

**THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH PODCAST
TRANSCRIPTS**

**EPISODE 143:
THE GREAT VOWEL SHIFT (Part 3)**

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Welcome to the History of English Podcast – a podcast about the history of the English language. This is Episode 143: The Great Vowel Shift (Part 3). In this episode, we’re going to conclude our look at the Great Vowel Shift. We’ll do that by focusing our attention on the vowels pronounced in the back part of the mouth. The vowel changes that we know today as the ‘Great Vowel Shift’ affected all of the long vowel sounds, including the back vowels. Those vowels also experienced a chain shift whereby a series of vowel sounds moved in unison. Those changes caused many words to be pronounced in new ways, but the spellings tended to stay the same. As a result, this process contributed to the modern disconnect between the way words are pronounced and the way they are spelled. So this time, we’ll explore the impact of the Great Vowel Shift on the vowels pronounced in the back part of the mouth, and we’ll see how those changes shaped the way many words are spelled today.

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 let’s turn our attention to the vowels pronounced in the back part of the mouth. As we’ve seen before, the various vowel sounds are produced by slightly altering the way the tongue is shaped in the open cavity of the mouth when we speak. Those various shapes are what linguists use to distinguish the different vowel sounds, and sometimes, to group those sounds together. One way that linguists distinguish vowel sounds is to differentiate between those produced in the front of the mouth – the so-called front vowels – and those produced in the back part of the mouth – the so-called back vowels.

A few episodes back, I gave you a mnemonic to help you keep track of where those vowel sounds are pronounced in the mouth. The order followed a circular motion, beginning with the highest front vowel, then working its way downward to the bottom part of the mouth, and then working its way back upward in the back part of the mouth. That mnemonic was ‘Eat Aged Eggs At Ollie’s Awesome Old Uber.’ The first sound in each of those words represents each of the major long vowel sounds used in English in the order I just described. Over the prior two episodes, we focused on those first few vowels – the front vowels. Now, we’re going to focus on the last few vowels in that mnemonic – those pronounced in the back of the mouth. Those are the sounds represented by the phrase ‘Ollie’s Awesome Old Uber’ – /a:/ - /ɔ:/ – /o:/ and /u:/. If you pronounce those four sounds in that order, you’ll feel the movement from /a:/ in the lower part of the mouth up to /u:/ in the highest back part of the mouth. During the Great Vowel Shift, these four vowel sounds in the back of the mouth were raised in a way that mirrored what happened in the front part of the mouth.

Now as I’ve noted before, there is no universal agreement about the order in which the vowels shifted around – either in the front or the back of the mouth. Many linguists think the highest vowel sounds moved out of the way first, and that allowed the vowel sounds underneath to move up and fill the gaps left behind. That’s the view I presented in the prior episodes, and since the back vowels moved in a parallel manner, that’s the view I’ll present here as well.

As we go through these changes, there are really three major developments to keep track of – the shift of the high /u:/ sound, the shift of the slightly lower /o:/ sound, and the shift of lowest /ɔ:/ and /a:/ sounds. So just like last time, I’m going to divide this episode into three parts, and we’ll deal with each of those developments separately.

We’ll begin with the changes that affected the highest long vowel sound produced in the back of the mouth – the /u:/ sound.

[MUSIC BREAK]

As we’ve explored the Great Vowel Shift, there has been one recurring theme – the raising of the various vowel sounds over time. Generally speaking, the vowel sounds pronounced in the front and back of the mouth were raised up one step during the 1400s and 1500s, and some of them were raised another step in the following centuries. That’s why the changes in the front and back of the mouth were parallel developments, rather than a larger circular movement involving all of the vowels.

And I think that is a common misunderstanding about the Great Vowel Shift, and it may be where the analogy to a game of musical chairs creates some confusion. Some people mistakenly think that all of the vowel sounds in the mouth shifted around together in a clockwise or counter-clockwise motion, so as the front vowels moved up, the back vowels must have moved down to fill the gaps as part of a larger circular motion. But again, that’s not what happened. There were actually two separate, but parallel movements. The front vowels moved up in a chain shift, and the back vowels also moved up in a separate chain shift. Even though they were distinct from each other, the two sets of changes were very similar since they happened in basically the same order at roughly the same time. And that’s why they are thought to be part of the same larger process that affected all of the long vowels.

