It can be very technical and dry. And in fact, linguists still don't agree on all of those details. They also aren't even sure why it happened in the first place.

While early linguists were aware that the pronunciation of certain vowel sounds had changed between the time of Chaucer and the time of Shakespeare, they tended to see it as a random series of changes – a period of instability in the language. But in the early 1900s, a Danish linguist named Otto Jespersen looked a little closer at what happened in English. And where others saw chaos, Jespersen saw order. He recognized that most of the long vowel sounds were raised during the 1400s and 1500s. Generally speaking, all of the long vowel sounds shifted upward one position and came to be pronounced with the adjacent vowel sound – the sound that was one step higher. He saw all of these changes as being tied together in what linguists call a 'chain shift,' so they all moved together, either at the same time or in a series of related movements. These types of shifts usually affect a small number of vowel sounds, but for some reason, this particular vowel shift affected all of the long vowel sounds in English. Apparently, they all moved in relation to each other. It was Jespersen who coined the term 'the Great Vowel Shift.' He wrote that the Great Vowel Shift consisted of a "great raising of all long vowels." [SOURCE: *'Inventing English,' Seth Lerer, p. 101.*]

Now hopefully, you listened to the last episode – Episode 140. And if you did, Jespersen's comments may actually make some sense. We saw last time that each vowel sound is made in a specific part of the oral cavity, and vowel sounds that are located next to each other in the mouth sometimes shift back and forth over time because there is nothing to block the movement between them. So what Jespersen was describing was a phenomenon whereby all of the vowel sounds shifted to the position next door – the position that was one step higher. And the highest two vowels essentially moved out of the way and shifted down toward the central part of the mouth. Again, this process only affected the vowels when they were pronounced as long vowels where the pronunciations were stretched out a bit. When the vowels were pronounced as short quick vowels, they tended to stay in place and didn't move.

So in order to make some sense out of all of that, we really need to understand the positions that the vowels occupy in the mouth. And that's why I wanted to take you through that in the last episode.

I should also make one other point here – a point of clarification. Even though many linguists speak of vowels in terms of the position they occupy in the mouth, and they use illustrations that outline those relative positions, it is important to note that the oral cavity is just that – a cavity or open space. So the sound itself doesn't really occur in any specific part of the mouth. The sound occurs throughout the mouth. The position or location really refers to what the tongue is doing. So when a linguist describes the /i:/ ('ee') sound as a high front vowel, what they really mean is that the tongue is raised slightly and placed in that position. As you progress downward from /i:/ ('ee'), to /e:/ ('ay'), to /ɛ:/ ('eh'), and so on, the tongue itself lowers and flattens out a bit. The same thing happens in the back of the mouth. When we pronounce the highest back vowel sound /u:/, there is a slight raising of the back part of the tongue towards that position. And as we move lower, from /u:/ ('oo') to /o:/ ('oh') to /ɔ:/ ('aw'), and so on, once again, the tongue lowers and

flattens out a bit. So technically speaking, the positions relate to what the tongue is doing, but it's easier to think about specific vowels being articulated in specific parts of the mouth because that makes it easier to visualize what's going on, and it makes it easier to follow these types of vowel shifts when one sound starts to be pronounced like the sound next to it.

As I noted last time, the pronunciation of vowel sounds is far from precise. Even among people who speak with the same accent, a particular vowel sound can vary a little bit from one speaker to the next. There is usually a range of acceptable pronunciations of any given vowel sound. That range can vary over time. Sometimes people extend their vowel sounds into the spaces occupied by the neighboring vowels. They might pronounce /ɛ:/ as /e:/ or /æ:/. But it can also work the other way. Where the pronunciations vary quite a bit, speakers may restrict those different pronunciations back down to one sound.

That's one way that a vowel shift occurs. The vowel is pronounced in different ways for a while, and then settles down on a new and slightly different pronunciation. Sometime this process can affect one specific vowel sound – or that vowel sound and its neighbor. But sometimes, the instability causes a chain reaction. As the pronunciation of one vowel sound expands to encompass its neighboring sound, the pronunciation of that neighboring sound can also expand. Sometimes it has to expand to prevent a merger. As we've seen, vowels can merge together, but when that happens, you get a lot of new words that are pronounced the same way. Languages can deal with that phenomenon up to a point, but there is a limit. At some point when vowel sounds start to expand and crash together, you get so many words that are pronounced the same way that communication starts to be a problem.

