THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH PODCAST TRANSCRIPTS

EPISODE 184: SPELLING SAYS A LOT (Part 1)

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Welcome to the History of English Podcast – a podcast about the history of the English language. This is Episode 184: Spelling Says a Lot. This time, we're going to look at the pronunciation of English in the early 1600s as the language was starting to make its way around the world. And we're going to do that by focusing on the way words are spelled. As crazy as English spelling often seems, there is usually an explanation and logic to it if you understand how words were pronounced in the past. So this time, we're going to try to make sense out of English spelling, while also re-creating the sound of English in the early modern period.

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 at Patreon.com/historyofenglish.

Now before we get started, let me explain the idea behind this episode. Throughout this podcast series, I have tried to trace the development of the alphabet and the way it had been applied to various sounds over the centuries. I have also tried to trace basic changes in the way English and other languages are pronounced. And of course, those two developments are closely related to each other because, theoretically, the way words are spelled is supposed to reflect the way they are pronounced. That isn't always the case in Modern English, but spelling and pronunciation are fundamental parts of our story.

The problem is that, in tracing those developments in pronunciation and spelling, the topics have been spread out over 13 years and 183 episodes. I doubt most of you have listened to all of those episodes, and if you have, you probably don't remember all of those details. So I thought it would be helpful to do an episode – or a couple of episodes – that provide a quick summary of all the essential points that we have covered as it relates to modern spelling. And I also thought it would be helpful to do that in the context of the early 1600s because that was the time when English was starting to spread around the world. Most of the remaining part of the story of English will concern the development of regional accents and dialects. So I thought it would be helpful to establish a baseline in the way the language was pronounced, so that future developments can be traced back to this point when there was more of a common foundation. So the idea is to have a convenient summary of the essential features of the language in the early 1600s.

I also decided to approach this topic through spelling because spelling is a source of so much frustration and confusion in Modern English. But that's mainly because our spelling system in stuck in the past. Most of our words are spelled the way the pronounced in the 1500s. So a closer look at older pronunciations reveals why words are spelled the way they are today. And this is a good time to explore those topics because we have a several important scholars in the early 1600s who provided us with a detailed account of English pronunciation at the time.

So this episode will cover some new ground, but it will also summarize some of the important topics from earlier episodes. If some of this material seems vaguely familiar, that's why. And this will be the first part of the discussion. I'll cover the first part of the alphabet this time, and I'll save the rest for the next episode.

So with that, let's pick up the story of English where we left off last time around the year 1619. By this point, we have English settlements in Ireland, in Jamestown in North America, and in Bermuda. We also have trading posts in India, and English traders starting to operate in Japan. English was on its way around the world.

English was starting to become an international language, but in a sense, it already was an international language. Over the prior five centuries, the English vocabulary had exploded with words from French, Latin, Greek, Old Norse, and increasingly from Dutch, Spanish and Italian. We've even seen that words from India were starting to flow into the language. English speakers were willing to embrace words from anywhere, and outside of a few scholars who decried the outside influence, most people seemed to think that the outside influence had improved the English language by making it more expressive, more flexible, and more worldly. In prior episodes, I mentioned how writers were starting to express pride in the English language for the first time – at least the first time since the Norman Conquest.

Another example of that pride comes from an English writer and historian named William Camden, who was in his late 60s at the current point in our overall story in 1619. He was a writer and bit of a book collector. When he died four years later, he left his books to Robert Cotton, whose library was the source of so many Old English and early Middle English books that survive today. A few years earlier, in the late 1500s, Camden had composed a survey of the British Isles called 'Britannia.' And it is an important work for historians of the late Elizabethan period. The book discussed the history, topography, and culture of the British Isles. Camden even learned Old English and Welsh so he could compile essential information from old manuscripts.

His book was written in Latin, but several years later in the early 1600s, excerpts were published in English, and they are interesting because they reveal something very important about the state of English at the time. The passages reveal the pride and confidence that English speakers had acquired in their own language. English had once been perceived as a peasant language – inferior to classical languages like Latin and Greek, and also inferior to French, which was the language of power and wealth in England going back to the Norman Conquest. But Camden reveals how that perception had changed. He felt that the language had evolved to the point where it could express ideas and emotions and shades of meaning as well as any of those other languages. In one particular passage, Camden expressed his pride in English and criticized the English obsession with other languages. He wrote:

> ". . . pardon me and thinke me not overballanced with affection, if I thinke that our English tongue is . . . as fluent as the Latine, as courteous as the Spanish, as courtlike as the French, and as amorous as the Italian, as some Italianated amorous have confessed. Neither hath any thing detracted more from the dignitie of our tongue, than our owne affection of forraine tongues, by admiring, praising, and studying them above measure:"

While Camden and other English speakers had gained a sense of pride in their own language, the way the language was written down and spelled was still a source of some frustration. Traditionally, there were no standard spellings. People just spelled words like they sounded. And Camden also included an interesting note about that aspect of English. He began by making reference to the comments of a Welsh writer named Sir John Price, who had lived a century earlier in the early 1500s. Price had written a passage at the time that noted how irregular English spelling was. Well, Camden, writing nearly a century later, took exception to Price's remarks. He felt that English spelling – what some people call the 'orthography' of the language – had became more regular and standardized by the end of the century. Camden wrote:

> "This variety of pronuntiation hath brought in some diversitie of Orthographie, and heere-vpon Sir Iohn Price, to the derogation of our tongue, and glorie of his Welsh, reporteth that a sentence spoken by him in English, & penned out of his mouth by foure good Secretaries . . . was so set downe by them, that they all differed one from the other in many letters: whereas so many Welsh writing the same likewise in their tongue varied not in any one letter at all. Well, I will not derogate from the good Knights credite; yet it hath beene seene where tenne English writing the same sentence, have all so concurred, that among them all there hath beene no other difference, than the adding, or omitting once or twice of our silent E, in the end of some wordes." [*SOURCE: A History of English Spelling, D.G. Scragg, p. 70.*]

Now, that's a notable passage because it reveals an important development that had taken place over the course of the 1500s. During that century, English spelling had started to become regular and standardized. Of course, it wasn't completely fixed yet. As Camden noted, people still had a tendency to add a silent E to many words. That was a lingering effect of the loss of Old English inflections. But a lot of progress had been made over the course of the prior century. It began when the English government started to standardize spellings in government documents in the late 1400s. And then the printing press moved the process along even further. And by the early 1600s, dictionaries and spelling books were starting to be published, and they conveyed the idea that there was a 'correct' way to spell words, and they provided a source that a person to could turn to if they needed to find that 'correct' spelling.

But there was one major problem with all of this. English spelling was being standardized at a time when the pronunciation of the language was rapidly changing and evolving. And that left us with the problem we have today.

English spelling generally reflects the way words were pronounced in the mid-1500s. By the late 1500s, some writers were already observing how spelling was starting to become divorced from pronunciation.

As we saw in prior episodes, several English writers tried to address this problem in the latter part of the 1500s by recommending a strictly phonetic spelling system. They wanted words to be spelled exactly like they were pronounced. Many of them even proposed their own phonetic alphabets. The idea was that each sound would have its own letter. That's the main problem with our existing alphabet. There are far more sounds in English than there are letters. So our letters

often have to do double or triple duty. But these early spelling reformers wanted to represent each sound with a specific letter.

