THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH PODCAST TRANSCRIPTS

EPISODE 35:
ENGLISH SOUNDS AND ROMAN LETTERS

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Welcome to the History of English Podcast - a podcast about the history of the English language. This is Episode 35: English Sounds and Roman Letters. Last time, we looked at how the sounds of early English began to change shortly after the Anglo-Saxons arrived in Britain. New sounds were beginning to emerge. And these changes coincided with the first attempts to write down the language with the Roman alphabet. So in this episode, we'll look at how those first scribes adapted the alphabet to the English language. And in the process, we'll see the ultimate origin of some of the strange spellings we have in Modern English.

Let me begin by noting that I had originally intended to discuss the first English alphabet in one episode. But there is a lot of material here, and it can be a little confusing to keep track of everything. So I have decided to cover the first English alphabet in two parts. It is important to keep in mind that Latin and English had many sounds in common. So in those cases, the application of the Roman alphabet to English was pretty straight-forward. But there were also many unique sounds in English – sounds that didn't exist in Latin. And that's where things started to get a little more complicated.

So in this episode, I'm going to explore how the alphabet was applied to the sounds which I discussed in the last episode. These were mainly the sounds in the back of the throat, and the newer sounds which evolved out of those original sounds. Next time, I'll look at how the alphabet was applied to some of the other sounds of Old English which didn't exist in Latin.

Let me also remind you that the 'History of the Alphabet' audiobook is available if you want to learn even more about the history of the alphabet. Just check out the website historyofenglishpodcast.com for links to that audiobook.

So let's begin, and let's see how the alphabet of the Romans was applied to the language of the Anglo-Saxons.

A couple of episodes back, we looked at how the missionaries who accompanied Augustine to Kent began to write down the English language. They helped Aethelbert the King of Kent to prepare a set of written laws. And you may wonder why I discussed the first document written in English before discussing the creation of the English alphabet. Well, the answer has to do with timing.

Aethelbert's laws were issued around the year 602 or 603 according to the best estimates, but none of the original manuscripts survived the centuries. The first copy we have is a later copy from a collection of old Anglo-Saxon laws compiled in the twelfth century. So that later version of the original document wasn't actually written down in the alphabet used in Kent around the year 600. So while the document itself is very important to language historians, it doesn't help us very much in terms of the original alphabet.

And after Aethelbert's laws, we don't really have any additional documents written in Old English for several more decades.

So before we start to look at Old English writing, let's consider the material we have to work with as we look back on the Old English period. The period of Old English extends from the time of the Anglo-Saxon invasion in the fifth century until the Norman conquest in the year 1066. Of course, people didn't immediately stop speaking Old English in 1066, so most historians extend the period of Old English out to the middle of the following century, usually to around the year 1150. Well, during the entire period of the Old English – almost seven centuries – we only have a little over 3,000 texts. As the British linguist and historian David Crystal has noted, if you were to count all of the words written in those Old English documents, the grand total would only be about 3 million words in total. Not 3 million separate or unique words, but 3 million total words. And to put that into some context, Charles Dickens's works contain about 4 million words total. So the entirety of Old English is less that the works of some of the more well known English writers.

But more than that, most of the surviving Old English texts come from the last three centuries of the Old English period. There are actually very few documents from the first half of that period. And we don't actually have any surviving documents until the second half of the seventh century.

So despite the fact that Aethelbert's laws originated around the year 600, we don't actually have an alphabet to examine until nearer the end of that century.

And all that means that there is a lot which is not known about the first use of the Roman alphabet for English. Most of those earliest documents simply haven't survived the centuries. But using the material that does exist, we can piece together a lot of this early history, and we can see how that early history impacts the way we spell English words today.

In order to understand this process, we have to return to the story of the first Christian missionaries in Britain. In the south, the first missionaries arrived with Augustine. And we know that those missionaries in Kent brought the Roman alphabet with them, but we don't know much about the form of that alphabet since none of those original English texts have survived in their original form.

But before Augustine arrived in the south of Britain, monks from Ireland were already well-entrenched in northern Britain in and around modern-day Scotland. That Irish monastic movement is very important to our story because, ultimately, those Irish-influenced monks were the ones who wrote down most of the oldest surviving English documents.

The Irish monasteries were extremely advanced for the time, especially when it came to literacy and education. In fact, in this regard, they were the most advanced in Western Europe. The Irish monks were proficient in both Latin and Greek. And they soon adapted the Roman alphabet to the local Celtic languages of Ireland. They also constructed those fancy illuminated manuscripts like the Book of Kells which was constructed a century or so later. Those illuminated manuscripts weren't just books. They were considered fabulous works of art, and they were unrivaled in their beauty and sophistication at the time.

Like most monasteries, the Irish monasteries contained a scriptorium where manuscripts were copied and studied. Ancient Latin texts were copied, and in later centuries, they were transcribed into the local language.