If I'm feeling a bit overweight and my doctor tells me I'm getting 'fat,' it will probably cause me to eat a little less and exercise more. But if his accent changes, and he starts to raise his /æ/ sound up to /i/, then instead of telling me that I'm getting 'fat,' he may tell me that I'm getting 'fit.' And that may lead me to think I'm in great shape, and I can throw that out that diet and cancel my gym membership. So vowel shifts can create problems.

To account for those problems, people will try to keep those words distinct. So if *fat* starts to sound like *fit*, people may start to compensate by slightly changing the pronunciation of *fit* to something else – maybe to 'fet' or 'feet' or some other closely-related sound. That's how chain shifts occur. To prevent those sounds from crashing together and creating confusion in the language, people have a tendency to adjust their vowel sounds to keep words distinct. It produces a chain reaction sort of like falling dominos. A change in one vowel sound produces a series of related changes as the neighboring vowel sounds adjust. This type of chain shift usually affects a small group of closely-related vowels, but for some reason, this type of chain shift affected ALL of the long vowels in English from the 1400s through the 1600s. And arguably, it has never completely stopped.

Now Jespersen's orderly process has been questioned by other linguists. They suggest that the process wasn't orderly at all – that there was an extended period of linguistic confusion where the vowel sounds in many words could be pronounced multiple ways. And over time, as people adopted and settled on certain specific pronunciations, the vowel sounds became a bit more

fixed, and we ended up with the vowel sounds we have today. And they would say that the process only looks orderly in retrospect if we compare the Middle English sounds to the Modern English sounds, and if we try to draw out certain patterns based on those changes. To make this point, they note that the changes were not uniform throughout Britain. The changes were far more extensive in the south of England where the standard dialect of English emerged, but the changes were more limited in the north. Also, as we'll see, there were many exceptions and irregularities, and there were also cases where the vowel sounds actually did crash into each other and merge. And some vowel sounds didn't just move next door. They kept moving and ultimately ended up several steps away from where they began. [SOURCE: 'An Introduction to Early Modern English,' Terttu Nevalainen, p. 120-1.]

Now this difference in perspective among scholars points to the fact that many of the details of the Great Vowel Shift are still disputed, and they remain the subject of much debate.

For example, there is still no agreement about the cause of the shift. Some linguists tend to think that it was caused by some major social upheaval. Others tend to think it was a natural development within the language.

For those who think there was an outside influence that spurred the changes, they often point to the social disruptions that stemmed from the Black Death in the mid-1300s. The argument goes something like this. As we saw in previous episodes, the massive plague that swept across England and the rest of Europe disrupted the feudal system and allowed peasants that were previously tied to the land to negotiate for their labor services. Many of them left the manors and moved to towns and cities. That led to a significant migration from the countryside to cities like London. It is estimated that the population of London in the year 1500 was about 75,000 people. A century later, it had tripled to over 200,000 people. About 50 years after that, it had doubled again to around 450,000 people. [SOURCE: 'The English Language,' Robert Burchfield, p. 21-22.]

With people pouring into cities like London from the countryside, there was suddenly a great mixture of dialects in those cities. That was especially true for London which was relatively close to most of the major dialect regions at the time, except those in the far north. So people would have been pronouncing the same words very differently, often with different vowel sounds. Over the course of that period from the 1400s through the 1600s, speakers gradually settled on certain common pronunciations, and the vowel sounds stabilized. There may also have been social factors at work like the preference for one particular dialect or manner of speech among several competing options because that dialect was seen as more prestigious or more proper. At any rate, by the end of that period, a new system of vowel pronunciations had emerged. [SOURCE: 'Inventing English,' Seth Lerer, p. 111.]

Now that's a very simplified version of the view advocated by some scholars. Another view suggests that vowel shifts are actually very common within languages given the fact that vowels are pronounced in the open cavity of the mouth and therefore tend to be a bit unstable. So this alternate view assumes that the vowel changes were part of a natural process and weren't really dependent on outside influences like the migration of people from the countryside to the cities.

Many of these scholars point to the fact that the Chinese language also experienced a large-scale vowel shift over a thousand years ago in the 800s.