When we looked at the changes that affected the front vowels, we saw that the highest front vowel apparently moved first. And the same thing happened in the back of the mouth. Again, there isn’t universal agreement about that, but there is a lot of evidence to support that view. That highest front vowel was pronounced /i:/. You can’t really make a higher vowel sound in the front of the mouth. So it couldn’t shift up any higher. Instead, that sound fundamentally changed. It became a diphthong. What happened is that it started to acquire a slight /ə/ sound at the front. So instead of /i:/, people started to say /ə-i/. That /ə/ sound is the sound known as ‘schwa,’ and it’s pronounced in the central part of the mouth. So this change really represented a movement of the vowel sound from the top front part of the mouth to the central part of the mouth. This change happened very early on the 1400s, if not before. Then over time, that initial sound shifted even lower in the mouth from /ə/ to /a/. So the vowel shifted from /əi/ to /ai/, and that gave us our modern /ai/ sound.

Well, the exact same thing happened to the high /u:/ sound in the back of the mouth. Again, it was a parallel development. So at the same time that highest front vowel acquired a slight /ə/ sound at the front, the highest back vowel also acquired the same sound at the front. And when

the diphthong was lowered in the front, the same thing happened in the back. So let me illustrate that change for you.

Again, that highest back vowel is the /u:/ sound. In the 1400s, if not earlier, the /u:/ sound started to be pronounced with that same /ə/ sound at the front. So it shifted from /u:/ to /ə-u/ – or /əu/ when pronounced quickly. So words that had previously been pronounced with the /u:/ sound in Middle English started to be pronounced with an /əu/ sound in early Modern English around the time of Shakespeare. But again, just like with the front vowel, there was an additional change a couple of centuries later. That initial sound in the diphthong dropped even lower. It went from /ə/ to /a/, and the diphthong shifted from /əu/ to /a-u/ – or /au/ when pronounced quickly. So again, the evolution of this highest back vowel over time was /u:/ to /əu/ to /au/. And this development is almost identical to what happened with highest front vowel. The sound went from a high pure vowel, to a centralized diphthong, to a lower diphthong.

This type of parallel development is what allowed early linguists like Otto Jespersen to conclude that the changes to the front and back vowels were part of the same general process that impacted all of the long vowel sounds. When all of those pieces were put together, it became apparent that all of these seemingly independent vowel changes were actually part of a larger connected process. And that's why Jespersen called all of these various changes the 'Great Vowel Shift.'

One of the interesting things about the evolution of this /u:/ sound over time is the way it impacted English spelling. So let's consider how this sound was traditionally spelled before the Great Vowel Shift. This /u:/ sound is considered a long sound of the letter <U> today. And traditionally, the letter U was used to represent that sound. In Old English, the word *house* was *hus* – spelled 'h-u-s.' And the word *mouse* was *mus* – spelled 'm-u-s.' Those pronunciations continued into the Middle English period before the Great Vowel Shift took place. So Geoffrey Chaucer would have pronounced those words the same way with that same /u:/ vowel sound. But the spelling of those words had started to change by that time. Instead of spelling that sound with the traditional letter <U>, many writers were spelling it a new way with the letter combination <OU>. So in the Canterbury Tales, we find the word *house* spelled 'h-o-u-s' and the word *mouse* spelled 'm-o-u-s.' There was no 'E' at the end like today, but otherwise, those words had acquired much of their modern spelling by that time. So where did that <OU> spelling come from?

Well, it actually came from French. French often spelled the /u:/ sound with the letters <OU>. And it still does that today. Think about the French word *vous* which means 'you.' It's spelled 'v-o-u-s.' And the French word *nous* means 'we.' It's spelled 'n-o-u-s.' As we know, Middle English scribes were heavily influenced by French, so they adopted that French spelling as well. But why did they borrow that spelling, and why did French use that spelling in the first place?

Well, the answer to those questions has to do with certain problems associated with the letter <U> in the Middle Ages. I've actually touched on some of these issues in prior episodes. First of all, in the common handwriting script of the Middle Ages, letters were written in a flowing style where one letter flowed into the next much like modern cursive writing. That created a problem for certain letters like the letter <U>. That letter tended get lost in that handwriting style, and it

made the words difficult to read. The letter <U> consisted of two up-and-down strokes. But when the letter <U> appeared beside an <I>, or another <U>, or a <W>, or an <M>, or <N> or <L>, what you ended up with was a series of up-and-down strokes, and it was difficult to determine where one letter ended and another letter began. So in those situations, scribes looked for ways to make the letter <U> stand out. But that wasn't the only problem associated with letter <U>.

Another problem was the fact that the letters <U>, <V> and <W> had not become distinct letters yet. The same symbol was used to represent all of the sounds we associate with those letters today. And that tended to create further confusion.

