

## 1 History: how things came to be this way

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This section of the book is devoted to pieces which offer glimpses into the history of the English language: in Norwich, in Norfolk, in East Anglia and in Britain generally. The section starts, however, where English also started, on the European mainland; and the Prologue takes us even further back into our remote Eurasian Indo-European past.

### Prologue: Sir William Jones and his revolution

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About 230 years ago, Sir William Jones made an amazing intellectual breakthrough. He was a gifted learner of languages, and by an early age he had mastered Greek, Latin, Hebrew and Arabic. He had even translated Persian into French. In 1783, arriving in Calcutta where he had been appointed as a judge, he started learning Sanskrit, the ancient classical language of northern India – one of the first Britons to do so.

He was astonished by what he found. Could it just be a coincidence that the Latin word *pater*, Greek *patér* and Sanskrit *pitár* all meant ‘father’; and that Latin *frater*, Ancient Greek *phrater* and Sanskrit *bhratar* all meant ‘brother’? After all, Sanskrit had been spoken 3,500 miles from Italy, where Latin had been spoken. The similarities, however, were undeniable, especially in the grammar: for example, Latin *est* (‘it is’) was *asti* in Sanskrit, *sumus* (‘we are’) was *smas*, and *sunt* (‘they are’) was *santi*.

In a famous lecture, Jones argued there was “a stronger affinity” between Sanskrit, Latin and Greek “than could possibly have been produced by accident”. Others had also noticed this, but Jones’ breakthrough was to state that the affinity was so strong that no linguist could examine the three languages “without believing them to have sprung from some common source, which, perhaps, no longer exists”.

That was the big new idea: that there had been an earlier parent language *which had since disappeared*. Previously, scholars had misguidedly wondered which of the world’s existing languages had been the “first” language – Hebrew was often mentioned. But Jones argued that the only way to explain these affinities, over such a large geographical area, was to assume that there had once been a language which had gradually turned into Latin, Greek and Sanskrit – and Celtic, Iranian and

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Germanic – just as Latin itself had changed into the Romance languages Italian, Spanish, Rumanian and French; and just as Sanskrit had turned into the vernacular north Indian languages – Sanskrit had ceased to be spoken as a native language around 500 BC and morphed into languages like Hindi, Punjabi, Gujarati and Bengali.

From Irish in the west to Bengali in the east, from Icelandic in the north to Maldivian in the south, the languages of most of Europe and much of west and south Asia developed over time out of that same single source, which has now not existed for 5,000 years. Today we call it Indo-European.

Sir William died in 1794, aged only 41. But he revolutionised our way of thinking about language history.

LINGUISTIC NOTES

- Irish or Irish Gaelic is the indigenous language of Ireland. It is a member of the Celtic branch of the Indo-European language family. The other Celtic languages are Scottish Gaelic, Manx, Welsh, Cornish and Breton. Irish is an endangered language, with perhaps 30,000 native speakers, although the numbers are disputed, not least because of the rather large numbers of speakers in Ireland who have learnt Irish as a second language.
- Bengali, which is the main language of Bangladesh as well as of the Indian state of West Bengal, is one of the descendants of Sanskrit. It has about 220 million native speakers, and is one of the biggest languages in the world. It is a member of the Indo-Aryan sub-branch of the Indo-Iranian branch of the Indo-European language family. The other main Indo-Aryan languages are Hindi-Urdu, Punjabi, Marathi, Gujarati, Sindhi, Nepali, Assamese and Sinhalese (the majority language in Sri Lanka/Ceylon). The Gypsy language Romany is also an Indo-Aryan language (see 1.10).
- Icelandic is, like English, a member of the Germanic branch of Indo-European. It has about the same number of native speakers as Maldivian.
- Maldivian, the language of the Maldivian Islands in the Indian Ocean, is another Indo-Aryan language. It is also known as Dhivehi, and is rather closely related to Sinhalese. It has about 350,000 native speakers.
- The geographical spread of the Indo-European language family can be judged from the fact that Ireland and Bangladesh are about 5,000 miles or 8,000 kilometres apart, and the distance from the Icelandic capital of Reykjavik to Malé, the largest city in the Maldives, is about 6,000 miles or 9,500 kilometres.

1.1 Our ancestors across the sea

I am sitting at my laptop, in the county of Norfolk, about 17 miles or 30 kilometres from the North Sea, writing about English, in English. That is a very new thing to be able to do. I do not mean because laptops are a recent invention; and I do not mean because people of relatively humble origins like me have only recently known how to write, although both of those things are true. What I mean is that the English language itself is very recent. Human language is probably about 200,000 years old; but English has not been around for even 1 per cent of that time.