And more limited chain shifts have also been identified within most other Germanic languages, even though they didn't experience a wholesale shift of all the long vowels like in English. For example, the German word for 'white' is *weiß*. The two words evolved out of the same Germanic root, which was something like **hweit*. And even though the vowel sound has changed over time within both languages, notice that both modern words have the same vowel sound today. Also, note that the German word for 'house' is almost identical to the English word. They're both pronounced as 'house.' Again, they came from the same Germanic root word which was **husan*. In standard English, the vowel evolved from *hus* to *house*, and obviously the German word has experienced a similar change. So again, some of the changes that took place in English have parallels in other Germanic languages, and that has led some scholars to argue that the English changes were just part of a natural process. [SOURCE: 'Long Vowel Shifts in English: c. 1050-1700,' Gjertrud Stenbrenden, p. 10-11.] But even for those who find parallels in other Germanic languages, the fact is that the changes within English were much more extensive. Again, the Great Vowel Shift affected ALL of the long vowel sounds within English, not just some of them.

So the ultimate cause of the Great Vowel Shift remains a bit of a mystery. There are some interesting theories, but there's no real consensus or agreement among scholars. The same is also true for the timing and sequence of the shifts. Some scholars think the highest vowel sounds shifted first, and that opened up the space for the lower vowel sounds to move up higher. However, there are alternate views. Some scholars think some of the lower vowels moved up first and that pushed the higher vowels out of the way. There are also theories that the vowels all moved at the same time, sort of like a game of musical chairs where they all shifted around in unison. It's difficult to establish a definitive answer from the surviving documents, but there is very strong evidence based on the way words were spelled that the highest vowel sounds moved very early on. So that's the version that I am presenting here – that the highest vowels shifted out of the way and the lower vowels moved up to fill the gaps. It's a somewhat traditional view of the Great Vowel Shift, but again, it is 'a' view – not necessarily the only or the definitive view.

So with that bit of background out of the way, let's delve into those vowel changes. And again, this time we're going to focus on the changes in the upper front part of the mouth. We'll deal with the other vowel sounds over the next couple of episodes.

Last time, I took you through the location where each of the front vowels is pronounced, and I gave you the mnemonic 'Eat Aged Eggs At Ollie's.' That little phrase illustrates the order of the vowels pronounced in the front part of the mouth from highest to lowest. The highest is /i:/, then one step down we have /e:/, then we move down to /ɛ:/. This time, we're going to focus on those two highest vowels – /i:/ ('ee') and /e:/ ('ay').

During the course of the Great Vowel Shift, each of those sounds shifted higher or further back, sort of like a conveyor belt. And these appear to be two of the earliest changes that can be confirmed via spellings in the surviving documents. In fact, I've touched on both of these changes in earlier episodes. So let's start at the top.

That highest vowel sound in the front of the mouth is the /i:/ ('ee') sound. Again, I'm not talking about the letter E. I'm just talking about the actual sound that comes out of your mouth. It's the sound that you hear in words like *feet*, and *dream*, and *brief*, and *elite*, and *ski*. As those words indicate, that sound can actually be spelled a lot of different ways. It is a common vowel sound, and it has been a common sound within English from the very beginning. But during the late Middle English period, most of the words that had that sound started to be pronounced differently. Over the next three or four centuries, that sound continued to evolve, and it eventually ended up as the sound that we pronounce today as /ai/ ('eye'). So to Geoffrey Chaucer, a specific point in the day was the /ti:m/ ('teem'), but to us, it is the *time*. To Chaucer, a married woman – and in some cases, even an unmarried woman – was a *wif* ('weef'). To us, she is a *wife*. To Chaucer, the number after eight was /ni:n/ ('neen'). To us, that number is *nine*. That's the ultimate evolution of that sound.

As I've noted before, that /i:/ ('ee') vowel sound was traditionally spelled with letter I. We hear that original sound in a word like *ski* which was borrowed in the modern era. But of course, we generally use that letter for the /ai/ sound today in words like those I just mentioned – *time*, *wife* and *nine*. In fact, that's how the letter I came to be called the letter 'I.' Not to confuse you too much, but it was once called 'ee' because that was the sound it represented. But as I just noted, the /i:/ ('ee') sound gradually evolved into the /ai/ ('eye') sound. And the letter followed along with that change – both the name of the letter and the sound it represents.

So in the Prologue to the Canterbury Tales, Chaucer used the word *ride*. After all, the pilgrims were riding to Canterbury. But he would have pronounced it /ri:d/ ('reed'). And at least in some places, he spelled it R-I-D-E, just like we do today. Over time, the pronunciation shifted from /ri:d/ ('reed') to /raid/ ('ride'), but that common spelling remained the same. So the letter went along for the ride – no pun intended. And today, the letter has that newer /ai/ ('eye') sound within English.