Of course, the problem with a strictly phonetic approach is that people pronounce words differently in different regions and sometimes within the same region. And pronunciations change over time. So it's hard to get people to agree on phonetic spellings, and even if you can agree, those spellings have to be constantly revised and updated as the language changes. Otherwise, the system stops being phonetic after a while. Phonetic spelling also requires you to invent new letters to represent all of the specific sounds in English. And convincing people to adopt a new spelling system is hard. Once people become accustomed to a particular spelling, it just looks 'right' to them. They don't like to change it. So none of the phonetic writing systems that were proposed stood a chance with printers and the general public.

But those proposals are important to language historians because they reveal a great deal about the way the language was pronounced at the time. Since most of those proposals contained a phonetic alphabet, and also contained passages to illustrate how the alphabet worked, they are a goldmine for historical linguists. They provide some of the best evidence we have about the way words were pronounced in the late 1500s and early 1600s.

One of the early advocates of phonetic spelling was John Hart. He wrote in the second half of the 1500s, and his comments are important because he wrote extensively about the way words were pronounced at the time. We looked at his works in Episode 159 and 160. Other scholars soon followed in Hart's footsteps and proposed similar spelling systems. But a few years later, an English headmaster named Richard Mulcaster proposed the system that we largely use today. Mulcaster was the headmaster of St Paul's School in London, and he recognized that a purely phonetic spelling system wasn't practical. You couldn't have different spellings for each dialect of English. You needed to have a consistent approach that took into account both the way words were pronounced and the way people were accustomed to spelling them. That balanced approach provided the model we use today. We looked at Mulcaster's ideas and proposals back in Episode 163.

Well Mulcaster eventually retired as headmaster of St. Paul's School, and in 1607, he was succeeded by a new headmaster named Alexander Gil. And Gil was also interested in the way English was spoken and written. As an aside, one of Gil's students during this period was John Milton, who later went on to write Paradise Lost.

Well, at the current point in our overall story of English in the year 1619, Gil published an important book on English phonetics and spelling called 'Logonomia Anglica.'

As that name indicates, it was written in Latin, but that wasn't unusual. A lot of scholars in the 1500s and 1600s who wrote about English did so in Latin because Latin was still considered to be the language of scholarship. But that didn't detract from Gil's overall view of English. Like William Camden who I mentioned earlier, Gil had a very high opinion of English. He wrote that no other language was 'more graceful, elegant, or apt for the expression of every subtle thought than English.' [*SOURCE: Righting the Mother Tongue, David Wolman, p. 57.*]

Like many English scholars who had preceded him, Gil wanted a more phonetic spelling system. And this particular book published in 1619 set forth his ideas. Of course, most of his ideas failed to gain acceptance, but like John Hart before him, he is largely remembered because of his detailed description of the language at the time.

But Gil wasn't the only writer of this period to provide a detailed description of the language. Around the same time that Gil was composing his work on English spelling, another writer in London named Robert Robinson produced a book called 'The Art of Pronuntiation.' Robinson created his own phonetic alphabet, and even though relatively little is known about him, his book also provides some important insights about pronunciation at the time.

The works of these various writers provide essential information about English at a time when English was reaching distant lands, and new varieties were beginning to emerge in those regions.

So with the help of those writers, and other clues and evidence compiled by modern linguists, I am going to try to present a view of what English sounded like in the early 1600s. And I'm going to do that by looking at the way words are spelled, since those two factors are closely related.

And notice that I said I am going to present 'a' view of how English was pronounced at the time. People who know far more about seventeenth century pronunciations that I will ever know can't agree on the details, so I would never claim to present the one definitive view of this topic. But despite the occasional disagreements, there are many generally accepted principles that I will try to focus on in this episode.

Of course, there would have been a lot of variation in the way English was spoken in the early 1600s, just as there is today. But I'm going to focus on the form of the language that was spoken in and around London because that is what most of the writers of the period were concerned about. They considered it to be the standard form of the language at the time, and in fact, it evolved into the standard form of English spoken in most parts of the world today.

Now since my approach in this episode is to examine the connection between spelling and pronunciation, let's begin at the beginning – with letter A.

The first thing to keep in mind about letter A is that it originally represented the /ɑ:/ sound in Latin, and that was the way the letter was originally used in English as well. In fact, when we encounter that letter A, it usually means there was an /ɑ:/ sound involved at some point in the past. The letter still represents that sound in a word like ***father***, but it's not the primary sound of the letter in Modern English.

Today, the letter [a] usually represents other sounds. As a child learning to spell, you may have been taught that the letter A has two distinct sounds. There is the so-called 'short [a]' sound found in words like ***hat***, ***back***, ***sad***, and ***apple***. That's the /æ/ sound. And there is also the so-called 'long [a]' sound found in words like ***cake***, ***tape***, ***face*** and ***name***. That's the /ei/ sound. And you also may have been taught that the spelling distinguishes those two sounds by adding a silent [e] to the end of a word if it has the 'long' sound. So that's the difference between ***hat*** without

the silent E and ***hate*** with the silent [e]. That silent [e] is only there to indicate how the [a] is supposed to be pronounced.

Now all of that is true, but of course, it is incredibly simplified. The letter [a] can also be used to represent other sounds as we'll see. But let's keep things simple and just focus on the sounds of 'short [a]' and 'long [a].'

That 'short [a]' sound (/æ/) has been around since Old English. In fact, all of those words I used as examples – ***hat***, ***back***, ***sad*** and ***apple*** – were around in Old English, and back then, they would have been pronounced essentially the same way we pronounce them today. Old English even had a specific letter for that sound, which was the letter called ash. It looked like an [a] and an [e] pushed together. That letter was created because the /æ/ sound was a little different from the /ɑ/ sound usually represented by letter A. So the Anglo-Saxons apparently felt they needed a separate letter for that /æ/ sound, which wasn't really common in Latin. But after the Norman Conquest, the French-trained scribes didn't see a need for the letter ash, so it gradually disappeared. During the Middle English period, it was replaced with letter [a], and that spelling persists to this day.

Now, all in all, that seems pretty straight-forward, but there is one complicating factor here. I said that we pronounce those words the same way they were pronounced in Old English, but that doesn't mean the pronunciation hasn't changed over the centuries. In fact, since the time of the Norman Conquest, the vowel sound in those words has fluctuated between this original /æ/ sound and the nearby /ɑ/ sound. And when I say nearby, I mean that the tongue is lowered and flattened just a little bit as we go from /æ/ to /ɑ/. Shortly after the Norman Conquest, it appears that English speakers dropped that vowel sound down to /ɑ/ for a few centuries, so ***hat***, ***back*** and ***sad*** became /hɑt/, /bɑk/ and /sɑd/. But then in the late 1500s, the sound moved back to /æ/ again, thereby returning to the original pronunciation and giving us the common pronunciation that we hear today in words like ***hat***, ***back*** and ***sad***.

That sound was still returning to its original /æ/ sound in the early 1600s. So at the current point in our overall story of English, you would have probably heard both pronunciations with older and more educated speakers saying /hɑt/, /bɑk/ and /sɑd/, and younger and less educated speakers saying ***hat***, ***back*** and ***sad***. But the letter [a] was used for both sounds – the /æ/ and the /ɑ/ sound, so the spelling never really changed. So here we see how the letter [a] expanded from its original /ɑ/ sound to also represent the /æ/ sound in English, and that use is preserved as our so-called 'short [a]' sound.