Another related problem had to do with the way scribes often indicated a long vowel sound. They would simply double the vowel letter like the way we often double the letter <E> for the /i:/ sound today. But you couldn't really do that with a <U> because some scribes were already using a 'double U' to represent the /w/ sound. And of course, that spelling eventually gave us the distinct letter that we call <W> ('double U') today. So a literal 'double U' – U-U – only created more confusion. It wasn't clear if it represented the long /u:/ sound or the /w/ sound.

These problems affected scribes throughout western Europe, not just in England. Most all of them were using similar scripts. And they all struggled with the best way to represent this /u:/ sound in a way that was clear and not confusing. French scribes eventually came up with a solution. They just adopted the spelling <OU> for that sound. English scribes then adopted that same practice from French. So by the time of late Middle English, we have words like *hus* and *mus* being spelled with an <OU> rather than their more traditional single letter <U>.

But then, in the 1400s, if not before, the /u:/ sound started to shift as part of the Great Vowel Shift. As I described earlier, it became a diphthong pronounced as /əu/. So *hus* became /həus/, and *mus* became /məus/. And then, a couple of centuries after that, the vowel shifted again. The sound shifted from /əu/ to /au/. Thus, /həus/ became *house*, and /məus/ became *mouse*. Those words also acquired a silent E at the end when they were spelled, and that gave us the modern spelling of *house* and *mouse*. Other words also experienced that same evolution like *mouth*, *spouse*, *south*, *thou*, *pound*, *bound*, *foul*, *out*, and so on.

Sometimes, scribes modified that spelling from <OU> to <OW>. Again, the <U>, <V> and <W> were still somewhat interchangeable, and the <OU> spelling may have been confused in certain situations with <OV>. So it may have looked like it was representing the /ov/ sound. At any rate, in some words, the <OU> was replaced with <OW>. And we see that spelling in words like *cow*, *how*, *now*, *brown*, *down*, and the American spelling of *plow* ('p-l-o-w').

Now I should note that there are quite a few words in modern standard English where the letter combination <OU> is still used for its original /u:/ sound. That includes words like *through*, *wound*, *youth*, *group*, *soup*, and so on. So what's the deal with those words? Why aren't they pronounced with the /au/ sound like those other words? Why do we say *youth* and not /yauth/? And *soup* and not /saup/? Well, there are actually two different answers to that question.

First, some of those words with the /u:/ sound were borrowed from French after the Great Vowel Shift. So they came into English with their French /u:/ sound and their French <OU> spelling, and neither the sound nor the spelling changed within English because the Great Vowel Shift was already over by that point. That's what happened with words like *group*, *soup*, *acoustic*, *souvenir* and *bouquet*. And that's why they are still pronounced with their original /u:/ sound.

And I can add another interesting word to that list – the word *mousse* ('m-o-u-s-s-e'). Again, it's a French loanword for a type of creamy dessert or a similar type of creamy substance like hair mousse. It was borrowed in the 1800s, so it came into English well after the Great Vowel Shift. But notice that Old English also had a word pronounced as /mu:s/ – spelled 'm-u-s.' It was the word for a small rodent. And as we saw, that Old English word for a rodent acquired its <OU> spelling in Middle English, then the vowel shifted from /mu:s/ to /məus/ during the Great Vowel Shift, and then it shifted again from /məus/ to /maus/ in the 1600s and 1700s. So when we compare Old English *mouse* to French *mousse*, we can see and hear how the Great Vowel Shift affected the former, but not the latter.

So we still have the <OU> spelling for the /u:/ sound in words borrowed from French after the Great Vowel Shift. But there is also another group of words where we still use that <OU> spelling for the /u:/ sound. And those words are native English words. They just happen to be words where the vowel sound was stubborn. The vowel never shifted in those words during the Great Vowel Shift. That includes words like *through*, *wound* and *youth*. So we have a few native words, as well as a handful of loanwords, where the /u:/ sound is still spelled <OU>, the same as it was during the time of Chaucer.

I should also note that there are a few other words where the pronunciation varies – where some people pronounce the word with the older vowel sound and some people use the modern vowel sound. For example, think about the pronunciation of the word spelled 'r-o-u-t-e.' Some people use the original pronunciation – /ru:t/. And some people use the newer pronunciation altered by the Great Vowel Shift – /raut/. As recently as the 1700s, both pronunciations were common in Britain and North America. But in the 1800s, the pronunciation as /raut/ largely fell out of use in Britain. So in Britain, *route* /ru:t/ has fallen in line with words like *through*, *wound* and *youth* where the original vowel sound had been retained. So that's a case where the vowel started to shift to /au/, but then it was pulled back to /u:/. But in the US, both pronunciations of that word can be found today. So in American English, the vowel in that word has partially shifted, but it remains in a bit of flux.