But other European languages didn't make that change. Most of them continued to use letter I to represent its traditional /i:/ ('ee') sound. And English continued to borrow words from those languages after the sound had shifted within English. So when those words came into English, they came in with their /i:/ ('ee') sounds which were still represented by letter I. That's why we still use the letter I to spell the /i:/ ('ee') sound in words like *ski*, and *police*, and *elite*, and *spaghetti*. As I noted last time, this actually gives us a good general rule to use to distinguish an older word that pre-dates the Great Vowel Shift from a more recent loanword that came in later. When you look at a word where the letter I represents the /ai/ ('eye') sound like *time*, *vine*, *life*, *five*, *write*, *side*, *child*, *like*, and so on, you're normally looking at an old word that went through the vowel shift. But when you look at a word where the letter I represents the /i:/ ('ee') sound like *ski*, *police*, *elite*, *machine*, and so on, you're normally looking at a loanword that came into English after the Great Vowel Shift with its original sound in tact.

This is also why V-I-N-E is pronounced /vain/ ('vine'), but R-A-V-I-N-E is pronounced /rə-vi:n/ ('ra-veen'). *Vine* is an older word that went through the vowel shift. But *ravine* is a newer word that was borrowed after the shift. *Ravine* is first recorded in English in the late 1500s. We see a similar situation with L-I-C-E which is pronounced /lais/ ('lice'), as compared with P-O-L-I-C-E is pronounced /po-li:s/ ('police'). Again, *lice* is older, going all the way back to Old English, and it went through the vowel shift. But *police* is a French loanword that came in later and retains its original vowel sound.

Sometimes we find English words that are still a bit unsettled with both pronunciations like *either* ('ee-ther') and *either* ('eye-ther'), and *neither* ('nee-ther') and *neither* ('neye-ther'). Today, there tends to be a regional divide in the pronunciation of those words, but that regional divide only developed over the past couple of centuries.

We also have a few loanwords that were borrowed into English after the vowel shift with their original /i:/ ('ee') sound, but the sound has started to drift over to the /ai/ ('eye') sound in the modern era. Think about the various pronunciations of A-N-T-I. Some people say /anti:/ ('an-tee') and some say /antai/ ('an-teye'). It's ultimately a Greek prefix that came into English from French and Latin in the 1500s. It came in with its original pronunciation as /anti:/ ('an-tee'). But over time, some speakers have Anglicized it to /antai/ ('an-teye'). So in a way, it has experienced the pull of the Great Vowel Shift several centuries after the shift was supposedly complete.

Another example is the Latin word spelled V-I-A meaning 'by way of.' It also came in after the Great Vowel Shift with its original vowel sound pronounced /vi:ə/ ('vee-uh'). But many English speakers have converted it into /vai-ə/ ('veye-uh'). So again, we still hear the lingering affect of that old vowel shift on some of these words.

These dual pronunciations also provide a clue as to how the vowel shift might have occurred in the first place. There was probably a period in the 1400s when there were lots of words that could be pronounced both ways. And over time, people gradually settled on the /ai/ ('eye') pronunciation. So if that history is a guide, it suggests that pronunciations like /anti:/ ('an-tee') and /via:/ ('vee-uh') may eventually give way to /antai/ ('an-teye') and /vai-a/ ('veye-uh').

At any rate, it might be helpful to think of this first vowel shift as the /vi:a-via/ shift because it's a shift that is still reflected in words like that.

So we've seen that this vowel sound shifted from /i:/ ('ee') to /ai/ ('eye'), but let's look a little closer at that change because it wasn't as simple as I've made it sound. The sound actually went through an intermediate stage before it ended up as /ai/ ('eye'). And this little bit of detail is important to understand how the Great Vowel Shift presumably got underway.

At some point in the late 1300s, and some scholars think it might have been even sooner than that in some places, English speakers started to change the way they pronounced that /i:/ ('ee') sound when it was pronounced as a long vowel. Instead of saying /i:/ ('ee'), which is a pure vowel sound, they began to put a little sound in front of it. And that new sound was /ə/ ('uh').

Last time, I mentioned that this /ə/ ('uh') sound is called 'schwa,' and it's pronounced in the middle of the oral cavity. So instead of saying /i:/ ('ee'), people started to say /ə-i/ ('uh-ee') – or /əi/ ('uhee') when pronounced in normal speech. You might remember that when two vowel sounds are combined it's called a diphthong. So linguists would say that speakers converted the pure vowel /i:/ ('ee') into the diphthong /əi/ ('uhee').