As an aside, I should note that this fluctuation between /æ/ and /ɑ/ continued after the early 1600s, most notably in the following century when speakers in southern England moved the sound back down to /ɑ/ in a whole class of words. That class included the word ***class*** itself, which came to be pronounced /clɑss/. When that /æ/ vowel sound appeared before certain consonant sounds like the 's' sound (/s/), and the 'f' sound (/f/), and the 'th' sound (/th/), the /æ/ sound once again lowered to /ɑ/, thereby giving us the pronunciations associated with southern England today. That includes words like ***class***, ***bath***, ***last***, ***dance***, ***path*** and so on. But again, that was a later development that took place in southern England and then spread to places like

Australia and New Zealand. So at the current point in our story in the early 1600s, speakers didn't make that distinction yet. They didn't contrast ***fat*** and ***fast*** (/fɑst/) and ***bat*** and ***bath*** (/bɑth/). They would have pronounced all of those with the same vowel sound, just like someone from North America or northern England does today. But again, whether you say ***class*** (/clæs/) or ***class*** (/clɑs/), it's spelled the same way because the letter [a] has been used to represent both sounds in English since the Norman Conquest.

So that's the so-called 'short' sound of letter [a]. But what about the 'long [a]' sound? It's the /ei/ sound we hear in words like ***cake***, ***tape***, and ***face***. If the original sound of letter [a] was /ɑ/, why do we use it spell all of those words with the /ei/ sound/ Well, here the answer in the Great Vowel Shift.

In those words, the sound represented by letter [a] has a different history because the sound was originally pronounced longer than the 'short [a]' sound that we just looked at. So it was held slightly longer when people spoke, and that made it a distinct sound. Vowel length isn't as important in Modern English as it once was, but it still exists to a certain extent. Anyway, the vowel sounds that were pronounced longer all shifted around as part of the phenomenon called the Great Vowel Shift that began in the 1400s. It's called the Great Vowel Shift because it affected an entire series of vowel sounds in English, which all moved around in relation to each other kind of like a game of musical chairs. I discussed the Great Vowel Shift back in Episodes 141 through 143, so check out those episodes for a detailed discussion about those changes.

But for purposes of letter [a], the Great Vowel Shift changed the way we use the letter in English because spellings were locked in place while the vowel sound continued to shift around. Remember that the original sound of letter [a] was /ɑ/ – in this case the longer version of that sound. So the letter [a] was originally applied to words that had that sound. And in earlier periods of English, words like ***name***, ***make*** and ***hate*** all had that /ɑ:/ sound, so people said /nɑ:m/, /mɑ:k/, and /hɑ:t/. Since they originally had that /ɑ:/ sound, they were all spelled with an [a].

But then the sound began to change as part of the Great Vowel Shift. In fact, in those words, the sound didn't just change once. It changed several times over the course of a couple of centuries. The sound went from /ɑ:/ to /æ:/ to /ɛ:/ to /e:/ to /ei/. So the modern word ***make*** started as /mɑ:k/, then became /mæ:k/, then /mɛ:k/, then /me:k/, and then /meik/. Again, /mɑk/, /mæ:k/, /mɛ:k/, /me:k/, and /meik/. That evolution extended from the early 1500s through the 1700s. And as a result of that long-term vowel change, we use the letter [a] today to represent that /ei/ sound in words like ***name***, ***make***, ***hate***, ***cake***, ***flame***, ***take***, ***fade***, ***haste***, ***safe***, and on and on. Notice that all of those words have an [a] followed by a consonant and then a silent E to indicate that the letter [a] is pronounced as 'long [a]'. Most of the words in Modern English that follow that pattern have that history.

So what was the sound of those words at the current point in our overall story of English in the early 1600s? Well, at that time, we were somewhere in the middle of the Great Vowel Shift, so the sound was still changing. And the surviving descriptions of the sound by the various spelling reformers indicate some uncertainty about the sound as well. The sound was probably fluctuating between /æ:/ and /ɛ:/ and /e:/. So for the phrase 'bake the cake,' you would have heard some

older and educated speakers say '/bæ:k/ the /cæ:k/' or '/bɛ:k/ the /cɛ:k/' in the older way, but you would have also heard some people saying '/be:k/ the /ce:k/,' which was a precursor of our modern pronunciation. And in fact, Alexander Gil writing in 1619 acknowledged that there were people around London who he called Mopseys that used that newer pronunciation, even though he didn't like it. He was a bit old fashioned and preferred the older pronunciations. [*SOURCE: From Dialect to Standard, Hans Frede Nielsen, p. 222-3*.]

So that's the 'short [a]' and 'long [a]' sounds and how they were probably being pronounced in the early 1600s. And so far, we've seen how the letter [a] was extended in English from its original /ɑ:/ sound to encompass additional sounds like /æ:/ and /ei/, and those newer sounds are in fact considered to the 'standard' sounds of the letter in Modern English.

Now before we move on from letter [a], we have another group of words that are spelled with an [a] and which have the same 'long [a]' sound that we just examined, but these words are spelled a little differently. These words are spelled with [ay] or [ai]. At one time, [i]'s and [y]'s were somewhat interchangeable, so [ay] and [ai] are really just two variations of the same spelling. This group of words includes word like ***day***, ***way***, ***maid*** (m-a-i-d), ***pain*** (p-a-i-n), ***nail***, ***bait***, and so on. So why are these words spelled with [ay] or [ai] instead of [a] and a silent [e] at the end? In fact, sometimes we have both. We have ***maid*** (m-a-i-d) like someone who cleans your house, and ***made*** (m-a-d-e) as in the past tense of ***make***. And we have ***pain*** (p-a-i-n) as in something that hurts, and ***pane*** (p-a-n-e) as in a window pane. The reason why these two group of words are spelled differently is because they were once pronounced differently. They didn't rhyme like they do today. Remember, we can't be deceived by modern pronunciations because pronunciations have changed over time.

The [ai] or [ay] spelling developed in Middle English to represent a vowel that sounded something like /ai/. So in the Middle English period, the word ***day*** was pronounced more like /dai/, and it came to be spelled [d-a-y]. Interestingly, that original sound has worked its way back around and has reappeared in these words in some modern dialects of English. You can hear that pronunciation in a broad Australian accent where ***day*** is often pronounced as /dai/ like in the greeting 'good day,' which is rendered in that broad accent as 'g-day.'

So that was the original sound in this group of words spelled with [ay] or [ai]. But again, the vowel sound in those words changed over time. It went from /ai/ to /ɛ:/ to /e:/ to /ei/. So for the word ***day***, the evolution was something like /dai/, /dɛ:/, /de:/, /dei/. The changes took place over a couple of centuries and along the way, the vowel sound in that group of words merged with the vowel sound in the words we looked at a moment ago – the ones that are spelled today with a silent E. And that's why both groups of words have the same vowel sound today. It's why we can rhyme ***main*** (m-a-i-n) and ***mane*** (m-a-n-e).

The point at which the vowel sounds in those words merged is a matter of some debate, but it probably happened gradually in the 1500s and 1600s. So the merger was probably happening around the current point in our overall story of English in the early 1600s. If you were walking the streets of London in the early 1600s, you would have probably heard some conservative speakers still pronouncing the word ***day*** as /dai/, but you would have also heard people using

newer pronunciations like /dɛ:/ to /de:/. Again, the vowel sound in words spelled with [ai] or [ay] has it own unique history, and changed a lot of the past few centuries.

