

The Ages of English

- **The Anglo Saxon invasions 449AD**

- With the Roman Empire fast falling apart, the British provinces are cut loose sometime in the early 5th century. Despite more than 400 years in charge, the Romans don't leave much of their Latin language behind, beyond the occasional place name.

Unsurprisingly, barbarian invaders, such as the Picts and Scots, are already clamouring at the borders, and the beleaguered Britons turn to a variety of Germanic tribes for 'protection'. From 449AD, the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes begin to arrive and aggressively set up home. Many native Britons take to their heels and retreat west to Cornwall, Wales and Cumbria.

Cornish, Welsh and Cumbric languages develop, but the Celtic culture of central, southern and north eastern England doesn't stand a chance in a land ruled by Anglo Saxons.

- **Language development**

- The Anglo Saxons have little time for the native Celtic language, preferring to use their own tongue and its runic script. Christian missionaries begin to arrive in 597AD, led by Augustine. They bring with them a huge Latin vocabulary, and produce large numbers of manuscripts, in the form of the Bible and other religious texts. In the process, the missionaries sow the first seeds of literacy.

There is no standard system of spelling, so scribes spell words the way they are sounded in their part of the country. As a result, we have evidence of Old English dialects.

Four major dialects emerge in England: Northumbrian in the north; Mercian in the midlands; West Saxon in the south and west; and Kentish in the south east. Most Old English documents are written in West Saxon, the dialect of the politically prestigious area of Wessex, where Alfred the Great would rule in the 9th century.

- **The Viking Raids Begin - 787AD**

- The Vikings begin raiding Britain in 787AD and continue periodically until the 11th century. In less than a hundred years, these ferocious Danes rule most of eastern England, and remain in power until the Anglo Saxons strike back under Alfred the Great in 878AD.

The Danes suddenly find themselves restricted to an area called the 'Danelaw' – roughly the areas north east of a diagonal line from Chester to London. But the Danes retaliate, and by 980AD, a series of fresh assaults brings the rest of England under the rule of a Danish king, Cnut (Canute), in 1016. Danish dominance lasts until 1042.

- **Language development**

- The language of the Danes exerts an immense and long lasting influence on Old English, especially in the north and east. More than 1,500 place names in England have Scandinavian origins, particularly in Yorkshire and Lincolnshire.

For example, the '-by' in names like Rugby and Grimsby means 'farm' or 'town'; the '-thorpe' in Althorpe and Linthorpe means 'village'; and the '-thwaite' in Braithwaite and Langthwaite means 'isolated area'.

Many Scandinavian personal names come from this time, especially those ending in '-son'. And some very common words – 'both', 'same', 'get', 'give', 'take' - enter the language, as do regular English pronouns like 'they', 'them', 'their'. During this period, over 1,800 words of probable Scandinavian origin enter the language.

- **The Norman Conquest 1066**

- In 1066, William of Normandy invades England, ushering in a new social and linguistic era. But the change at the top takes a while to sink in, and manuscripts continue to be written in Old English as late as 1100.

French is rapidly established as the language of power and officialdom. William appoints French-speaking supporters to all the key positions of power, and this elite of barons,

abbots and bishops retains close ties with its native Normandy.

But English is far too entrenched and continues to be used by the majority of people. With Latin the language of the church and of education, England becomes a truly trilingual country.

- **Language development**

- English continues to evolve after the Norman Conquest, particularly in grammar. Word order becomes increasingly important in conveying the meaning of a sentence, rather than the traditional use of special word endings.

Clever new constructions enter the language, such as the auxiliary verbs 'had' and 'shall' (had made, shall go).

Spelling and pronunciation begin to shift too, as Norman scribes spell words using their own conventions, such as qu- instead of cw-. Slowly but surely, distinctive Old English characters begin to die out.

- **The Resurgence of English 1200 - 1400**

- The 12th century witnesses a renewed interest in Latin, Greek, and Arabic, which in turn spawns numerous English translations. There is a widespread increase in literacy, while universities are established at Oxford and Cambridge.

Ever turbulent, the relationship between England and France hits a new low with the onset of the Hundred Years War. England's French estates are lost, severing the umbilical tie with the Continent, and a sense of English national identity emerges.

The influence of French, now the language of the enemy, declines until it is spoken only at court, by the aristocracy and by the well-educated clergy. Children of the nobility, who formerly spoke English as a second language, begin to adopt it as their mother tongue.

- **Language development**

- English usurps French as the language of power when it is used for the first time at the

opening of parliament in 1362. French continues as the language of the law, while Latin dominates in education and the Church.

Despite being edged out, French has already had an immense impact, with 10,000 of its words entering the language during the 14th century. Hundreds of Old English words disappear into obscurity, but many others survive alongside their French and Latin equivalent, each endowed with a slightly different meaning: for example, 'ask' (Old English), 'question' (French), 'interrogate' (Latin).

- **The Invention of the Printing Press 1476**

- The arrival of the printing press is a major step towards a standard writing system – and initiates an enormous boom in the production of printed resources in English.

Once luxury items, books are now more affordable, and the spread of literacy suddenly makes publishing a profitable business. Over 20,000 titles appear following the setting up of England's first printing press by William Caxton in 1476.

Literary output in Scotland reaches an all time high in the 15th century, driven by the works of writers like Robert Henryson and William Dunbar.