Now let's think about that change in terms of location and position. The original /i:/ ('ee') sound is the highest vowel sound that can be produced in the front part of the mouth. And this /ə/ ('uh') sound is produced more in the middle of the mouth. So whereas before, this vowel was pronounced in the highest position in the front of the mouth, it now started to be pronounced in two different places. The pronunciation started in the center of the mouth and moved forward. The new sound was clearly distinct from the old sound. And since the old sound was no longer being used, that allowed the vowel sound pronounced underneath to move up and fill the gap, but more on that later.

So we've seen that the high /i:/ ('ee') vowel was now being pronounced as /əi/ ('uhee') beginning in the center of the mouth and sliding forward. But the shift wasn't done yet. A couple of centuries later, in the 1600s and 1700s, it shifted again. The initial sound dropped from /ə/ ('uh') in the center of the mouth down to /a/ in the lower part of the mouth. So instead of saying /ə-i/ ('uhee'), people began to say /a-i:/ ('ah-ee') – or /ai/ ('eye') in normal speech. And that's how we got the modern /ai/ ('eye') sound. Even though we might think of the /ai/ ('eye') sound as a single vowel because we spell it with a single letter, it's actually two sounds put together. It's the /a/ ('ah') sound followed by the /i:/ ('ee') sound. That's why I didn't talk that sound in the last episode – because it's not a pure vowel sound. It's a diphthong.

So in order to trace that evolution, let me give you a few examples. Whereas Chaucer would have said /ti:m/ in the 1300s, Shakespeare would have probably said /təim/ in late 1500s, and we would say *time* today. /ti:m/ – /təim/ – *time*. And whereas Chaucer would have said /ni:n/, and Shakespeare would have said /nəin/, we would say *nine*. /ni:n/ – /nəin/ – *nine*.

If you try to mimic those pronunciations, you'll hear how the sound actually moves back and lower each time. No one really knows why that shift happened, but it was essential to the Great Vowel Shift because, as I noted earlier, it cleared the way for the other front vowels to move up as part of a larger chain shift.

So today, in Modern English, we still have the sounds at the beginning and the end of that shift – the /i:/ ('ee') sound and the /ai/ ('ai') sound. But what about that sound in the middle – the /əi/ ('uhee') sound? It was common during the time of Shakespeare, but it largely disappeared when the sound dropped down to the modern /ai/ ('eye') sound. But here's something you may find interesting. That sound can still be found in some English dialects. And those dialects have that sound due to a more recent vowel shift within those particular dialects that mirrors what happened during the Great Vowel Shift. In other words, the same sound shift happened again – at least the first step in the shift.

Here's what happened. In the 1700s and 1800s after the Great Vowel Shift was complete. People in and around London started to change the way they pronounced their /i:/ ('ee') sound. That sound was still a common sound in English, but due to the Great Vowel Shift it was found in a brand new set of words. And in those words that had acquired that sound during the Great Vowel Shift, those speakers started to change the vowel sound again. And just like their ancestors had done three or four centuries earlier, they shifted that sound from /i:/ ('ee') to /ɔi/ ('uhee'). And that is more evidence for the theory that these types of changes are natural changes within the language.

At any rate, this new pronunciation became common in the working-class accent spoken in London which came to be known as Cockney. And shortly thereafter, there was a significant migration from London to the new colony of Australia. And this same feature pops up in Australian accents as well. In fact, there are lots of similarities between the Cockney accent and the Australian accent due to that close historic link.

So I thought it might be interesting to hear this pronunciation as it exists today in those two accents. Let me play you a few samples from listeners where you can hear a modern version of this same vowel shift.

First we have Matt from London who read two of the sentences I provided on the website. The first sentence is "The 10 steel beams are still supporting the tin roof." That sentence features the word *beam* which has that long /i:/ ('ee') sound. And the second sentence is "We had to prepare a meal with only a tomato, an egg, and a block of goat cheese." That sentence features the word *cheese* which also has that long /i:/ ('ee') sound. Notice in these sentences that we hear the word *beam* pronounced more like /bɛim/ ('buh-eem') and the word *cheese* pronounced more /chɛis/ ('chuh-ees').

[CLIP]

Now let's listen to a few samples from Australia. First we have Lisa from Canberra. Again, notice the pronunciations of *beams* and *cheese*.

Now let's listen to John from Melbourne reading the same two sentences.

[CLIP]

Finally, here's a clip from Geoff in Australia – and notice how Geoff catches himself when he pronounces *beams*.

I hope you could hear that vowel sound. Again, that vowel is not common in standard English anymore, but it does exist in those specific dialects, and it exists due to a later vowel shift that was similar the shift that occurred in the early stages of the Great Vowel Shift.