One other quick note before we move on. We also use the letter [a] in combination with the letter [w] or [u] to indicate another sound in English – the /ɔ/ sound. We use [au] to spell words like ***cause***, ***taught***, ***haunt***, ***author*** and ***August***, and we use [aw] to spell words like ***law***, ***thaw***, ***raw***, ***dawn***, and ***hawk***. You might remember from earlier episodes that the letters [u] and [w] were somewhat interchangeable in the past, so [au] and [aw] and really just variations of the same spelling. So what's the deal with [au] and [aw]? Well, again, this is a case where English had a specific vowel sound, but didn't have a letter to represent that sound, so scribes had to come up with a way to represent that sound, and then the sound changed. Originally, the sound was /au/. That /au/ sound is actually a combination of two different sounds, so it's what linguists call a diphthong. It sort of begins with the /a/ sound and ends with an /u:/ sound – /a-u/. And since those two sounds were usually spelled with [a] and [u], scribes just combined those two letters to represent that sound. And linguists use the same combination today when they want to spell that sound phonetically. But again, that original sound was /au/.

And words like those I mentioned earlier are spelled with [au] or [aw] because they originally had that /au/ sound. So people said /caus/ instead of ***cause***, and /taut/ instead of ***taught***. According to most of the spelling reformers who were writing in the late 1500s and early 1600s, those words still had that /au/ sound at that time, though Robert Robinson – writing in 1617 – was the first to indicate that the vowel sound was starting to change. It gradually shifted from /au/ to /ɔ/ over the course of the 1600s and 1700s, which gave us the standard pronunciation used in most of those words today. So again, at the current point in our overall story in the early 1600s, most people still said /caus/ and /taut/, but if you were around at the time, you would have probably encountered a few people who were starting to say /cas/ and /tat/, which eventually become to ***cause*** and ***taught***. So that's the quick history of [au] and [aw].

Now that's a lot of information about letter A and the various ways in which it has been used over the recent centuries. But we're not entirely done with that letter yet. We're going to encounter it again in spellings like [ea] and [oa], but those are better addressed when we got to those other vowel letters. So let's move on to the next letter, which of course, is [b]. [b] is a consonant letter, and fortunately, the history of this letter is much more straight-forward.

The sound represented by letter [b] has been pretty consistent over the centuries and hasn't really changed, but we do have a few silent [b]'s in words like ***doubt*** and ***debt***. As we saw back in Episode 153, those letters were never really pronounced in English. They were added because the Latin roots of those words had a [b] in them because they were pronounced with a 'b' sound in Latin. But that 'b' sound had disappeared before those words made their way to English. So they were originally spelled without a [b], and there is no indication that anyone pronounced those [b]'s once they were added in.

We also have silent [b]'s at the end of some words from Old English like ***dumb***, ***lamb***, ***climb***, ***comb*** and ***womb***, as well as some words borrowed from French like ***tomb***, ***bomb***, and ***succumb***. Those [b]'s are there because again there was once a 'b' sound at the end of those words or in

some part of the earlier version of those words. And in those cases, the [b]'s were once pronounced in the Middle Ages. But the evidence suggests that they were all silent by the early 1600s. The spelling reformers who included phonetic descriptions of those words in the 1500s and 1600s didn't included a [b] at the end. We also have evidence from Shakespeare who rhymed those words with other words that never had a 'b' sound at the end. So, for example, he rhymed the word ***climb*** with the words ***time*** and ***crime***. All of that evidence suggests that you would not have heard a 'b' sound at the end of those words if you were walking around London in the early 1600s. They were gone by then.

So that's letter [b]. What about letter [c]? Well, the main comment to make about that letter is that it has two common pronunciations in English – the so-called 'hard' and 'soft' sounds of letter [c]. The 'hard' sound is the /k/ sound that we associate with letter [k]. And the 'soft [c]' sound is the /s/ sound that we associate with letter [s]. The hard /k/ sound is the original sound of letter [c] going back to Latin, and we still use the letter in that way when it appears before the vowels [a], [o] and [u]. For example, in words like ***cat***, ***cot***, ***cold***, ***cut*** and ***cute***. And the letter usually has the soft /s/ sound when it appears before the vowel letters [e] and [i]. For example, in words like ***civil***, ***city***, ***cemetery*** and ***central***. Of course, there are exceptions, but that is the general rule.

Those two distinct sounds of the letter emerged in the Middle Ages. I explained that process in earlier episodes, specifically Episode 5 which has a good discussion about that development. But the main point here is that it was firmly entrenched by the 1500s when English spelling started to become fixed. English printers and writers followed the traditional practice, which was really the French practice, of maintaining the letter [c] in those words, rather than substituting a [k] or an [s]. And that was because it was thought that readers could easily determine how to pronounce the [c] based on the vowel sound that followed it. So when English spelling was standardized, those [c]'s were preserved, and in the early 1600s, those [c]'s would have been pronounced pretty much the same as today.

But what about the letter [c] in words like ***ocean***, ***social***, ***facial*** and ***precious***. In those words, it has a /sh/ sound, which we would usually spell with [sh]. So why are those words spelled with a [c]? Well, you can probably guess the answer. Again, the sound changed in those words over time. In all of those words I mentioned – ***ocean***, ***social***, ***facial*** and ***precious*** – the [c] appears before an [e] or [i], so we would expect the 's' sound (/s/). Well, that was the sound used in those words in the mid-1500s when English spelling was becoming regular. So people would have said /oh-see-an/ instead of /oh-shun/, and /soh-see-al/ instead of /soh-shul/ and /preh-see-us/ instead of /preh-shus/. That's why those words are spelled that way. And that is confirmed by most of spellings reformers like John Hart in the mid-1500s. But the modern /sh/ sound in those words started to appear a short time later. By the late 1500s and early 1600s, the modern pronunciation was starting to emerge. In Episode 172, I discussed that development and gave examples from Shakespeare which show that he probably used both pronunciations. Again, it was a sound in transition at the time.

So that's letter [c]. We can now move on to letter [d], but I don't have much to say about [d]. [d] is a consonant letter, and it hasn't changed much over time, so I'm not going to spend any time on it here.

And that brings us to another vowel letter – the letter [e]. As we know, vowel letters are tricky because they represent multiple sounds and the sounds have a history of shifting around. Let's begin by noting that the original sound of letter [e] going all the way back to Latin was /e:/. That's still the common sound of the letter in most other European languages, and we still have it in words borrowed from other languages in recent centuries. We hear that traditional sound of [e] at the end of loanwords like ***café***, ***fiancé***, ***resume***, ***ballet***, ***buffet***, ***beret***, ***gourmet***, ***anime***, and others. But of course, within English, we associate that letter with other sounds.

Just like letter [a], letter [e] also represents two common sounds that are referred to as its 'short' and 'long' sounds. The short sound of letter [e] is /ɛ/ as in ***pet***, ***web***, ***bed*** and ***mess***. The letter [e] by itself before a consonant usually represents that sound, and that short sound has been pretty stable since English adopted the Latin alphabet in the early Middle Ages. So I don't really have anything else to say about the so-called 'short [e]' sound.

But the 'long [e]' sound is a bit more complicated because, as we know, all of the 'long' vowel sounds were affected by the Great Vowel Shift. Today, that long sound of letter [e] is /i:/ as ***be***, ***tree***, ***feet***, ***cheese***, ***beef***, ***weed, needle***, and so on. A simple trick to remember the long sound of a vowel letter is that it is the same as the name of the letter because we use the long sound as the name of the letter. So the long sound as letter [a] is /ei/, and the long sound of letter [e] is /i:/.

As you may have noticed, we usually mark that 'long [e]' sound today by doubling the letter [e]. At one time, writers also used the silent [e] at the end of a word to mark the long sound, just like we do with letter [a], but writers and printers preferred to double the [e] and that became the more standard spelling in English.