And believe it or not, this process of copying documents from Latin into Latin produced some of the earliest examples of writing in the local vernacular – whether it was the local Celtic languages in Ireland or the local Old English language of the Anglo-Saxons. Many times, these scribes were just local people who had joined the monastery. So they spoke the local language. And they would sometimes jot little notes or comments or even translations in the margins of the pages. And those little notes and comments written by monks in northern Britain are some of the earliest surviving examples of written English. They're not full texts – just little comments. So they are akin to some of those early runic inscriptions, and individually they may not be all that significant, but collectively they shed some light on the early version of the language.

During this period, from around the sixth century through the seventh century, the way in which scribes wrote the Roman letters had started to change. The traditional Roman script is basically what we know today as uppercase or capital letters. But with the collapse of the Roman Empire and the traditional Roman schools, the traditional Roman way or speaking and writing had begun to change. As I've noted before, it was during this period that Latin began to fracture into regional dialects. And the same thing happened to the Roman letters.

Since we're almost a thousand years away from the printing press, we have to keep in mind that all documents and texts were handwritten at this point. And handwriting is obviously very personal and, much like language, it can evolve over time. And by the seventh century, a variety of regional handwriting styles had emerged throughout Europe. The Franks had developed a unique script as had the Visigoths down in Spain. And the Irish monks had also developed a unique script.

These scripts used modified letter forms. They were usually simplified shapes with fewer strokes, and they were typically more rounded and flowing than the traditional 'blocky' Roman letters.   As you might have guessed, these simplified scripts were the precursor of our modern lowercase letters. But these were not considered lowercase letters at this time. There wasn't really a distinction between uppercase and lowercase early on. These simplified handwritten letters were just considered a different way of writing the traditional Roman letters.

As I noted, these various handwriting styles tended to vary from one region to the next. They often competed for influence. And it is very likely that these regional scripts would have evolved into different regional alphabets, just as Latin evolved into different regional languages. But the rise of Charlemagne in the Frankish kingdom in the eighth century finally put a stop to that process. As the ruler of most of western Europe, Charlemagne imposed the Carolingian script of the Franks throughout the Empire. And it became the standard script of the later Holy Roman Empire after his death. And I mention this because the Carolingian script is important for two reasons.

First, it later evolved into the script called 'blackletter' or 'Gothic.' But today we know that later version of the script as 'Old English' or the 'Old English font.' And we see that font used a lot in English signs or documents which are supposed to represent an older period of English, but don't be confused by that name. The Old English language didn't use the script which we know today as 'Old English.' In fact, the script or font which we know today as Old English didn't even exist during the period of spoken Old English.

The other reason why that Carolingian script is so important is because it was revived when printing began in the late Middle Ages. Printers liked the script, and it was adopted as the standard way of writing lowercase letters. And so our modern lowercase letters are actually derived from that Carolingian script used by Charlemagne and the Franks.

But at our current point in the story of English, we are at a time before any of those later developments. Those later Carolingian and Old English scripts didn't really exist yet. So at our point in the sixth and seventh centuries, we have the even earlier regional scripts. And the Irish script was just one of those regional scripts, albeit a very important one. In fact, that early Irish script influenced the development of the later Carolingian script in the Frankish kingdom.

So around the seventh century, there were two different scripts being used to write Church Latin in Anglo-Saxon Britain. In the south, the Roman missionaries led by Augustine used a writing style which was common in Rome. And the Irish monks in the north used that early Irish writing style.

The practices and traditions of the Irish Church and the Roman Church were similar, but not the same. So as these two movements met in northern and central Britain, the differences had to be resolved. As we'll see in an upcoming episode, the religious differences were generally resolved in favor of the Roman Church in the south, but the writing style of northern monks continued to influence Old English writing. And that was because those northern monasteries were incredibly advanced when it came to education and writing. For the next couple of centuries, most of the written texts in Old English came from those northern monasteries in and around Northumbria. That was the case until the Vikings arrived late in the eighth century. At that point, the Vikings began to destroy those monasteries, and literacy passed to the south. But for these first couple of centuries, the Irish-influenced monasteries in the north dominated English writing.

This Irish-influenced script was a rounded script with very distinct letters. It wasn't cursive. The letters didn't actually flow into each other, but it was much more flowing that the traditional Roman letters. It resembled our modern lowercase alphabet in many respects. In fact, when you look at a document written with these letters, all of the letters appear to be lowercase – even the first letter in a sentence and the first letter in proper names. Today, we would expect to find an uppercase letter in those positions. But remember, these weren't considered lowercase letters. There was no real distinction between uppercase and lowercase at this time. So technically they were all uppercase even though they resembled what we would call 'lowercase' letters today.

During the seventh century, the Anglo-Saxon monks in the northern monasteries gradually began to adapt this script to their native Old English language. As I mentioned, they began by writing comments and notes in the margins of the Latin documents which they were busy translating. But as more and more Anglo-Saxons sought to join the Church, they had to be trained. And since they didn't know Latin, prayers and religious texts needed to be translated and written in English.

So these Irish-influenced monks began to apply this Irish-influenced script to Old English. And in the process, we got the first Old English script. And even though the script resembles modern lowercase letters, there are a few exceptions.