[CLIP]

So we've just covered the first major vowel change in the Great Vowel Shift – the shift from /i:/ ('ee') to /θi/ ('uhee') to /ai/ ('eye'). The important thing to take from that discussion is that the /i:/ ('ee') sound changed to a new sound. That meant that the /i:/ ('ee') sound wasn't really being used anymore, so other words could now use that sound without creating any confusion or overlap with the words that had that sound before.

So for example, the word *bite* was pronounced as /bi:t/ ('beet') before the Great Vowel Shift. That how Chaucer would have said it. But when /bi:t/ ('beet') became /bθit/ ('buh-eet') on its way to *bite*, it meant that there was no word pronounced as /bi:t/ ('beet') anymore. But there was a type of root vegetable grown in gardens called a /be:t/ ('bait'). And now the pronunciation of that root vegetable expanded. Some people still called it a /be:t/ ('bait'), but some people started to pronounce that vowel a little bit higher. They called it a /bi:t/ ('beet'). And that was OK because the old verb /bi:t/ ('beet') was evolving into *bite*. So there wasn't any risk that someone would say 'I like to bi:t bi:ts' ('beet beets'). They would say 'I like to bθit bi:ts' ('buh-eet beets'). And a couple of centuries later, they would say 'I like to bite beets.' So if that old root vegetable called a /be:t/ ('bait') started to be pronounced as /bi:t/ ('beet'), it was OK. There was no merger or overlapping. And if you followed that example, then you followed the second major step in the Great Vowel Shift.

Remember our old mnemonic 'Eat Aged Eggs.' That phrase illustrates the front vowels in descending order – /i:/, /e:/, /ɛ/. So at the top, we have the /i:/ ('ee') sound that we just looked at. And immediately beneath that high /i:/ ('ee') sound is the /e:/ ('ay') sound. It was found in a lot of words in Middle English. And when that high /i:/ ('ee') sound shifted to a diphthong, words with that slightly lower /e:/ ('ay') sound started to fill the gap that was left behind. So in other words, the long /e:/ ('ay') sound was raised up to /i:/ ('ee'). That's how that root vegetable known as a /be:t/ ('bait') became known as a *beet*. And that's also why the phrase 'bite a beet' didn't create any confusion at the time. No one said 'bi:t a b:it' ('beet a beet') because the verb had already shifted to /bθit/ ('buh-eet'). So *bite* and *beet* never crashed into each other. This type of order and spacing was usually maintained in the Great Vowel Shift. It appears that speakers generally tried to avoid mergers. If two different vowel sounds crashed together, it would create a bunch of words that sounded the same, and that would create a lot of confusion in the language. So again, in order to maintain some degree of order, vowel sounds usually moved together in a chain shift. That kept the words distinct from each other.

So let's look a little closer at this second vowel shift from /e:/ ('ay') up to /i:/ ('ee'). There were lots of words affected by this shift. For example, /be:t/ ('bait') became *beet*. /tre:/ ('tray') became *tree*. /be:/ ('bay') became *be*. /swe:t/ ('sway') became *sweet*. /bre:f/ ('brayf') became *brief*. And so on. Again, in terms of location, this second highest front vowel – /e:/ ('ay') – moved up and occupied the position of the highest front vowel – /i:/ ('ee').

The original sound of this vowel was traditionally spelled with letter E. And once again, the sound changed, but the spellings remained the same. So as the sound shifted up to /i:/ ('ee'), the letter also started to be called 'ee'. And that's how the letter got its name in English.

But just as we saw before, other European languages continued to use letter E to represent the older /e:/ ('ay') sound. And English has borrowed quite a few of those words since the Great Vowel Shift ended. And that's why the letter E represents that other sound in more recent loanwords like *café*, *fiancé*, *resume*, *saute*, *ballet*, *buffet*, and *gourmet*.

Once again, we can turn that into a good general rule. When we have a word where the letter E represents the /i:/ ('ee') sound, it's probably a old word that went through the Great Vowel Shift. But when we have a word where the letter E represents the /e:/ ('ay') sound, it's probably a newer loanword that was borrowed after the vowel shift was complete, and therefore avoided the effects of the vowel shift.

We have one really good example of this in Modern English. It's the words *medley* and *melee*. Both words are ultimately derived from the same Old French root word meaning 'to mix or mingle.' *Medley* was borrowed into English in the 1300s, so it went through the Great Vowel Shift. The pronunciation shifted from /med-le:/ to *medley*. But then in the 1600s, after the Great Vowel Shift, English borrowed another version of the same word. That was the word *melee* – and of course, *melee* has the original vowel pronunciation as /e:/ ('ay'). So between the words *melee* and *medley*, we can hear the vowel shift at work.