Now, as we saw earlier, the original sound of letter [e] was more like /e:/. So most of the words that we have today that are spelled with a double [e] once had that original /e:/ sound. So ***tree*** was originally /tre:/, and ***cheese*** was originally /che:s/, and ***weed*** was originally /we:d/.

But then the Great Vowel Shift changed the way those words were pronounced. And in the 1400s and 1500s, people started to raise the front of the tongues a bit when they pronounced those words, and in the process, the sound shifted from /e:/ up to /i:/. So /tre:/ became ***tree***, and /che:s/ became ***cheese***, and so on. It was a very simple change. And it was mostly in place by the end of the 1500s. So at the current point in our overall story of English that change had already occurred, and those 'double [e]' words were pronounced pretty much the same as today. And along the way, the sound of letter [e] was extended to this /i:/ sound – the sound that we call the 'long [e]' sound today.

Now I said that scribes and printers usually represented that 'long [e]' sound by doubling the [e]'s, but another technique used by French scribes was to place an [I] before the [e] or after the [e], thereby producing the [ei] and [ie] letter combination for the sound. That spelling was often

retained in words that were taken from French, and was sometimes even applied to native English words, and we see that alternate spelling in words like ***grieve***, ***chief***, ***brief***, ***field***, ***receive***, ***ceiling***, and so on. Again, most of those words have essentially the same phonetic history as words like ***tree*** and ***be*** and ***feet***. They experienced the same vowel shift. They just use a slightly different spelling to represent the same sound.

Now we need to add one more piece to this puzzle of words with the /i:/ sound. We've covered the 'double [e]' words like ***tree*** and ***feet***, and we've covered the [ie] and [ei] words like ***chief*** and ***receive***. Again, those words have essentially the same vowel history; they just employ different spellings for the same sound. But now we have to add in words spelled with [ea] like ***please***, ***speak***, ***clean***, ***heat***, ***leap***, ***seat***, and so on. Again, this group of words have the same /i:/ sound as those other words today. So was [ea] just another alternate spelling for that same sound? Well, no. The [ea] spelling was once used for a different sound, but again, the sound shifted and merged with the /i:/ sound in those other words. And since the spelling of these [ea] words was already locked in place, they have retained that spelling over time. Again, spellings often tell us the phonetic history of the word.

The [ea] spelling was originally used for the /ɛ:/ sound. That's the same sound we hear in words like ***pet*** and ***set***, but in this case, it was pronounced longer. So it was a long /ɛ:/ instead of a short /ɛ/. And for this longer /ɛ:/ sound, scribes apparently felt the need to represent it in a different way. So they combined [e] and [a] and came up with the [ea] spelling. Phonetically speaking, this sound is pronounced somewhere between the traditional sound of letter [e] and letter [a], so somewhere between /e:/ and /a:/. Given that this was an in-between sound, it made sense to combine [e] and [a] to represent that sound.

So a word like ***feast*** was once pronounced as /fɛ:st/ – a sound still heard in the related word ***festival***. And a word like ***read*** (r-e-a-d) was once pronounced as /rɛ:d/ – a sound still heard in the past tense form of the word, as in "I read the book yesterday." And the word ***leave*** was once pronounced as /lɛ:v/ – a sound still heard in the past tense form ***left***.

But again, over time, most of the words with that /ɛ:/ sound and that [ea] spelling experienced a vowel shift under the Great Vowel Shift. The sound was initially raised to /e:/, and then later raised again to /i:/. So a word like ***feast*** went from /fɛ:st/ to /fe:st/ to /fi:st/.

Now I should note that this vowel change didn't occur in all of these words spelled with [ea]. In some of them, the quality of the sound never really changed. It just became a little bit shorter. And that's why we find that old [ea] spelling in words like ***head***, ***death***, ***deaf***, ***bread***, ***sweat***, ***spread***, ***weather***, ***measure***, ***ready***, and so on. These words retain an original /ɛ/ pronunciation; they just use a slightly shorter version of it.

And as the sound shifted in the other words, some of them got stuck in the middle between the original /ɛ:/ sound and the modern /i:/ sound. Remember the sound shifted in two separate steps. It went from /ɛ:/ to /e:/, and then from /e:/ to /i:/. Well, a few of those words got stuck in the middle with the /e:/ sound. And those words are ***great***, ***steak*** (s-t-e-a-k), and ***break*** (b-r-e-a-k), but there are really only a few words and names that got stuck at that in-between stage. Most of

the words spelled with [ea] moved on to the /i:/ pronunciation we use today in words like ***clean***, ***seat***, ***speak*** and so on.

So what was the status of this vowel sound in those words at the current point in our overall story in the early 1600s? Well, from the surviving descriptions, it appears that the sound was midway through its evolution. It had gone from /ɛ:/ to /e:/, but hadn't quite reached /i:/ yet. So people were saying /fe:st/ instead of ***feast***, and /spe:k/ instead of ***speak***.

But Alexander Gil gives us a little more information. Remember that he was writing at the current point in our story in the year 1619, and he said that the people who lived to east of London pronounced those words with an /i:/ sound like we do today. He said that the people there spoke what he called the 'Eastern' dialect, and based on his descriptions, they had a very advanced pronunciation that reflected where the language was headed. So they said ***feast*** and ***speak*** like we do today, whereas most of the people in London still said /fe:st/ and /spe:k/. [SOURCE: From Dialect to Standard, Hans Frede Nielsen, p. 223]

But the bottom line here is that the [ea] spelling we use today originally represented a sound that changed as part of the Great Vowel Shift, and it ultimately merged with the /i:/ sound that we find in so many other words.

So that's enough about letter E. Let move on to the next letter [f]. I don't really have much to say about [f]. The sound it represents has been pretty stable in English since spellings became fixed, so it doesn't create many challenges for spellers today. My only note is that we also have the alternate [ph] spelling for the 'f' sound, and that spelling is almost always found in loanwords from Greek. Ancient Greek has a sound which evolved into the 'f' sound in many Greek words, and the Greek alphabet had the letter phi to represent that sound. The [ph] spelling is an attempt to represent that Greek letter phi in those loanwords. So we can think of it as another type of etymology spelling where the spelling reflects some ancient sound that has long since disappeared or changed in some way.

That takes us to letter [g]. Much like letter [c], it also has a so-called 'hard' and 'soft' sound. The 'hard' pronunciation is /g/, and that's the traditional sound of the letter going all the way back to the Romans. When the alphabet was brought to England, the Anglo-Saxons applied letter [g] to the same sound in Old English. We hear that original 'hard' sound in words like ***game***, ***go***, ***goose*** and ***good***.

But then as French evolved out of Latin in western Europe, the sound started to change in some words. When a [g] appeared before letters [e] or [i], the sound changed and produced the so-called 'soft' sound of letter. That's the /j/ sound. That happened because the sounds represented by [e] and [i] are pronounced with the front of the tongue raised, and the 'g' sound was sort of pulled forward to the palate region, thereby creating that /j/ sound. So the letter [g] became a 'soft [g]' when it appeared before [e] and [i]. We hear that sound in words like ***germ***, ***gentle***, ***giant***, ***gender*** and so on.