For example, the letter D resembles our modern lowercase 'd', but the stem was not straight like it is today. Instead it was curved to the left.

The letter I didn't have a dot yet.

The letter R resembled our modern cursive 'r', but the stem actually extended below the line.

The letter T resembled a modern lowercase 't', but it actually ended at the cross-stroke, so it looked like a smaller version of our modern uppercase T.

The letter S had three different shapes, one of which resembled our modern letter S, but that was actually the least used of the three shapes. One of the shapes was an elongated S which looked like someone took the top and bottom of a modern letter S and stretched it. So it was basically a straight line with a little curve at the top and bottom. It was a form of S used in the Irish script, and it was actually used well into the modern English period. In fact, it can be seen in documents written as late as the eighteenth century. Many documents from the Revolutionary War period in the United States still used that elongated S. But printers eventually discarded the elongated S, and they began using the shorter version which we use today.

As these early scribes sought to apply the Latin alphabet to Old English, the easy part was the sounds which both languages had in common. For those sounds, the letters were pretty much applied directly from Latin. But as we saw last time, English had several unique sounds which didn't exist in Latin. Some of those sounds were native to the Germanic languages, and some of those sounds were the brand new sounds which had evolved in early Old English. In fact, some of those new sounds were probably still evolving at this point in the seventh century.

And part of the reason why we know that some of those sounds were still changing in this early period is because of the way the first alphabet was applied to those sounds. The new alphabet didn't always distinguish the old sounds from the new sounds in a simple and orderly way. So that suggests that the sounds were still changing. If that first English alphabet had been introduced - say - a century later, those new sounds might have been firmly entrenched as distinct sounds, and the new alphabet might have been more logical and orderly. And it probably would have simplified modern English spellings. But unfortunately, no one ever said English spelling was supposed to be easy. As we'll see, the problem with English spelling begins right here at the very beginning.

So let's turn our attention back to those new sounds of early Old English which I discussed in the last episode. As I noted last time, English underwent several important sound changes shortly after the Anglo-Saxons arrived in Britain. As a general rule, most of the Germanic sounds in the back of the throat moved forward to the front of the mouth. And this included both consonants and vowels. And those sound shifts changed the way English sounded.

I wanted to find a way to illustrate how the sound of English changed. So I thought it might be interesting to listen a clip of Modern Dutch in comparison to English. And the reason why Dutch is a good language to use for this type of illustration is because it retains a lot of the original Germanic sounds, especially those sounds in the back of the throat. I mentioned a few episodes back that the early form of the Modern German language experienced its own sound changes called the Sound Germanic Sound Shift. And by the way, those changes were occurring in southern Germany around the same time that the new sounds were emerging in Old English. So a lot of the sounds of Modern English and Modern German have evolved away from the original West Germanic language. But Modern Dutch has retained a lot more of those original sounds or phonemes. So when we listen to Modern Dutch, we can hear a lot of the sounds which have either disappeared or declined in Modern English.

So in order to avoid any copyright issues, I tried to find a clip of Modern Dutch that was in the public domain. And I've selected a clip of the abdication speech of the Dutch Queen Beatrix from earlier this year. As you may be aware, Queen Beatrix decided to retire at the age of 75 so her son could become king. And this is just the first couple of sentences from her televised announcement. Just in case in your curious, here is the English translation:

"As you all know, I hope to celebrate my 75th birthday in a few days. I am grateful that I have been allowed to approach that day in good health."

So here are those same two sentences in the native Dutch. And I want you to notice the sounds of the language, especially those breathy consonants, because they're actually important to this episode.

(SOUND CLIP)

So I think you can hear what I'm talking about. The sound of Modern Dutch is very different from the sound of Modern English. Dutch has a lot more of those consonants pronounced in the back of the throat. And English once had a lot of those too, but those were some of the sounds which were shifting forward in Old English. Now that doesn't mean that Old English lost all of those sounds. In fact, Old English retained quite a few of them. But those sounds were decreasing in the seventh century when the first scribes began to write down the language. And those new sounds like /sh/, and /ch/ and /j/, they were becoming more and more popular. And those scribes had to figure out how to apply the Roman alphabet to all of those sounds of early Old English.

So let's begin with the Germanic 'SK' sound. As you might remember, that sound shifted to the 'SH' sound in Old English. So we went from *scyrte* to *shirt* and from *scip* to *ship*. Unfortunately, the early scribes didn't clearly distinguish those two sounds.   The letter combination 'SC' was used to represent the 'SK' sound (/sk/). We still do that in words like *disc* spelled D-I-S-C. Remember that the letter C always represented the K sound in Old English. The letter K wasn't really used during this period. But those early Old English scribes used the 'SC' letter combination, not only for the older 'SK' sound, but also for the newer 'SH' sound. So that meant that the 'SK' sound (/sk/) and the newer 'SH' sound (/sh/) were both spelled the same way. And we know that the 'SC' spelling was often pronounced as 'SH' because a lot of those spellings were changed as soon as the French-influenced scribes got hold of them after 1066. Those Middle English scribes apparently hated that old 'SC' spelling since it didn't reflect the way the words were actually pronounced. So they introduced the letter combination 'SH' to represent that newer /sh/ sound. And words which had previously been spelled with an 'SC' were now spelled with an 'SH.'