Five thousand years ago there was no such language as English, not even here in Norfolk which, I reckon, is where English was born. But there is an important respect in which the language I am writing in did already exist then: there actually was a language which *became* English. Five thousand years ago, the language-which-became-English was not spoken anywhere in Britain. You would have had to travel eastwards from Norfolk at least 500 miles (800 kms) across the North Sea to hear the forerunner of modern English being spoken. Around 2500 bc, the linguistic ancestors of modern English speakers were living in southern Scandinavia – in southern Sweden and on the Danish islands in the region where Copenhagen and Malmö are today.

During the millennia since, the language they spoke there has changed so much, as languages do, that if we could hear it today it would be unrecognisable and incomprehensible. But the English dialect I grew up speaking in Norfolk, on the other side of the North Sea, really is a direct descendant of that ancient language of southern Scandinavia, a descendant passed down directly from one generation to another over many centuries.

We have no idea what name the speakers of that language had for it – if it had a name at all – but today linguists call it Proto-Germanic. Two hundred generations later, my native language is called English by its speakers; but there is a direct line of transmission from the one language to the other. Proto-Germanic no longer exists, but it has not died out. It has simply become transformed, over the millennia, into English – and also Dutch, Afrikaans, Frisian, German, Yiddish, Swedish, Danish, Norwegian, Icelandic and Faroese, the sister languages of English in the Germanic language family.

It is very hard to imagine what the lives of our linguistic ancestors 200 generations back were like. But we owe them our language. If they hadn't spoken like that, we wouldn't be speaking – and writing – like this.

BACKGROUND NOTES

*The city of Norwich, where I wrote this, lies about 17 miles / 30 kms from the east coast of the county of Norfolk in eastern England, which is in turn about 120 miles / 200 kms across the North Sea from the west coast of the Netherlands, and 340 miles / 540 kms from the west coast of Denmark.*

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### LINGUISTIC NOTES

- How long human language as we know it today has existed is a question we do not really know the answer to. Evans suggests that language dates back to “long before” 150,000 years ago; see Nicholas Evans (2010) *Dying Words: Endangered Languages and What They Have to Tell Us*, Oxford: Blackwell, 14.
- The suggestion that English was “born” in Norfolk is a little bit cheeky, but the earliest and densest patterns of Anglo-Saxon settlement do seem to be focussed on Norfolk, and on Kent and Sussex; see Peter Trudgill (2014) “The spread of English”, in M. Filppula, D. Sharma & J. Klemola (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of World Englishes*, Oxford University Press.
- Proto-Germanic is generally dated from about 2500 BC. to 500 BC. It later divided into West Germanic; North Germanic, which was ancestral to the Scandinavian languages; and East Germanic, which developed into the languages of the Burgundians, the Vandals and the Goths, including the Visigoths who ended up in Spain. There is some indication that a form of Gothic survived in the Crimea until the eighteenth century; see [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Crimean\\_Gothic](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Crimean_Gothic) – but there are no East Germanic languages surviving today.

### 1.2 The oldest English word

The Norwich Castle Museum has been hosting a fascinating exhibition on the Roman Empire, including items from the Middle East and North Africa, as well as Europe. Amongst the European materials, there are displays from Walsingham, Hockwold and Hoxne – the Romans were here in East Anglia, too, for over 350 years.

How did we get on with these Romans who came over here, invading our country? Maybe “we” is not the right word. The people who lived in Norfolk when the Romans arrived were not English-speaking. They were the Iceni, Celts who spoke a language we now call Brittonic, which was the ancestor of Welsh, Cornish and Breton. Famously, to start with, the two groups got on very badly indeed; and the Iceni queen Boudica led a brave but ultimately doomed revolt against the Romans.

Not surprisingly, though, after centuries of increasingly peaceful contact with the Romans, the Brittonic language acquired many Latin words from them, as we can see in Modern Welsh words like *pont* ‘bridge’ and *llafur* ‘labour’. But in much of Roman Europe, the linguistic consequences were much greater. The Celts in Portugal, Spain, France and Italy, under the

influence of Roman culture, gradually abandoned their native tongues altogether and shifted to Latin.

Why did that not happen here? Well – it did! As the Roman legions were pulling out of Norfolk in AD 410, perhaps most of the Celts walking around the streets of Venta Icenorum (Caistor St Edmund) would have been speaking Latin: many of them would have actually been bilingual in Latin and Celtic, just as the Celts were in France.

Linguists believe that the dialect of Latin which was spoken here in southern England would eventually have ended up being very like Old French. Norfolk would have gone from being, if you like, Welsh speaking to being French speaking.

So what stopped this happening? Well, *we* did – depending once again on who you mean by “we”. Our linguistic ancestors, the Anglo-Saxons, sailed across the North Sea to these shores, and subsequently came to dominate the Romano-Celts politically, culturally and linguistically. They brought with them the Germanic language which eventually became English. The very oldest word of written English ever discovered anywhere was found engraved on a bone in the Anglo-Saxon graveyard in Caistor. It reads RAIHAN ‘roe deer’.