Now, as you know, the 'soft' sound of [g] is actually the same sound that we associate with letter [j]. They both have the /j/ sound. So why do we represent that sound with two different letters? Well, as we'll see a little bit later, that sound didn't exist in Latin, so Latin didn't have a letter for it. And the sound was rare in Old English, so Old English didn't have a specific letter for it either. The sound actually evolved out of other sounds in French. The 'soft [g]' was one case where the sound emerged in French, and most words that use the 'soft [g]' today are French loanwords. The other instance where the /j/ sound emerged in French was in relation to the letter I. So I'll deal with that development a little later. But that is where the letter J came from. So today, we have two different letters for the /j/ sound because the sound came about as a result of two different sound changes. And the letters we use today for that /j/ sound reflect that history.

Since the 'soft [g]' was really a French development that passed to English, when we encounter those 'soft [g]'s in words like ***gentle*** or ***gender***, we can generally assume that the word came from French. And when we encounter a 'hard [g]' before [e] or [i], we can generally assume that that word didn't come from French. So words like ***get***, ***gear***, ***give*** and ***girl*** are words that were already in English before the French influence arrived. So they have retained their original hard [g]'s. And words like ***gecko*** and ***geyser*** are more recent loanwords from other languages, so the French 'soft [g]' doesn't apply to those words either.

Now the 'soft [g]' development in French didn't affect every word. Even in French, there were a few words that retained a 'hard [g]' sound before [e] or [i], and in those cases, the French scribes had to figure out a way to make it clear the [g] retained its original sound. So they came up with a new spelling. That added a [u] after the [g] as an alternate way of indicating a 'hard [g]' sound. And that [gu] spelling became a common way to indicate that traditional sound where it might not otherwise be clear. That's why the word ***guest*** [g-u-e-s-t] is spelled with [gu] rather than a simple [g]. 'G-e-s-t' might imply that the pronunciation was /jest/, so the [gu] spelling was used to make it clear that the [g] was a 'hard [g].' We also encounter that [gu] spelling in words like ***guide***, ***guild***, ***guitar***, and ***guilty***, as well as in the middle of a word ***disguise***. That French spelling was sometimes extended to other words where the 'g' sound appeared before the other vowel letters like ***guard*** and ***guarantee***.

In Dutch, scribes had a different way of indicating the 'hard [g]' sound. They would add an [h] after the [g], and the result was a [gh] spelling. That spelling also made its way to English in a few words, specifically, ***ghost***, ***ghastly***, ***aghast***, and ***gherkin***. The reason why this Dutch spelling is used in those words is because of the history of the printing press. The Dutch began using the printing press before the English did. In fact, the first English printing press was brought over from the Netherlands, and some of the Dutch assistants and typesetters came with it. And that allowed some of those Dutch spelling conventions to pass into English.

Italian also used the same [gh] letter combination to represent the hard /g/ sound. That Italian spelling is found in words like ***ghetto*** and the middle of ***spaghetti***.

So the bottom line here is that we have a lot of different ways of representing the 'g' sound in English, and the particular spelling often tells us about the history of the word, including where it came from.

So that's a lot of different ways of representing the 'g' sound. But sometimes, we have a [g] in words that isn't pronounced at all. That's especially true for the [g] at the front of words like ***gnaw*** and ***gnat***. In those words, the [g] was once pronounced as /gnau/ or /gnat/. Those are Old English words. Old English had the initial /gn/ sound in some words, just like it had the initial /kn/ sound preserved in so many words that begin with [kn] like ***knife***, and ***knee*** and ***knot***. Those pronunciations were apparently still lingering in conservative educated speech in the early 1500s, enough that it was retained in the permanent spelling of those words. But by the current point in our story in the early 1600s, the 'g' sound in those word spelled with [gn] was gone. The spelling reformers of the early 1600s provide no evidence that the 'g' sound at the front of those words was still being pronounced at the time.

Now a moment ago, I mentioned the [gh] spelling in words like ***ghost*** and ***ghetto***, and I noted that when the [gh] combination is used to represent that hard /g/ sound, it reflects a spelling that was borrowed from outside of English. But we also have a lot of words where the [gh] spelling doesn't represent any sound at all. The [gh] in those words is silent. That's the case in words like in ***light***, ***night***, ***high***, ***thought***, ***though***, ***eight*** (e-i-g-h-t), and many others. Now this silent [gh] has a completely different history from the [gh] in ***ghost*** or ***ghetto*** . And in fact, this silent [gh] is native to English.

This particular [gh] spelling emerged in Middle English to spell the /x/ sound, which was still common in English at the time. It had been around since Old English, and really before that. So the word ***night*** was originally pronounced more like /nixt/, and the word ***though*** was originally pronounced more like /tho:x/. That sound was still being pronounced, at least to a certain extent, in the 1500s, which is why it remains in the standard spelling of so many words today. But, of course, that sound gradually disappeared in the early modern era, though it survives to an extent in Scotland and a few other regional dialects.

The question then is when did that sound disappear? And was it still around at the current point in our overall story in the early 1600s? Well, the answer is that it still lingered in some people's speech, although it was mostly gone by that point.

Most of the early spelling reformers still marked the sound with a specific letter in their phonetic alphabet. At the very end of the 1500s, a spelling reformer named Edmund Coote wrote that the sound was "little sounded," and he also noted that some people pronounced it and some didn't. Even at the current point in our overall story in 1619, we find conflicting evidence. Alexander Gil included the sound in his phonetic spellings, but Robert Robinson – writing around the same time – didn't represent the sound at all. As we've seen, Gil tended to be a bit conservative in his phonetic spellings, reflecting a more traditional and educated form of speech, whereas Robinson tended to be a bit more modern, reflecting the speech that was emerging at the time and would go on to become the standard pronunciations. Gil is actually one of last writers to indicate that the sound was still being pronounced. After that point, if it is mentioned at all, it is referred to as the 'old' pronunciation. [See Sherwood 1632]. So if you were walking around London in 1619, you would have heard most people saying the word ***though*** (/tho:/) (t-h-o-u-g-h) like we do today, but occasionally you would have heard some older and some more educated speakers still saying

/thox:/. But they were some of the last speakers to pronounce it that way in what we would call ‘standard’ English.

So that’s the story behind the [gh] spelling that is silent today, but what about the [gh] spelling that is pronounced as a ‘f’ sound. Earlier, we saw that the [ph] spelling is used for that sound in words like ***phone*** and ***philosophy***, and that’s a spelling that came from Greek and is generally used in Greek loanwords. But what about the [gh] spelling at the end of words like ***laugh***, and ***cough*** and ***enough***. There the [gh] spelling represents the ‘f’ sound. So what’s going on there? Well, again, this is the same [gh] that was used to represent the /x/ sound in Middle English. But where that sound occurred at the end of a word, it sometimes became an /f/ sound. And that change was still underway in the early 1600s.

So in Middle English, a word like ***laugh*** would have been pronounced /laux/. This word – and most of the other words where the ‘f’ sound emerged at the end – had a vowel sound that was pronounced with rounded lips. Well, when rounding the lips to make that vowel sound, it tends to bring the lower lip closer to the top teeth, and in that environment, it’s very close to an ‘f’ sound, and as people stopped pronouncing the /x/ sound after that rounded vowel, some people apparently chose to substitute an ‘f’ sound in its place which could be easily produced in that environment. So it evolved from /laux/ to /lauf/. Now, again, in the early 1600s, some people would have pronounced that ‘f’ sound and some wouldn’t. And the surviving evidence from those spelling reformers confirms that the pronunciation of the ‘f’ sound was variable at the time.