So *ship* was actually spelled S-C-I-P in Old English. And *shirt* was spelled 'S-C-Y-R-T-E.' But the modern spellings with an 'SH' emerged during this period of Middle English.

Another new sound which I discussed in the last episode was the 'CH' sound - /ch/. This 'CH' sound tended to emerge when the letter C occurred before a front vowel – E, I or Y in Old English.   Otherwise, the C tended to retain it original 'K' sound. Again, this sound may have been changing when the first alphabet was adopted. Because again the first scribes made no distinction between the old sound and the new sound. They used the letter C for both sounds. Apparently they didn't feel the need for separate letters because context made it clear how the letter was pronounced. In many ways, it's similar to Modern English. Even today, we instinctively pronounce the letter C as an S when it appears before and E or an I, but we tend to pronounce it as K when it appears before an A, O or U. So it kinda worked the same way in Old English. The C was left as it was, but before the E and the I, it was just pronounced as /ch/.

So *child* or /cheeld/ was still spelled 'C-I-L-D.' *Cheese* or /chay-se/ was spelled 'C-E-S-E' – at least in the Anglian dialects.

But again, when the French-influenced scribes of Middle English came across this sound, they apparently found this C confusing. Especially since the C also now represented an 'S' sound in French before those same front vowels – E and I. So the French scribes kept the letter C for the 'S' sound in accordance with French practice, and they used the 'CH' letter combination for the English 'CH' sound. So words like *child* and *cheese* got their modern 'CH' spellings during the later period of Middle English.

So what we see happening here is that the original Old English scribes didn't always distinguish these new sounds in the language from the old sounds, but the Middle English scribes tried to fix these spelling problems after the Norman French arrived. All of those new French words made the language even more confusing. So some of these old problems were sorted out along with the newer problems. But as we'll see when we get to Middle English, some of those later solutions just created more problems.

Now last time, I talked about the 'G' sound, and how it also underwent a lot of changes in early Old English. It actually shifted to several new sounds in Old English. In certain cases, it shifted to a 'Y' sound. In other cases, it shifted to a 'J' sound. And sometimes it shifted to that breathy consonant sound in the back of the throat – that sound which you could hear in the Dutch clip of Queen Beatrix which I played earlier. And in certain situations, the 'G' sound didn't change at all. It remained a hard 'G' sound. And this is where things start to get complicated because the Roman alphabet had a letter for the 'G' sound – G. But for those other sounds, well, that was a different story.

The version of the Roman alphabet used by the first English scribes didn't really have a letter for the 'J' sound (/j/). And it didn't have a letter for the 'Y' consonant or semi-vowel sound (/y/). And it certainly didn't have a letter for that breathy Germanic sound that we hear in words like 'yuckkk' and 'Bachhh' and lochhh.' So the scribes had to improvise in those cases.

And even the letter G itself was somewhat complicated in Old English.

The form of G used in the Irish script in the north was different from the traditional form of G used in Rome. Instead of the lowercase G with the closed circle, this Irish form of G didn't have a closed circle. It actually resembled the number 3. If you take a number 3 and extend the bottom part of the number below the line, the number would actually resemble this Irish letter G which was called 'yogh.' And it was the standard form of the letter in the north, and eventually it spread throughout the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms. The traditional Roman G was sometimes used, but the prevalence of this Irish form of 'G' reflects the influence of the scribes in those northern monasteries.

Now since this yogh was the letter G in Old English, it could represent any of the sounds which had evolved from – or which were still evolving from – the original G sound. It could be used for the hard 'G' sound (/g/), the 'Y' sound (/y/), or that breathy consonant in the back of the throat.

It could also be used for that J sound (/j/) which was emerging at the end of words and syllables.

So let's begin out look at the letter G – or yogh – with that 'J' sound (/j/). First, that sound never really appeared at the beginning of words in Old English. It usually appeared at the end of a syllable, and since Old English had a lot of single syllable words, that means it tended to appear at the end of words. So last time, I mentioned that a word like *egg* became *edge* in very early Old English.

But there was no letter J in the early Roman alphabet which the first English scribes used. And that was because Latin didn't have the 'J' sound when the Roman alphabet was adopted. You might remember that names like *Julius* and *Jupiter* were once pronounced /yoo-lius/ and /yoo-piter/. So the letter J wasn't added to the Roman alphabet until that 'J' sound had stated to emerge in early French, and even then it was often considered a variation of the letter I. But all of that came later. So those earlier English scribes didn't have a letter J to work with. So they had to come up with a new way to represent this 'J' sound as the end of English words like *edge*.

Last time, I stated that they came up with the letter combination 'DG' to represent that new 'J' sound. And I suggested that the 'G' in the 'DG' combination reflected the fact that this was initially considered a variation of the original 'G' sound. And that 'DG' spelling was retained by the later Middle English scribes for many words ending in the 'J' sound – words like *judge*.