I should also mention the pronunciation of the name spelled 'H-o-u-s-t-o-n.' For the city in Texas, it's pronounced /hyu:ston/. For the street in New York City, it's pronounced /hau-ston/. The city and the street are actually named after two different people who pronounced their last names differently, and that's why the city and the street have different pronunciations today. But the difference in the pronunciation of those surnames was caused by this vowel shift that began in the 1400 and 1500s.

Now this vowel sound not only varies in a handful of words, it also varies from region to region. And this particular vowel shift explains some very common differences among regional accents. Again, the traditional view of this vowel shift is that it shifted twice – from /u:/ to /əu/ and then from /əu/ to /au/. But it's important to note that those changes took place in southern Britain and then were extended to the early American colonies. So that /au/ sound is part of the 'standard' forms of English spoken in England and the US. But in some places outside of southern Britain, the vowel didn't evolve in the same way. In some places, the vowel never shifted at all, and in other places, the vowel experienced the first shift, but not the second shift. So in those places, this vowel is still pronounced as /u:/ or /əu/. And before we move on to the next section, let me illustrate some of these regional variations because it helps to explain why English speakers pronounce many of these words differently.

As I've noted before, the impact of the Great Vowel Shift was much more limited in the north of England and in Scotland. So even to this day, you're much more likely to find words pronounced with their original or older vowel sounds in those regions. And in some of those place, speakers still pronounce words like *house* and *mouse* with their original Old English vowels– as /hu:s/ and /mu:s/.

Now, over the past few years, I've invited listeners to leave a voice sample at the website for the podcast. And I've provided some sample sentences there to try to pick up on some of these regional variations. One of the sentences I provided was "The mouse moved about the house. He snuck down the stairs and crawled around the outside of the towel closet." That sentence includes this particular vowel sound in words like *mouse*, *house*, *around* and *outside*.

Here's a dialect sample from Malcolm who is from the Newcastle region in the far north of England. You'll notice that he pronounces these words with their original /u:/ sound:

[AUDIO CLIP]

Now let's move a little further northward into Scotland, and let's listen to a sample for Calum. You'll notice that his accent shows the effects of the early stages of the Great Vowel Shift. He pronounces those words with the /əu/ sound which emerged in early Modern English, but he also points out that other speakers in Scotland use the older pronunciation:

[AUDIO CLIP]

Now that /əu/ pronunciation is very common throughout Scotland, northern England, Wales and Ireland. Remember that this was the vowel sound that emerged during the Great Vowel Shift in the 1400s and 1500s when the sound evolved from /u:/ to /əu/. So this was the vowel that Shakespeare probably used. Again, in many of these regions, that early Modern English vowel is still used, even though it often exists side-by-side with the modern /au/ sound as well. Some speakers will use one pronunciation while other speakers will use the other.

Here's a sample from Kerin who is from Wales, and you'll notice that she also uses that early Modern English vowel:

[AUDIO CLIP]

Now let's move over to Ireland and listen to Nora Anne who uses the same basic pronunciation:

[AUDIO CLIP]

And here's an interesting anecdote from Daniel who is from Northern Ireland. He talks about teaching English in France and the challenge of teaching in an accent that is considered non-standard. Notice that Daniel also uses the early Modern English vowel sound:

[AUDIO CLIP]

Now let's move 'across the pond' – as they say – to North America. As I noted earlier, the vowel shift from /əu/ to /au/ took place in southern Britain in the 1600s and 1700s – a couple of centuries after the Great Vowel Shift. And since that included places like London where 'standard' English emerged, that pronunciation became the accepted standard for many speakers. And it was carried to North America by immigrants in the 1600s and 1700s. So that /au/ sound became the accepted norm in North America as well. And today, most Americans pronounce words like *house* and *mouse* with that more recent /au/ sound. But there is a little pocket of English speakers that still use the older early Modern English vowel – the /əu/ sound that was still common when their ancestors arrived in North America in the 1600s. Those are the speakers who live along the Outer Banks of North Carolina and into the Tidewater region of Virginia. I've mentioned the very unique dialect of the Outer Banks before because it is somewhat of an anomaly. Settlers arrived there in the 1600s, and their descendants remained isolated along the barrier islands until the past century or so. As a result, their dialect retains a lot of the older vowel sounds, and it doesn't show as much general American influence.