Most of the spelling reformers indicate that the word ***laugh*** was still pronounced in the traditional way as /laux/, but Sir Thomas Smith writing in 1568 recorded /lauf/ as alternate pronunciation. So we know it was around by then. Shakespeare’s poems and plays confirm the ‘f’ sound at the end because he rhymed the word ***laugh*** with other words that ended in [f], so he also had the emerging ‘f’ pronunciation. Alexander Gil writing at the current point in our overall story in 1619 used the older, traditional pronunciation, but he said that /laf/ with the ‘f’ sound could also be heard, and he specifically attributed it to speakers from the north of England. By the 1630s, it appears that the ‘f’ pronunciation was the normal pronunciation of the word.

The word ***enough*** apparently acquired its ‘f’ sound a little before ***laugh*** did because Gil and Robinson – both writing around the same time– record that ***enough*** was pronounced with an ‘f’ sound at the end. So even though Gil didn’t use the ‘f’ for ***laugh***, he did use it for ***enough***. But he acknowledged that the pronunciation of ***enough*** varied. He said that some people used the older pronunciation /inux/. Again, the main point here is that the modern pronunciations were emerging in the early 1600s, but they weren’t universal yet. [*SOURCE: The Cambridge History of the English Language, Vol. III, Roger Lass, Ed., p. 17*.]

So having explored the [gh] spelling, I supposed it’s a good time to move on from letter [g] to letter [h] – the next letter in the alphabet. The letter [h] represents a very soft and lightly pronounced /h/ sound. It’s little more that an a slight breath or aspiration before another sound. And since it is such a light sound, it has had a tendency to disappear over time, especially at the front of words.

The sound was common in Old English, and we still have many Old English words that begin with letter [h] like ***hand***, ***hair***, ***head***, ***house***, ***high***, ***hot***, and ***hound***. And were it not for the Norman Conquest, the history of letter [h] in English would probably be simple and straight-forward. But of course, as we've seen, the Conquest wreaked havoc on English spelling as French spellings and pronunciations infiltrated English and tended to complicate things.

With respect to letter [h], the main problem is that the sound of the letter had become silent at the front of words in Late Latin and early French. So as all of the French loanwords poured into English, we acquired a lot of words with a silent H at the front, some of which have retained that silent H like ***honor***, ***honest***, ***hour*** (h-o-u-r) and ***heir*** (h-e-i-r).

So in Middle English – as all of those French words with their silent H's poured in – it left English with a group of native words where the initial [h] was pronounced and a group of French words where it wasn't. Now when some scribes spelled those French words, they would omit the [h] since it wasn't pronounced, but as we've seen, there was an effort in late Middle English to emphasize the original spelling of words to reflect their etymology and original pronunciations, even to the point of inserting letters used in Latin that were never pronounced in English. And as a result, most of those French words came to be spelled with their original [h]'s at the front, even though the [h] was silent.

As literacy spread with the printing press, people encountered those [h]'s at the front of many words, and they weren't sure if they were supposed to pronounce them or not. They didn't necessarily know where the word came from, so they couldn't tell if the [h] was silent. This created a lot of confusion where some people pronounced the [h] in French words where it was supposed to be silent, and the didn't pronounce the [h] in native English words where it was supposed to be pronounced. That was basically the state of things in at the current point in our overall story in the early 1600s. So some people would have said ***house***, and some people would have said /ous/. Some people would have said ***honor*** (/oner/), and some people would have said /honor/. And some people would have said ***herb*** (/herb/) and some would have said /erb/.

Several decades earlier, John Hart had transcribed the word ***honor*** without an [h] on most occasions, reflecting the traditional French pronunciation of the word with a silent [h]. But on a couple of occasions, he slipped and included the [h]. So apparently, even he was prone to variation.

At the current point in our story in 1619, Alexander Gil wrote that he strongly objected to writing words like ***honor*** and ***honest*** with an [h] because the [h] was never pronounced. Interestingly, in that same passage, he didn't just give the examples of ***honor*** and ***honest***; he also included the word ***over***, which he said shouldn't ever be spelled with an [h] either. That may seem like an odd inclusion because it is a native English word and we don't spell it with an [h] today, but at the time, some people did spell it with an [h] because they thought it was one of those French words where the [h] had been dropped from the spelling. Since writers occasionally spelled it with an [h], some people starting pronouncing it as /hover/. Linguists call that a hyper-correction, where people basically over-correct and change something that shouldn't have been changed.

So in the early 1600s, there was a complicated mix where the [h] was sometimes pronounced, and sometimes it wasn't, and sometimes an [h] was even added to words that never had one. But as time passed, the spellings started to guide the pronunciation. Since writers and printers had reinserted the [h] in most of those French loanwords, people always encountered those words with an [h] when they saw them written down. So, in most cases, people assumed that the correct pronunciation was with the [h]. So it became increasingly common over the centuries for people to pronounce the [h] at the front of words that were spelled with an [h]. French words like ***habit***, ***host***, ***hotel***, ***hospital***, ***history***, ***hero***, and ***horrible*** all acquired an 'h' sound at the front because that's the way they were spelled, even though the [h]'s had been silent in French. There were really only a handful of exceptions – ***honor***, ***honest***, ***hour*** (h-o-u-r) and ***heir*** (h-e-i-r) and ***herb*** in American English. But in British English, the word ***herb*** followed along with most of those other French words and also picked up an initial [h] sound, thereby becoming /herb/.

I should note that some people in the 1500s and 1600s had a tendency to never pronounce the 'h' at the front of words, regardless of where they came from. They just assumed that all initial [h]'s were silent, even in native words like ***house***, which became /ouse/, and ***hello***, which became /ello/. That type of pronunciation was especially associated with working class and lower class speakers in London, and it eventually became highly stigmatized. Of course, England was much more class conscious than North America, so it had class connotations in England that it didn't have in North America. As a result, there was a concerted effort in England in the 1800s and 1900s to get people to pronounced their [h]'s again. We'll look at that effort in a future episode, but of course, those H-less dialects still persist in parts of England.

Now let's wrap up this episode by taking a quick look at letters [i] and [j] because they are actually related to each other. Of course, the letter I is another vowel letter, and like the other vowel letters we have examined, it has so-called 'short' and 'long' sounds. The short sound is /i/ – the sound heard in words like ***bit***, ***hid***, ***slip***, and ***digit***. That's the traditional short sound of the letter, and it hasn't really changed much over the history of English.

Now the 'long' sound of [i] has changed over time because. like all of the long vowel sounds. it changed as part of the Great Vowel Shift. Today, that long sound is /ai/ as in ***ice***, ***fine***, ***wide***, ***dime***, and so on. Again, that's the sound that emerged during the Great Vowel Shift. But the original long sound of letter [i] was actually /i:/. That's still the sound of the letter in most other European languages, and of course, we have that pronunciation in a lot of words that have been borrowed from other languages in recent centuries after the Great Vowel Shift. Some of those newer loanwords include ***elite***, ***police***, ***pizza***, ***piano***, and so on. Again, that's the original sound of letter I.

Again, within English, this sound shifted from /i:/ to /ai/, but there was an intermediate stage where it was something like /ɔi/. So it went from /i:/ to /ɔi/ to /ai/. For a word like ***time***, the evolution would have been /ti:m/, /tɔim/, /taim/. At the current point in our overall story in the early 1600s, the vowel sound was probably at the middle stage – as /ɔi/. So if you were walking around London, you would have probably heard most people say ***time*** (/tɔim/), ***ice*** (/ɔis/) and ***wine*** (/wɔin/), but you might have heard a few people using the modern pronunciations ***time***, ***ice***

and ***wine***. That would have been considered non-standard at the time, but it gradually became the norm over the course of the 1600s and 1700s.