Well, I need to amend that statement a little bit. The Old English scribes actually used 'CG' for that sound – not 'DG'. But the Middle English scribes didn't like that 'CG' combination. So they removed the C and put a D in its place. So 'CG' became 'DG' in early Middle English. And a word like *edge* got a new spelling. It went from 'E-C-G' in Old English to 'E-D-G-E' in Middle English. But this was a continuation of the Old English tradition. It isn't entirely clear why the Middle English scribes switched from CG to DG. It may have been because the letter C was associated with a sound in the back of the throat – the 'K' sound. But the 'J' sound (/j/) is in the front of the mouth. So they may have concluded that the letter D was a better partner for the G since D is also pronounced in the front of the mouth. At any rate, the Middle English scribes made this substitution and gave us the 'DG' spelling which we still use today.

So that's the 'J' sound. But what about situations where the 'G' sound shifted to a 'Y' sound?

Well, let's consider what the English scribes have to work with. I noted earlier that in early French, /yoo-piter/ became /jupiter/ and /yoo-lius/ became /julius/. So you may be thinking that they scribes had a letter for the 'Y' sound (/y/). What is sometimes called the consonant sound of Y, or some linguists refer to is as a semi-vowel, but it's the /y/ sound which we have in words like *year* and *yet*. And just to avoid any confusion, I am going to refer to it as the consonant sound of Y.

So why didn't the English scribes just use the letter Y for those 'Y' sounds in Old English? Well, this is where we have to go back to Latin and that Irish Church history.

While it is true that /yoo-piter/ became /jupiter/ and /yoo-lius/ became /julius/, that 'Y' sound in those words didn't exist in the original Latin language. The 'Y' sound in Latin had evolved out of an original 'I' sound. So the name of *Julius Caesar* during the time of Caesar was actually spelled I-U-L-I-U-S. You may have seen that spelling in some of those old Roman inscriptions. Well, that name was originally pronounced /ee-oo-lius/. But when an 'I' precedes another vowel, it tends to slur into a 'Y' sound. So /ee-oo-lius/ eventually came to be pronounced /yoo-lius/. And *Jupiter* was originally spelled 'I-U-P-I-T-E-R,' and it was pronounced /ee-oo-piter/. But again, it slurred into /yoo-piter/. So the 'Y' sound came out of the 'I' sound in Latin, whereas in Old English, the same 'Y' sound came out of the 'G' sound, at least in some words. So you can start to see why this gets confusing in later English.

So what about the spelling of that 'Y' sound? Well, the Roman alphabet did eventually adopt the letter Y for the 'Y' consonant sound (/y/). But that had not really occurred by the time the first Irish monasteries were being established in Ireland. And remember that Ireland was never part of the Roman Empire. And once the Irish monastic movement was established in Ireland, it became somewhat independent of the Roman Church. It developed its own customs and traditions. And

even though the Roman alphabet back on the continent did eventually add the letter 'Y' for the /y/ sound, that was after the Irish script was already well entrenched in Ireland.

And of course, it was those Irish-influenced monks in the north of Britain who composed most of the early English texts. So the Irish solution for this sound was destined to be solution for Old English. And those Irish-influenced scribes simply elected to retain the letter G for the consonant sound of 'Y.' And they apparently did that because in most of those Old English words, that 'Y' sound had evolved out of an original 'G' sound. So just like they kept the letter C for both sounds of C – /k/ and /ch/ – they decided to keep the letter G for both of these 'G' sounds – /g/ and /y/.

So in the last episode, I noted that our modern word *year* was originally /gay-ar/, but it became /yay-er/. And the G was kept as the initial letter since the Irish version of the alphabet didn't have a letter for the /y/ sound. So the spelling of *year* in Old English was G-E-A-R.

But as you might imagine, all of this changed when the Norman French arrived. They apparently look at that 'G' in words like *year* and said 'No' – or 'non.' By that point, the letter Y for the /y/ sound was well established in French. So they got rid of those Old English 'G's, and replaced them with French 'Y's. And *year* went from G-E-A-R to Y-E-A-R. And *yet* went from G-E-T to Y-E-T. And sometimes this 'Y' sound was found at the end of words. So the Old English version of the word *many* was spelled M-A-N-I-G, but in Middle English, it became M-A-N-Y.

And you may know that the word *day* in German was *tag* as in 'guten tag' – or 'good day.' Well, the word *day* was actually spelled *dag* in Old English. They actually used a vowel letter which was a variation of the letter A for the vowel, but I'll discuss that next time. The key point here is that Old English retained that G on the end of the word since it had once represented a 'G' sound, just like in Modern German. Again, the Old English scribes used the letter G for this 'Y' sound. But the French-influenced scribes took care of all of that after 1066. Those G's were removed, and the French Y was put it their place. And *day* finally got its modern spelling D-A-Y. So again, we can see how later French spellings gave us the spellings we have today.