Let me play you a few examples of this dialect. The first part of this clip comes from a documentary about the dialect that is narrated by Professor Walt Wolfram who is one of the leading experts on American accents and dialects, and he also happens to be one of my professors from way back. And I've also added a couple of clips at the end to further illustrate the pronunciation of this older /əu/ vowel sound in words like /sound/, /downtown/, /around/ and /house/.

Now as that last speaker noted, the use of that older /əu/ vowel sound seems strange to most Americans because it's very rare in American English. But if we move into some of the northernmost parts of the US, and especially as we move into Canada, we start to find this same pronunciation. In fact, this is a convenient way for Americans to identify a Canadian accent. For the most part, a standard American accent and a standard Canadian accent are so similar that it can be difficult to distinguish the two, but this particular vowel sound is a quick giveaway. It's very common for Canadian speakers to use the older /əu/ vowel. Let me give you a couple of examples.

First we have Margaret who is from northern Quebec and Ontario:

[AUDIO CLIP]

And here's Dave from Alberta:

[AUDIO CLIP]

Now this type of pronunciation is sometimes referred to as Canadian Raising. It's a tendency of many Canadian speakers to pronounce diphthongs like /au/ and /ai/ by starting the vowel sound a little bit higher in the mouth – closer to the older pronunciations found in early Modern English. But interestingly, it isn't entirely clear if this particular Canadian pronunciation is a holdover from early Modern English or if it is a more recent development. These features aren't really documented until the mid-1900s. Some linguists think it represents a more recent vowel shift within Canadian English, while others think it developed from the older pronunciation which was preserved in certain pockets of Canada and gradually expanded outward over time. But regardless of the source, it is a prominent feature of Canadian English.

Many Americans tend to hear this /əu/ sound as an odd diphthong, and they often misrepresent this sound when they repeat it. It's common to hear Americans mimic a Canadian accent by saying 'aboot' rather than /abəut/. So Americans will tend to shift the vowel all the back to its original /u:/ sound, but again, the Canadian vowel is actually somewhere between the Old English vowel and the modern American vowel. It's closer to the early Modern English vowel.

Here's a voice sample from Erik in Edmonton who discusses this pronunciation and the way it is often perceived by Americans.

[AUDIO CLIP]

So I hope you found that interesting. All of those regional variations stem from the evolution of the high /u:/ vowel sound in the back of the mouth from the 1400s until today. I think I've thoroughly covered the evolution of that vowel sound, so let's move on to the next vowel. As we know, the Great Vowel Shift was a chain shift, so when one vowel sound moved, the vowel sound underneath it moved up and filled the gap that was left behind. So now, let's turn our attention to the vowel sound pronounced one step lower than the /u:/ sound, and that's the /o:/ sound.

[MUSIC BREAK]

Earlier, I mentioned the mnemonic device to help you keep track of the vowel sounds that are pronounced in the back part of the mouth, or more specifically, produced by the placement and movement of the tongue in the back part of the mouth. The final part of that mnemonic was 'Ollie's Awesome Old Uber,' which represents the sounds /a:/ - /ɔ:/ - /o:/ - /u:/. So those final two sounds are /o:/ and /u:/. When the /u:/ sound became a diphthong and moved in the way I described in the prior section, the /o:/ sound moved up and filled the gap that was left behind. To

put it a different way, words that were pronounced with the /o:/ sound before the Great Vowel Shift came to be pronounced with the /u:/ sound after the Great Vowel Shift. Middle English /foad/, /spooan/, /loas/ and /toath/ became Modern English *food*, *spoon*, *loose* and *tooth*.

We still have some lingering evidence of that sound change in a few words. To a certain extent we can hear it in the difference between *tone* and *tune*. Both words are derived from the same Latin root – *tonus*. Those words pre-date the Great Vowel Shift and have a complicated phonetic history, but *tone* retains much of the original Latin vowel sound, whereas *tune* shows the effects of the vowel shift.

Another example is the word *gold* and the surname *Gould*. They're ultimately the same word. The name *Gould* actually began as *Gold*, and again, the vowel sound was raised during the Great Vowel Shift from *Gold* to *Gould*. And believe or not, the word *gold* for the expensive metal was also pronounced /gu:ld/ in early Modern English. So Shakespeare would have referred to a /gu:lden/ ring – not a 'golden' ring. But the pronunciation of the shiny metal shifted back to /go:ld/ in the 1700s and 1800s. That left us with the name *Gould* and the metal *gold*.