- **Language development**

- The 'Great Vowel Shift' takes place during the 15th century, and represents a major development in pronunciation which resulted in many words coming to be pronounced more like they are today. A speaker in Chaucer's era pronounced 'time' like the modern English 'team', 'see' like 'say', 'fame' like 'farm'.

The dialect of the East Midlands begins to establish itself as a form of 'standard English'. This is the most populous region of England and home to important social, administrative, and educational centres, including the royal court at London. Spelling also becomes more standardised and the pace of grammatical change slows down. But more dialects emerge, compared to the Old English era. West Saxon is now Southern; Northumbrian is

Northern; Mercian splits into West Midlands and East Midlands; Kentish still encompasses the south east. In Scotland, the dialect diverges radically from its English cousins, adopting Gaelic words and developing a unique pronunciation. The change is dubbed by some 'Middle Scots' to distinguish it from 'Middle English'.

- **The Renaissance 1500 - 1650**

- The Renaissance sparks fresh interest in the classical languages and their literature, and leads to momentous developments in studies relating to medicine, science and the arts.

It is also a time of great religious and political upheaval, and the expansion of known boundaries with the discovery of the Americas.

The union of the English and Scottish crowns sees the first publication of an 'authorised' English translation of the Bible in 1611, named for the monarch who made it all possible, King James I of England (and VI of Scotland). The first folio of Shakespeare's plays is published in 1623.

- **Language development**

- This is a time of great invention in the language, as writers struggle to find appropriate terms to describe the groundbreaking techniques and concepts they are pioneering. Not content with raiding Greek and Latin, they are soon ransacking more than 50 languages from across the globe.

Controversy regarding the immense proliferation of terms follows. Some writers see the introduction of 'new' Greek and Latin terms as an 'enrichment' of the language, while enthusiasts for native English words condemn the newfangled additions as 'inkhorn terms'.

In addition to this influx of foreign terms, many new words are created by the addition of prefixes

(**un**comfortable, **fore**name, **under**ground);
suffixes (delightful**ness**, laughable, invest**ment**);
and by cobbling together compounds (heaven-sent, commander-in-chief).

- **The Colonisation of the New World 1600s**

- In the late 16th century, Walter Raleigh's expeditions lead to the first settlement in America, at Chesapeake Bay in 1607. In 1620, the Mayflower arrives in Cape Cod, and by 1640 around 25,000 people have settled there. By 1700, inhabitants in the region number more than a quarter of a million.

The Elizabethan age witnesses the rapid geographical expansion of English in the New World, with colonists arriving in droves. They come principally from the Midlands and the North (settling in Pennsylvania) or are Irish or Scots Irish (initially in Philadelphia, but moving swiftly inland). Immigrants from across the world rapidly follow, flooding the language with new words from a variety of nationalities.

- **Language development**

- In 1604, Robert Cawdrey's 'A Table Alphabeticall', listing the meanings of over 2,500 'hard words', is published. It is the first English dictionary.

Across the Atlantic, the deluge of settlers from all over the British Isles influences the development of different American accents. The early settlers come from the west of England; the 'Pilgrim Fathers' from Norfolk. Even to this day, remnants of these accents can be discerned in these particular areas.

Many so-called 'Americanisms' today are actually remnants of Middle English that crossed the Atlantic at this time: for example, 'I guess' for 'I think', 'gotten' for 'got', 'mad' for 'angry', 'fall' for 'autumn'.

- **The Industrial Revolution and beyond**

- During the 19th century, Britain becomes the world's leading industrial and trading nation, and the period is one of momentous change and upheaval.

The consequences of this 'Industrial Revolution' lead to major developments in the sciences and technology, spearheaded by a generation of British entrepreneurs and inventors.

In Africa and South East Asia, colonial expansion continues unabated. Sierra Leone,

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Singapore, Hong Kong and the Gold Coast (Ghana) are among the many places added to the long list of British acquisitions.

The 20th century sees the British Empire slowly fall apart at the seams, but several major developments ensure its language nonetheless thrives.

The British Broadcasting Corporation is established in 1922, broadcasting first to the Empire, then the Commonwealth from 1931.

With the days of Empire a distant memory, the electronic revolution begins in 1972 with the sending of the first network email. The creation of the world wide web in 1991 diversifies communication – much of it in English - on an unprecedented scale.

- **Language development**

- There is a frantic need for words and terms to describe the latest developments and concepts in science and technology.

A project is begun in 1884 to compile a 'New English Dictionary', which will eventually become the Oxford English Dictionary. In America, the need to define the identity of the new nation results in Noah Webster's 'American Dictionary of the English Language' appearing in 1828.

The 'novel' becomes the literary genre of the age, exemplified by the works of Dickens, Scott and Twain. These books introduce a wider range of spoken and non-standard English into written expression.

In the first half of the 20th century, the 'received pronunciation' of English is consolidated through public broadcasting, with the plummy 'BBC accent' perceived by many as the 'proper' way to speak.

In the twentieth century, English emerges as a world language, universally embraced across the globe. Hybrid, local variations of the language appear, such as Singlish (Singaporean English), as recently independent nations promote their identity through local varieties of the language. There

are also moves to standardize English used in key areas of communication such as air traffic control (Air Speak) and maritime travel (Sea Speak).

The advent of the Internet massively increases exposure to a wide range of English styles and linguistic experimentation. New technology results in idiosyncratic varieties of English, such as the 'text speak' invented by mobile phone users communicating via SMS.