Now before I move on, I do need to make a quick note about the letter Y. I noted that the Irish-influenced scribes didn't use the letter Y for the /y/ sound because the Roman alphabet didn't do that either at first. But the Irish scribes did have the letter Y, but they only used it for a specific vowel sound – /ü/. This was the way the letter Y was originally used in the Roman alphabet – strictly for this vowel sound. And it actually arrived a little bit late to the Roman alphabet because it represented a sound in Greek that didn't really exist in Latin. The Romans borrowed a lot of words from the Greeks and they needed to represent that Greek vowel sound. So they added the Greek letter upsilon for that sound, and that became the letter Y. And that had all occurred shortly before the alphabet made its way to Ireland.

So this use of Y for the vowel sound (/ü/) passed into the Irish script, and since Old English happened to have that same sound, it also passed into Old English. So Old English actually did have the letter Y, but it's use was limited to this /ü/ sound.

So the original version of the word *king* was pronounced /kü-ning/, and it was spelled C-Y-N-I-N-G.

But here's the way all of that impacts Modern English. Even though Latin and Old English both used the letter Y for this /ü/ vowel sound, that sound eventually shifted in both languages. And in both languages, it shifted to the original 'I' sound which was pronounced /ee/. We still have that original 'I' sound in words like *ring*, and *think* and *bring*. We also have it in that same word *king*. Again, the original Old English version was spelled C-Y-N-I-N-G – pronounced /kü-ning/. But that sound eventually shifted to the 'I' sound of *king*. So by the end of the Old English period, the letter Y and the letter I were representing the same vowel sound.

And this same thing was happening in Latin as well. So this is part of the reason why we sometimes represent the modern 'I' sound with a letter I and sometimes with a letter Y. So in American English, *tire* is spelled T-I-R-E, but in British English, it's spelled T-Y-R-E. So these vowel letters are somewhat interchangeable today. But at one time, I and Y represented different vowel sounds. But over time, the two sounds merged into a single sound. So today, either letter can be used to represent that vowel sound.

There's actually a lot more to the story of the letter Y, but we'll cover that when we get to Middle English.

So while you're digesting all of that, let me digress a little bit. Back when I introduced the Angles, Saxons, Jutes and Frisians, I mentioned where each of those groups came from. And I noted that historians are still a little unsure about the origin of the Jutes. The historian Bede tells us that the Jutes settled in Kent, so Aethelbert was descended from those original Jutes. But with respect to the history of the Jutes prior to that point, all we have are a handful of references to them in a few old documents. Since the Jutland peninsula in Denmark is also the homeland of the Angles, most historians think the Jutes originated in the northern part of that peninsula. But you might remember that I also noted that some scholars think there is a link between the Jutes and a Scandinavian tribe called the Geats.

Well this is where that link comes in. It has to do with these sound changes that took place in Latin and English that I have been discussing. One of the major sources of our knowledge about the Geats was the epic poem Beowulf which was composed in Old English at a later date. Beowulf himself was Geat who later became King of the Geats. The name of the Geats was spelled G-E-A-T-S in modern translations of the manuscript. And so many later generations of Modern English speakers have tended to pronounce the name as /geats/. But remember G-E-A-R was pronounced /yay-er/ – the original version of the word *year*. So that initial G probably had a 'Y' sound in Old English. In the original texts, the name was spelled G-E-A-T-A-S. So the pronunciation was probably /yay-ah-tas/.

Meanwhile, the name *Jutes* spelled J-U-T-E-S reflects a later pronunciation change. Remember /ee-oo-piter/ became /yoo-piter/ and then later became /jupiter/. Well the same thing happened with the name of the Jutes. During the time of Bede, Latin was still in the middle of that sound

change, and it was using the 'Y' pronunciation of /yoo-piter/. So for the same reason, the 'Jutes' weren't the 'Jutes' yet, they were more like the 'yutes.'

[My Cousin Vinny clip]

Sorry - I couldn't resist.

Anyway, the name of the 'yutes' – the one's in Britain – was actually spelled by Bede in Latin as I-U-T-A-E. So the actual pronunciation would have probably been /yoo-tay/.

So let's go back. The original pronunciation of the Geats was something like /yay-ah-tas/. And the original pronunciation of the Jutes was something like /yoo-tas/.

/yay-ah-tas/ and /yoo-tas/ – you can hear the similarity. And you can see why some scholars concluded that these were in fact the same people. In fact, in an Old English translation of Bede, his Latin word for the Jutes was actually translated as Geats. But in other parts of the translation, it is rendered as Jutes.

Now, most modern scholars dismiss this connection. It is generally agreed that the Geats lived in Southern Sweden and the Jutes lived across the narrow sea passage in northern Denmark. And though it's possible that there was some historical connection between the two groups, most modern scholars consider them to be distinct tribes. But all of this is important to our story for two reasons. First, it shows how words in both English and Latin have evolved over time, so we can't always trust the modern versions of words – even proper names. And we can't assume that words in ancient texts were pronounced the same way they are today.