By the way, the name of the city of Rome worked the same way. The pronunciation shifted from *Rome* to /r:um/ during the Great Vowel Shift, but then in the 1700s and 1800s, it shifted back down to *Rome* again. We know that from surviving documents from the period where people wrote about the pronunciation of words, and we also see evidence of it in the Shakespeare's plays. He lived immediately after the Great Vowel Shift, and he famously used the words *Rome* ('R-o-m-e') and *room* ('r-o-o-m') as puns. In *Romeo and Juliet*, he included the line, "Now is it Rome indeed, and room enough, When there is in it but one only man." Today, that line loses some of its meaning. But if we change the pronunciation of the city back to the way he would have pronounced it, the lines read, "Now is it /Ru:m/ indeed, and room enough, When there is in it but one only man." So Shakespeare was saying 'Is it really /ru:m/ when there's only room enough for one man?' But the pun gets lost on a modern audience since we have shifted the pronunciation of Rome back to its original pronunciation.

So far, we've seen and heard how this /o:/ sound shifted up to the /u:/ sound. Now let's consider how that change impacted English spelling, and specifically, how it impacted the way we use the letter <O>. We use the letter <O> for a lot of different sounds today, and the Great Vowel Shift is partially responsible for that.

Traditionally, the long /o:/ sound was spelled with the letter <O>. That shouldn't come as a surprise because we still consider that to be the long sound of the letter <O>. And as I mentioned earlier, scribes often indicated a long vowel sound by doubling the vowel letter. So it was common for scribes to spell the long /o:/ sound with <OO>. And those spellings were retained even after the sound was raised from /o:/ up to /u:/. And that's why we still use <OO> to spell words like *food*, *mood*, *boot*, *tooth*, *soon*, *moon* and so on. That <OO> spelling has become a somewhat standard way of representing the /u:/ sound.

But let's think about that <OO> spelling a bit more. We also find it in words like *look*, *book*, *foot*, *good*, *cook*, and so on. So what's going on there?

Well the sound in those words is considered a ‘short’ vowel sound, specifically, the ‘short U’ sound. Now since this is a short vowel sound, the development of this vowel is not really part of the Great Vowel Shift. Remember that the Great Vowel Shift only affected the long vowel sounds. But the Great Vowel Shift does help to explain why we use the letter O for the ‘short U’ sound in words like *look*, *book*, and *good*.

Traditionally, this ‘short U’ sound was spelled with letter U. We still find that spelling in many words today, like *bush*, *bull*, *push*, *pull*, *put*, *full*, *butcher*, and so on.

So if the letter <U> was traditionally used for that short /u/ sound, how did the letter <O> come into the picture? Well as I noted a few moments ago, the letter <O> was used for the long /o:/ sound in Middle English. And that sound was raised up to /u:/ during the Great Vowel Shift. And that led to the use of the letter <O> – or <OO> – for the /u:/ sound in words like *food*, *mood*, *boot*, and so on. But then, that long /u:/ sound was shortened in some of those words from long /u:/ to short /u/.

And when that happened, the vowel sound in those words crashed into and merged with the existing words which already had that ‘short U’ sound. And that gave us two sets of words with that sound. One set were the words that traditionally had that ‘short U’ sound and were spelled with a letter <U> like *bull* and *bush* and *put*. The other set were the words that were raised from /o:/ to /u:/ and then shortened to /u/. Those words are typically spelled with a <OO> to reflect their original /o:/ vowel sound. That includes words like *book*, *look*, *took*, *foot*, *good*, *wood*, *cook* and *stood*. So again, just to trace that sound change for you, *book* began as /boak/ during the time of Chaucer. The vowel was then raised up to /bu:k/ during the Great Vowel Shift, and then in the 1600s, the vowel was shortened to *book*. So it was, /boak/ – /bu:k/ – /buk/.

All of that explains why that ‘short U’ sound is sometimes spelled with a <U> and is sometimes spelled with a <OO>. The former are older words that still have their traditional <U>, and the latter are newer words with a sound that evolved from /o:/ and are spelled with <OO> to reflect that history.

Now so far, we’ve explored the changes that affected the two highest back vowels – /u:/ and /o:/. Now let’s turn our attention to the two lowest back vowels – /a:/ and /ɔ:/. In the next section of this episode, we’ll look at those two vowel sounds together because their history is fundamentally connected.