We also have a few words in English that can be pronounced either way. The word spelled S-H-E-I-K or S-H-E-I-K-H was borrowed from Arabic in the 1500s, and it can be pronounced as either /she:k/ ('shayk') or /shi:k/ ('sheek') in Modern English. And we also have the word spelled G-E-I-S-H-A from Japanese, and at least in American English, it can be pronounced as either /ge:sha/ ('gaysha') or /gi:sha/ ('geesha'). So there's still a little bit of fluctuation between those sounds today.

Now let's look a little closer at the impact of this change on English spelling. As we've seen, the sound began as /e:/ ('ay') before it shifted to /i:/ ('ee'). And scribes used the letter E to represent that original /e:/ ('ay') sound like in *café* and *resume*. But it was also common for Middle English scribes to distinguish the short /e:/ ('ay') sound from the long /e:/ ('ay') sound. They often did that by doubling the letter for the long sound. As I discussed in an earlier episode of the podcast, this was a common technique used by scribes. Just double the vowel letter for a long vowel sound. It made perfect sense. So it was common for many of these words with the long /e:/ ('ay') sound to be spelled with double E's.

And when the sound shifted up /i:/ ('ee'), the spellings remained the same. So those double E's were now found in lots of words that were pronounced with an /i:/ ('ee') sound. And that explains why many of these words are spelled with a double E today – like *tree*, *see*, *feet*, *meet*, *beet*, *sweet*, *week*, *seem*, *cheese*, *needle*, and so on. All of that seems pretty straight-forward.

But scribes also had a different way to represent that original long /e:/ sound. Rather than using those double E's, they sometimes adopted the French practice of spelling that sound with IE. Again, that was a common Anglo-Norman spelling used in French loanwords. And when the vowel sound in those words shifted up to /i:/ ('ee'), that IE spelling was retained. So it now represented the /i:/ ('ee') sound. And that explains the spellings of words like *brief*, *chief*, *grief*,

relief, achieve, retrieve, niece, siege, pierce and *piece* – P-I-E-C-E. Those are all French loanwords with the French spelling IE, and they were all borrowed into English before the Great Vowel Shift, so they all experienced this vowel change from /e:/ (‘ay’) to /i:/ (‘ee’), and they are all pronounced with the /i:/ (ee’) vowel sound today.

After the vowel shift was completed, scribes and printers started to extend that French spelling to native English words as well. So in some cases, the IE spelling replaced a more traditional E or EE spelling. As a result, native words like *thief, fiend, belief, field, yield, shield* and *wield* all received their modern IE spellings.

Now I should mention that this spelling sometimes competed with an alternate EI spelling with the letters reversed. In fact, a lot of the words I mentioned could be spelled both ways in the period immediately after the Great Vowel Shift, but the IE spelling was preferred and won out over time. In fact, it was so common that it eventually gave birth to the rule that we know today as “I before E except after C.” There was a small group of words borrowed from French that ended in ‘-ceipt’ or ‘-ceive,’ and they tended to use the alternate spelling. Specifically, those words were *receipt, receive, deceit, deceive, conceit, conceive*, and *perceive*. Those were the exceptions that gave birth to the “except after C” part. The spelling of the word *ceiling* was later revised, apparently to mirror these other exceptions. So those were the only eight exceptions that gave birth to the “except after C” part. But as I discussed in an earlier episode, this rule only works if we’re talking about words where those spellings represent the /i:/ (‘ee’) sound. When those spellings are applied to other sounds, the rule completely breaks down. But it works pretty well for these /i:/-sounding words that emerged after the Great Vowel Shift. It shows that English prefers the ‘I before E’ spelling for the /i:/ (‘ee’) sound, and that preference probably stems from the fact that IE was a common spelling for the sound both before and after the Great Vowel Shift. That’s why we generally represent the long /i:/ (‘ee’) sound today with either EE or IE. The first is a native English spelling, the second is a borrowed French spelling. But they both survived the Great Vowel Shift.

So we’ve now covered two of the vowel shifts that took place very early on in the Great Vowel Shift, and both were probably completed by the late 1400s. /e:/ (‘ay’) moved up to /i:/ (‘ee’), and /i:/ (‘ee’) moved out of the way and eventually became /ai/ (‘eye’).