But this digression is important for another reason. It reminds us that the Anglo-Saxons had once been neighbors of other Germanic tribes in the region around modern Denmark and Sweden. And this included tribes like the Geats, the Danes and the Swedes. And even if we assume that the Geats and Jutes were distinct tribes like most modern scholars do, there is little doubt that they were neighbors within the same region. And when some of these tribes migrated to Britain, they brought stories of their neighbors with them. And during this period of the seventh century, when a handful of Church scribes were starting to write down the English language, the vast majority of Anglo-Saxons continued to be illiterate, and they passed along stories the way they always had – in the oral tradition. And there is very little doubt that a story about a great hero of the Geats named Beowulf was being passed down from one generation to the next. But it wasn't written down yet. It would take at least another century before writing in Britain had progressed to the point where traditional Germanic folklore and stories like Beowulf would come to be written down.

But I wanted to plant that seed for you because in a few more episodes, we will get to the point where Beowulf was actually written down, and we'll look more closely at the poem at that point.

So let's return to the early English alphabet and the unique sounds of early Old English. So far I've covered most of the sounds which I discussed in the last episode, but there was one sound which I haven't addressed, and that sound had a significant impact on Modern English spellings.

That sound was the breathy consonant sound in the back of the throat that we hear at the end of words like 'yuckkk' or 'lochhh.' It's a sound that we heard in that Dutch clip which I played earlier. And it's a sound that we no longer have in English.

There were actually two versions of that sound in Old English. There was a voiced version and an unvoiced version. So it was sort of like the 'K' sound and the 'G' sound. The 'K' and 'G' sounds are basically the same, except that the 'K' sound is unvoiced and the 'G' sound is voiced. So the vocal chords are involved in the 'G' sound, but otherwise, those two sounds are pretty much the same. And these two breathy consonant sounds in the back of the throat worked the same way – one was voiced and one was unvoiced. And in fact all of these sounds are closely related. That's why I'm discussing them as a group in this episode. The 'K' and 'G' sounds are stops. That means the breath is stopped momentarily before the sound is made. But these other breathy sounds are not stops. They're fricatives which means the air just flows through. It's not stopped. So 'yuck' with a 'K', the sound is stopped. But 'yuckkkk' with this breathy fricative, the sound is more continuous. So that's how linguists categorize these sounds. But as you can tell, they are all just variations of the same throat sounds. The differences depend on whether you stop the sound or whether you use your vocal chords or not.

Well with respect to those breathy fricatives, and that's what I'm going to call them from here on, both of fricative sounds had existed since the original Germanic language. And that's why we can still hear those sounds in Modern Dutch. But as we're going to see, English gradually lost them.

In the last episode, I mentioned how the voiced version of this sound developed out of the 'G' sound in certain cases. And in many cases in continued to evolve and became a 'W' sound. And I gave the example *sagu* which became /sa-xu/ with that breathy fricative. And then eventually it shifted to the 'W sound and became /sa-we/. And today we have it as *saw*. But this fricative sound existed in other contexts as well, as did the unvoiced version of that same sound. And those early English scribes had to figure out what to do with those sounds because there certainly weren't any Roman letters for those sounds.

So the English scribes actually came up with a simple solution. For the voiced version of the sound, they used the letter G or that Irish version of the letter – yogh. But once again we see that letter G being called to the rescue. This was yet another job for the letter. So that word /sa-xu/ was spelled S-A-G-U in Old English. Now why did they decide to use the letter G for that sound? Well, perhaps because this particular fricative sound had evolved out of the G sound in certain contexts. But it's actually more basic than that.

Remember that this was the voiced fricative, and G was the voiced stop. In other words, the sounds were basically the same. They were both voiced in the back of the throat, and they were both voiced. So they both used the vocal chords. The only difference was the fact that the sound

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was momentarily stopped for the G sound but it was allowed to flow through for the fricative. So that's why the G sound sometimes shifted over to this fricative, and that's why the scribes used the G for both sounds.

But what about the unvoiced version of that sound? Well, in those cases, the scribes simply used the letter H. And that also makes sense if you thing about it. If you pronounce this breathy fricative in the back of the mouth, it ends up being basically a breathy sound. And that's really the sound of the letter H. It just represents a breathy sound. So in a word like *house*, the H is just a breathy sound before 'ouse.' So H was used for that unvoiced fricative sound in the back of the throat.

So just to give you an example of this, the word *night* as in *nighttime* was pronounced something like /nee-xt/ in Old English. And it was originally spelled N-I-H-T.

Now all of that may seem a little technical. But the important part of all of this is that these Germanic breathy fricatives were commonplace in Old English. One version was represented with a G, and one version was represented with an H. And here's where all of this starts to make sense to us today as Modern English speakers.

The Old English scribes had actually done a pretty good job of representing these sounds with what they had to work with – the G for one sound and the H for the other. But then the Norman French arrived. And these fine distinctions between the voiced and unvoiced versions of those sounds started to be lost in the mix of Middle English. Increasingly, those scribes just combined the G and the H together. And they often used this GH combination for both Germanic fricatives – the voiced and unvoiced versions.