[MUSIC BREAK]

In the prior section, we explored how the /o:/ sound was raised to /u:/ during the Great Vowel Shift. As with the other vowel changes we have explored, when the /o:/ sound moved up, it left a gap, and that gap was soon filled when the next lowest vowel sound moved up and occupied that space. In this case, that next lowest vowel was the /ɔ:/ sound. So the /ɔ:/ sound shifted up to the /o:/ sound during the 1400s and 1500s. But there’s a lot more to this part of the story. And those other details concern where that /ɔ:/ sound came from.

And this is where we need to refer back to an earlier episode. Way back in Episode 96 called ‘From Alpha to Omega,’ I explored a specific vowel shift that took place in the early Middle English period. And that vowel shift was really the source of this particular vowel sound. So let’s revisit that discussion for a moment.

As I noted earlier, the two lowest back vowels are /a:/ and /ɔ:/. Well, in the early Middle English period, shortly after the Norman Conquest, words that had that lowest /a:/ sound started to be pronounced with the slightly higher /ɔ:/ sound. So the vowel shifted up one step. And then, three or four centuries later, that vowel sound shifted up again during the Great Vowel Shift from /ɔ:/ to /o:/. Remember the order of those back vowels: ‘Ollie’s Awesome Old Uber’ – /a:/ - /ɔ:/ - /o:/ - /u:/. So this vowel sound followed that same order – /a:/ - /ɔ:/ - /o:/. /ha:m/-/hɔ:m/- **home**. /ba:n/-/bɔ:n/- **bone**. /sta:n/-/stɔ:n/- **stone**. /ba:t/-/bɔ:t/- **boat**. The first pronunciation was the Old English pronunciation. The second was the Middle English pronunciation. And the third pronunciation is the Modern English pronunciation after the second vowel shift.

Now again, that first vowel change happened about three or four centuries before the Great Vowel Shift, so it isn’t normally considered to be a part of the Great Vowel Shift itself. But if we step back and take a broader view of what happened, we can think of those two shifts as part of a larger, more extended process that converted the Old English vowel system into the Modern English vowel system.

Now the fact that these two lowest back vowels moved up over the course of the Middle English period does raise an interesting question. Since those were the lowest vowel sounds, and since we still have those vowel sounds in English today, where did the modern versions of those vowels come from?

Well, there’s not single answer to that question. The fact is that vowel sounds are constantly shifting around in English. And over the past few centuries, there have been many changes that aren’t considered part of the Great Vowel Shift itself. Many of those changes have taken place since then, or they involve a separate process. And many words that had other vowel sounds have moved in and filled the gaps left behind when the /a:/ and /ɔ:/ sounds moved up to /o:/. I’m not going to trace all of the changes here because, again, they’re not really considered to be part of the Great Vowel Shift. But I just want to explain why we still have words with those lowest back vowels even though those vowel sounds were raised upward in the 1400s and 1500s during the Great Vowel Shift.

Now having looked at how these low back vowels changed, let’s consider the impact of those changes on the way words are spelled. The first thing we should do is think back to the previous section where we looked at how the /o:/ sound shifted up to /u:/. We saw at that point, that many of the words affected by that change were spelled with a <OO>, and that spelling was retained when the vowel sound shifted up to /u:/. And that’s why so many words with the /u:/ sound today are spelled with <OO> like **room**, and **spoon**, and **moon**.

But notice that the letter <O> didn't become restricted to that high /u:/ sound. We still use the letter <O> for its traditional /o:/ sound in words like *home*, and *stone*, and *bone*. These are words where the vowel sound shifted upward in the way I described earlier in this section from /a:/ to /ɔ:/ to /o:/. /ha:m/ to /hɔ:m/ to *home*. So why do we use the letter O to spell those words? Why didn't they retain their original A's? It seems to contradict the general rule that words retained their older spellings even after their vowels shifted around.

Well, the answer to that question has to do with the fact that there wasn't a specific letter to represent that lower /ɔ:/ sound. So when the vowel in those words shifted up to /ɔ:/ in early Middle English, scribes had to figure out how to represent that sound in writing. And some of them decided to use the letter for <O> for that sound. So when the vowel sound moved up again from /ɔ:/ to /o:/ during the Great Vowel Shift, those words just retained the letter <O> that they already had. So let me break that down for you so you can see how that spelling evolved.