So that leaves us with letter [j], and as I noted a moment ago, it is closely related to letter [i]. In fact, it's really just a variation of letter [i]. It is basically I with a little flourish or a little tail at the bottom. And at the current point in our overall story of English, it didn't exist. Letter [j] as a distinct letter for the /dʒ/ sound didn't exist in 1619 , but it was about to make its first appearance as its own letter. [*NOTE: Linguists represent the sound we associate with letter J as /dʒ/. That's also the symbol used for that sound in this transcript.*] About a decade after Alexander Gil wrote his book on spelling reform and English pronunciation, the letter [j] started to be used as a distinct letter. And I'll deal with that development in an upcoming episode.

But if letter [j] didn't exist yet, how did people spell the /dʒ/ sound. Well, there were actually three different ways because the /dʒ/ sound has three different sources in English, and each source is represented by a different spelling.

First of all, the /dʒ/ sound didn't exist in Latin, that's why the Latin alphabet didn't have a specific letter for the sound. The /dʒ/ sound was also rare in Old English, but it did sometimes appear at the end of a word like the words ***edge*** and ***bridge***. Since there was no Latin letter for the sound, Old English scribes had to invent a way to represent the sound. They usually used some form of letter G – sometimes a double [g], sometimes a [cg] letter combination, and sometimes they came up with other variations. That uncertainty evolved into a [dg] spelling in Middle English, which was the precursor of our modern [dge] spelling in words like ***edge***, ***bridge***, ***ledge*** and so on. Again, all of that evolved out of an attempt to find a way to represent that sound at the end of a handful of English words.

But remember that the /dʒ/ sound didn't really appear outside of that context in Old English. It was rare at the time. But after the Norman Conquest, French words started to pour into English, and quite a few of those words did have that sound because that sound had emerged in early French. And it emerged through two separate and unrelated sound changes.

We've already looked at one of those, which is the 'soft [g]' sound in words like ***gentle*** and ***giant***. As we saw, the hard /g/ sound was softened in French and became a /dʒ/ sound in certain words. So in those words, the letter [g] was used to represent that /dʒ/ sound, and that spelling passed into English.

But that wasn't the only time that the /dʒ/ sound emerged in early French. Apparently, those early French speakers really liked that sound because it also emerged in another set of words. And that brings us back to letter [i] because it was the sound of that letter that produced this other /dʒ/ sound, and that is really where our letter [j] comes from.

As I've noted in prior episodes, in Latin, the vowel sound of letter [i] tended to change a bit when appeared before another vowel. Specifically, it tended to become a 'y' sound (/y/). [*NOTE: Linguists represent the sound we associate with letter Y with the phonetic symbol /j/, which can be confusing to English speakers since it tends to be confused with the English sound of J. So this*

transcript with use /y/ to represent that sound we associate with letter Y.] This happens naturally, and we do the same thing today in English at the end of a name like ***Olivia*** or ***Lydia***, which is sometimes pronounced as /o-liv-i-ya/ or /lid-i-ya/. Again, that little /y/ sound naturally emerges between letter [i] and another vowel. And that's what happened in a lot of words in Late Latin and early French. But then the sound continued to evolve in some words. In fact, the sound evolved into different sounds throughout western Europe, but in French, it gradually became a /dʒ/ sound in many words.

In prior episodes, I talked about the name ***Julius***, as in Julius Caesar. You may have noticed that the name is often written with an [I] in Latin as 'I-u-l-i-u-s.' That's because that was the original spelling of the name, which reflects its original pronunciation as /i-u-lius/. But then, it became /yoo-lius/ with the 'y' sound. And then in French, it continued to evolve into /dʒulius/ with the /dʒ/ sound. That happened in lots of words that passed into English like ***Jupiter***, ***January***, ***jelly***, ***joke***, ***juggle***, ***just***, ***justice***, ***jury*** and so on. But those words were still spelled with an [i] throughout the Middle English period, and all the way up to the current point in our story in the early 1600s.

But as I have noted before, the letter [i] was a problem for medieval scribes because in the blocky script that was used at the time. It tended to get lost in the middle of a word, so scribes looked for ways to make it stand out. Sometimes they would put a little dot above it, a technique which eventually became common for the lowercase version of the letter. And sometimes they would give the letter a little flourish or tail at the bottom to make it stand out below the line.

Well, in the 1400s and 1500s, scribes in parts of western Europe started using the [i] with the little flourish or tail to distinguish the two different sounds of the letter. The vowel sound was represented with the traditional straight version of the letter, and the consonant sound was represented with the version with the little flourish at the bottom. This technique was apparently first used in Spain in the 1400s. In Spain, that sound had evolved into an 'h' sound or a /x/ sound. That's why the name that looks like ***Jesus*** in English is actually pronounced at /hay-soos/ in Spanish, but is also spelled with that [j] despite the difference in pronunciation. Meanwhile, in the Germanic parts of Europe, the same [i] with the little flourish was applied to the 'y' sound that initially emerged from letter [i]. That's why the name that looks like ***Jan*** in English is pronounced as /yan/ in those regions and is also spelled with a [j].

French scribes also picked up the idea of using that fancy version of letter [i]I to represent the /dʒ/ sound that had emerged from the letter in French. And by the late 1500s, the English spelling reformer John Hart was recommending that English take the same approach. But there is no evidence that anyone took him up on the suggestion at the time.

As I noted, at the current point in our overall story of English in 1619, writers and printers in England were still using letter [i] to represent the /dʒ/ sound in all of the French loanwords. However, in another decade of so, the fancy [i] with the little flourish started to be applied exclusively to that /dʒ/ sound in those words in English, and that fancy [i] gradually came to be recognized as a separate and distinct letter. However, it took a long time. Well into the 1700s, words ***just*** and ***jury*** and ***judicial*** were still being listed under letter [i] in many English

dictionaries, even when they were spelled with the letter we call ‘j’ today. It’s strange to look at the words listed under [i] and see some of them begin with an [i] and some of them begin with a [j] – all listed together. But again, people still thought of them as two different ways of writing the same letter. In the 1800s, it finally became common to separate the words with the /dʒ/ sound and were spelled with the fancy [i]. They started to be placed separately after the words that used the traditional straight form of letter [i]. And it was really at that point, when those words were separated in the dictionaries and spelling guides, that people accepted the letter [j] as a distinct letter. And J finally made its way into the alphabet.

So in summary, those developments left us with three different ways to represent the /dʒ/ sound in English. There is [dge] used at the end of words like ***edge***, ***ledge*** and ***bridge***. There is the ‘soft [g]’ used to represent the sound mainly found in French loanwords where the ‘hard [g]’ sound softened and evolved to the /dʒ/ sound. And finally, there is letter [j], which is ultimately just a fancy [i] with a flourish at the bottom, and is mainly used in French loanwords to represent a sound that evolved out of letter [i] in certain situations in French.

And of course, we also use the letter [j] in loanwords from other languages like Spanish and German to reflect the specific sound that evolved in those regions or the sound that the letter was applied to in those regions.

So I hope all of that makes sense. And I think that’s enough for this episode. Next time, we’ll continue our look at the alphabet and the way it reflects older pronunciations in English. We’ll also continue to keep track of the sound of English in the early 1600s as it was spreading around the world. And since it will be the second part of this series, the release date for that episode should within the next month, rather than the two-month wait which has been the case recently.

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