I noted earlier that a few centuries after the Great Vowel Shift occurred, there was another more limited vowel shift that took place in and around London, and that later London shift helped to define the local Cockney accent. That London vowel shift featured the same vowel sounds that we’ve explored in this episode. As we saw earlier, /i:/ (‘ee’) became the diphthong /θi/ (‘uhee’), which mirrored the Great Vowel Shift a few centuries earlier.

And the slightly the lower /e:/ (‘ay’) sound also shifted to a new position. But unlike in the Great Vowel Shift where it moved up to fill the gap left by /i:/ (‘ee’), in this later London shift, it actually shifted to a diphthong somewhere between /æi/ to /ai/. And I mention this other London vowel shift because it explains one of the most distinctive features of the modern Cockney accent.

It explains why Cockney speakers sometimes pronounce *day* as something like ‘die,’ and *train* as ‘trine,’ and *Spain* as ‘spine.’ This particular aspect of Cockney speech was famously featured in the film ‘My Fair Lady’ based on George Bernard Shaw’s stage play called Pygmalion. The phonetics professor Henry Higgins tries to teach Eliza Doolittle to lose her Cockney accent and speak in a more standard way. And he takes aim at this particular vowel shift from /i:/ (‘ee’) to /ai/ (‘eye’) which was such a prominent feature of the Cockney accent.

[CLIP: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uKxd30lQ1f0>]

Well that was a little harsh. Of course, Audrey Hepburn who played Eliza Doolittle didn’t actually speak with a Cockney accent. She just used one for the part. So let me play a sample from an actual native speaker to get a sense for this sound. This is a clip from a dialect collection featured in the book ‘English Accents and Dialects’ by Arthur Hughes, Peter Trudgill and Dominic Watt. This clip features a native speaker who is apparently talking about the aftermath of a surgical procedure and the dressings associated with it. You should be able to hear words like *lay*, *paper*, *anyway* and *day* pronounced more like ‘lie,’ ‘pie-peh,’ ‘any-why,’ and ‘die.’

[CLIP]

Now as I noted earlier, there was a significant migration from the London area to Australia in the 1800s, and this working class London dialect proved to be a heavy influence on the early Australian dialect. So once again, we find this same feature among some Australian speakers. It’s more typical among those who speak with a broad Australian accent.

Of course, you’ll hear it in the well-known Australian greeting ‘g-die’ for ‘good day.’ And sometimes you’ll hear this type of broad Australian accent referred to as ‘strine,’ which is a slurred pronunciation of the word *Australian*.

Now I received a lot of voice samples from Australia, but very few of the speakers had this type of broad accent, so I wasn’t able to capture this sound very well in those samples. However, there was a very well-known person who had that type of accent. It was Steve Irwin, also known as the Crocodile Hunter. Of course, we have lots of surviving audio from him, and his speech routinely featured these types of pronunciations. Here’s a short clip from him where you’ll hear the word *age* pronounced as ‘eye-j’ and *male* – as in the gender male – pronounced as ‘mile.’

[CLIP – <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WcXZBfUdDAc>]

So in clips like that we hear a more recent vowel shift that took place in London and then expanded with migration to Australia.

Admittedly, those more recent developments are a bit of a digression. But I wanted to mention them here because they involve the same two vowel sounds that we explored as part of this episode about the Great Vowel Shift, and they point to the fact that the changes associated with the vowel shift were not a one-time occurrence. Vowels have continued to shift ever since, and very often, the more recent changes either mirror or closely resemble the changes that took place

five or six centuries ago. They just tend to be on a smaller scale, limited to a few specific vowel sounds. But all of this provides a lot of evidence for those who argue that the Great Vowel Shift was a natural development within the language, and it points to a tendency for vowels to either raise higher or turn into diphthongs over time.

So we'll stop there for now. We've covered the early developments that took place high in the front part of the mouth. Next time, we'll continue our look at the Great Vowel Shift by focusing on what happened with the lower vowels in the front of the mouth. That part of the story is fascinating because it actually features the merger of some of these shifting vowel sounds as they crashed together. And it helps to explain why words like M-E-E-T and M-E-A-T are pronounced the same way, but spelled differently. And it also explains why S-P-E-A-K is pronounced /spi:k/ ('speak'), but S-T-E-A-K is pronounced /steik/ ('steak'). This part of the story is probably the most complicated part of the Great Vowel Shift, but it's an extremely important part of the story. So next time, we'll explore those changes, and we'll see how those changes are reflected in other accents of Modern English.

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