Let's begin with the Old English version of words like *home* and *boat*. The Anglo-Saxons would have said *ham* and *bat*, and those words were typically spelled 'h-a-m' and 'b-a-t'. Then, around the time of the Norman Conquest in the early Middle English period, the vowel was raised up one step to /ɔ:/. So someone like Geoffrey Chaucer would have said /hɔ:m/ and /bɔ:t/. But that was clearly a different vowel sound, so Middle English scribes had to decide how to spell it.

Now this /ɔ:/ sound was articulated somewhere between the low /a:/ sound represented with letter <A> and the slightly higher /o:/ sound represented with letter <O>. So those were the two best options. They could either continue to spell those words with an <A> or they could shift the spelling to <O>, even though neither of those letters really reflected the current pronunciation. As I noted, many of those scribes decided to use the letter <O> for this in-between /ɔ:/ sound. But that meant the letter <O> was being used for both the /ɔ:/ sound and the slightly higher /o:/ sound. So the letter <O> was being asked to do a lot of work. And it wasn't always clear which sound the letter <O> was representing.

Because of that potential confusion, some scribes looked for a different way to represent that /ɔ:/ sound. Again, that sound was pronounced in between /a:/ and /o:/ – the traditional sounds of letter <A> and letter <O>. So some scribes decided to represent that in-between sound by putting those two letters together. That gave us the letter combination <OA>. That seemed to be a good way to indicate that this /ɔ:/ sound was pronounced somewhere in between the traditional sounds of letters <O> and <A>.

And that gave scribes two different ways of representing this /ɔ:/ sound – either the single letter <O> or the letters <O> and <A> put together. And then, when this /ɔ:/ sound shifted up to /o:/ during the Great Vowel Shift, those two spellings were retained. And we still use both of those spellings today for the words that experienced this evolution. We use the letter <O> in words like *home*, *stone*, *bone*, *holy*, *ghost*, and so on. And we use the letter combination <OA> in words like *boat*, *goat*, *road*, *loaf*, *soap* and so on. Again, all of those words have the same phonetic history, and they have the same vowel sound today, but the difference in spelling reflects the different ways of representing that /ɔ:/ vowel sound in late Middle English before the vowel shifted up to its modern pronunciation.

Now before we move on, I should probably account for another group of words with that /o:/ sound. Those are words that are typically spelled with <OW>, like *show*, *low*, *grow*, *blow*, and *bowl*. Those words have a slightly different phonetic history. That had a different vowel sound at the time of the Great Vowel Shift. It was a specific diphthong that shifted to this /o:/ sound at a later date in the 1500s and 1600s. So the vowel sound in those words crashed into and merged with those other words that acquired the /o:/ sound about a century earlier during the Great Vowel Shift.

All of that gave us three common ways of representing the /o:/ sound today – <O>, <OA>, and <OW>. Remember that Middle English scribes also used a <OO> spelling for that sound, and that spelling was retained in the words that shifted up to /u:/ during the vowel shift in words like *food* and *goose* and *spoon*. That's why we don't generally use the <OO> spelling for the /o:/ sound anymore. That spelling is usually reserved for the long and short 'U' sounds today as I discussed in the previous section.

Now before I conclude, let's consider the how the /o:/ sound has evolved within Modern English. As I noted a few episodes back, the /o:/ sound that was used in early Modern English was more of a pure vowel sound. So it was more like /o:/. So a word like boat was pronounced /bo:t/. That type of pronunciation can still be heard in parts of the British Isles. The sound later evolved into the modern pronunciation as /ou/, which is actually a diphthong. The modern sound is really the /o:/ sound followed by a slight /u:/ sound – /ou/. That happened in the 1700s. And then, in early 1900s, English speakers in southern Britain modified that sound a little bit more to /əu/, which is a similar diphthong, but it begins a little bit higher in the mouth.

Now that brings us to the end of the long vowel sounds in English. So we've covered all of the major vowel changes that are known today as the Great Vowel Shift. These changes affected all of the long vowels in English, and as I've outlined over these past three episodes, the changes didn't necessarily end with the Great Vowel Shift itself. Many of these vowels continued to shift and evolve over the course of the following centuries. There were also additional vowel shifts that took place at a later date, and were often limited to certain regions. Those changes contributed to the various regional accents that we have today. I'll try to trace out those changes and developments as we move forward into the Modern English period.

And speaking of Modern English, we can now start to turn our attention to that period. We'll begin next time with the rise of Tudors, and the discovery of the Americas by Christopher Columbus. These developments will set the stage for the eventual expansion of English well beyond the shores of Britain.

So next time, we'll pick back up with our overall historical narrative. Until then, thanks for listening to the History of English Podcast.