So during the period of Middle English, we got the GH letter combination. And that letter combination represented these Germanic fricative sounds in the back of the throat. But as we know, English lost those sounds over time, and that was part of the overall process by which English got rid of a lot of those Germanic consonants in the back of the throat.

So when these sounds disappeared, one of three things happened. In most cases, this breathy fricative sound completely disappeared from English. But in a few cases, the sound shifted to a 'W' sound. And in a few cases , it shifted to an 'F' sound. Again, these newer sounds were in the front of the mouth. So let's look at each of these scenarios.

As I said, in most cases, English speakers just stopped pronouncing those breathy fricative sounds. At some point, they were considered awkward. Maybe they were considered too Germanic to people accustomed to the heavy influence of French words after 1066. And there is little doubt that these very Germanic sounds would have been stigmatized and frowned upon by many French-speakers in Norman England. So as these breathy fricatives gradually disappeared, the GH spelling was left as a relic of an Old English pronunciation that was shunned or simply died out. And in those words, the GH basically became silent letters.

So earlier, I mentioned the word *night* as in *nighttime*. And I noted that it was originally pronounced /nee-xt/. And it was spelled N-I-H-T in Old English with the H representing that fricative sound. But the Middle English scribes gave the word its modern GH, and it became N-I-G-H-T. But over time that fricative sound disappeared, and the word became /neet/. And thanks to the Great Vowel Shift around the year 1500, /neet/ became /nite/. But we still have that Middle English spelling with the GH.

In the same manner, a word like *sight* followed the same evolution. From its original spelling with a basic H in Old English, it got a brand new GH in Middle English. And the word evolved from its original Old English version *sihð* (/see-xth/) to /seet/ to /site/. Along the way, the Germanic fricative disappeared, but the GH remained.

And even our modern number 8 followed this pattern. The Old English version of the word was spelled E-A-H-T-A, and it was pronounced /ayx-tuh/. In Middle English, it got a new spelling with a GH to represent that middle fricative sound. But the sound disappeared over time. And today the GH is silent, simply giving us *eight* (/ate/).

And we can apply the same analysis to words like *weigh* (W-E-I-G-H), *weight* (W-E-I-G-H-T), and words like *fight*, *fright*, *might*, *right*, and so on.

So that's what happened when this fricative sound disappeared. But in the last episode, I mentioned that the voiced version of this fricative sound – the one that came from the original 'G' sound – it sometimes shifted to a 'W' sound. So as we saw earlier, *sagu* eventually became *saw*. And the word D-R-A-G-A-N (pronounced /dra-xan/), it eventually became *draw* (D-R-A-W). And L-A-G-U (pronounced /la-xoo/) became *law* (L-A-W). So eventually these G's were replaced by W's.

So sometimes the fricative sound disappeared, and sometimes it shifted to a W sound, but in a small group of words, there was a third option. In those words, the fricative sound shifted to an F sound. This was a late development, but we see it in modern words like *rough*, *laugh*, and *cough* – all of which still have their GH spellings, but are now pronounced with an 'F' sound.

In Old English, *rough* was spelled simply R-U-H. It was pronounced /roo-x/. The H became GH in Middle English as we've seen. So the modern spelling of R-O-U-G-H reflects that original pronunciation, but the final consonant has shifted to an 'F' sound.

The word *laugh* also follows the same pattern. Believe it or not, *laugh* was originally spelled H-L-AE-H-H-A-N. And It was pronounced something like /hle-xan/. The H's in the middle became a GH as we've seen. And the H at the very beginning was dropped over time. But again, the pronunciation at the end later changed to an 'F' sound, and we got the modern English *laugh*.

Words like *cough*, *tough* and *trough* follow the same pattern.

Another example is the word *enough*. Believe it or not, it was originally spelled G-E-N-O-G –
which looks like /genog/ in Modern English. So it had a G at the beginning and at the end. And
the original pronunciation was probably something like /gay-nohg/.   So how did we get from
/gay-nohg/ to *enough*? Well, the G at the beginning took the 'Y' sound which we discussed
earlier. And the final G took that breathy fricative sound. So the pronunciation shifted from /gay-
nohg/ to /yay-nox)/. During Middle English, the word was given a GH spelling at the end. And
later, that breathy consonant at the end shifted to an F sound. So /yay-nox/ became 'enough.'

So, to summarize all of this, we have lots of words today with a 'GH' in the middle or at the end.
And that spelling represents a Germanic sound that was once very common in Old English. And
it's still common in modern languages like Dutch. But thanks to the natural evolution of English
away from those Germanic sounds in the back of the mouth, that 'GH' letter combination is
merely a relic of days gone by. Today it represents either an F sound or, more often, no sound at
all.

So if you follow that history, all of those 'GH's in Modern English start to make a little more
sense.

So that really takes us to the end of the sounds which I discussed in the last episode, but there
were several other Old English sounds which didn't exist in Latin. Those were older Germanic
sounds, and the early English scribes had to figure out what to do with those sounds as well. So
next time, we'll explore those remaining sounds and complete our look at the first English
alphabet.

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