You can see that in the Castle Museum too.

**BACKGROUND NOTES**

*Norwich Castle was built by the Normans on the orders of William the Conqueror, in the aftermath of the 1066 invasion. It now contains the Norwich Castle Museum, which houses permanent local art, natural history, archaeological and other exhibits, as well as temporary presentations such as the 2014 exhibition on the Roman Empire.*

*Walsingham and Hockwold are villages in, respectively, the northwest and southwest of the county of Norfolk, while Hoxne is in Suffolk.*

*Caistor St Edmund is a village just to the south of Norwich. The remains of the Roman town, which was constructed in the aftermath of Boudica’s revolt in AD 60, are just outside the village. A local saying has it that “Caistor was a city when Norwich was none – Norwich was built with Caistor stone.” The later Anglo-Saxon graveyard is on a hill nearby.*

**LINGUISTIC NOTES**

- A form of Celtic was the first Indo-European language to arrive in Britain and, at the time of the Roman invasion of England in AD 43, it was spoken over all or at least most of our island in the specifically British form of Brittonic (also called Brythonic).

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- The modern Welsh words *pont* ‘bridge’, and *llafur* ‘labour’ descend from Latin *pontem* (the accusative case of *pons*) and *labor* respectively, and can be compared to French *pont* ‘bridge’ and *labeur* ‘toil, labour’.
- The *Icenorum* in *Venta Icenorum* is the Latin genitive plural of *Iceni*, so ‘of the Iceni’. *Venta* is a Brittonic word which probably meant something like ‘market’ or ‘meeting place’. It appears in Modern Welsh in the place-name *Gwent* – *Cas-gwent* is the Welsh name for Chepstow.
- The word *Caistor* was borrowed into Old English from Latin *castra*, singular *castrum*, which originally referred to a Roman military encampment. Caister-on-Sea in Norfolk has the same origin, as do many other English place-names such as Chester, Winchester, Leicester, Lancaster.
- The suggestion that colloquial Latin as spoken in southern England would have ended up very like Old French, if it had survived, is due to Peter Schrijver (2009) “Celtic influence on Old English: phonological and phonetic evidence”, *English Language and Linguistics* 13.2: 193–211.
- The *raihan* inscription is written using an early form of the Germanic runic alphabet. It has been dated to the early AD 400s. It is thought that the deer bone which it was written on may have been used as part of some kind of game; see David & Hilary Crystal (2013) *Wordsmiths and Warriors: The English-Language Tourist’s Guide to Britain*, Oxford University Press.

## 1.3 Ouse

You might be familiar with the well-known Scottish song which goes “Campbeltown Loch, I wish you were whisky”. If we translate this into East Anglian terms, I suppose there might be some *EDP* readers who would not object at all if the Great Ouse, or even the Little Ouse, flowed with whisky as well. What they might not know, however, is that there is an interesting connection between the names of those rivers and the name of the drink.

Whisky is an alcoholic beverage which we owe to our Gaelic neighbours in Ireland and in northern and western Scotland. The English word *whisky* is an abbreviated version of an older form *whiskybae*, which was an anglicised form of the Gaelic term *uisge-beatha*.

Irish and Scottish Gaelic were once the same language – the Hebrides and the Scottish Highlands were originally settled by Gaels from Ireland. In both forms of Gaelic, *uisge-beatha* means ‘water of life’, which would originally have been a translation of Latin *acqua vitae*, like the French *eau de vie*.

The second part of *uisge-beatha* comes from Old Irish *bethu* ‘life’, which is related to the Greek root *bio-*, which we have borrowed into English in words like *biology*

and *biography*. (Linguists talk about languages “borrowing” words from others, even though there is no intention of giving them back.)

The first part comes from Old Irish *uisce* ‘water’, which is from the ancient Celtic root *utso*, later *usso*. This is also where *Ouse* comes from – there are several rivers with this name in Britain.

In fact, many river names in England are, like the Ouse, pre-English in origin, deriving from the Celtic language of the peoples who inhabited Britain before the arrival of our Germanic ancestors.

*Thames* was Celtic for ‘dark river’. *Yare* is Brittonic Celtic, perhaps meaning something like ‘babbling river’. *Avon* is simply the Brittonic word for ‘river’ – in modern Welsh it’s *Afon*. We can imagine Saxon incomers pointing to a river, asking its name, and the local Celts assuming they were just asking what their general word for a river was. So River Avon means ‘river river’!

River Ouse means ‘river water’: one possible scenario in our part of the world is that newly arrived Angles heard native Celts referring to the water in the Ouse as *usso* and wrongly thought that was the name of the river. *Uss* later became *Uss*, and then *Uus* or *Ouse*.

So, even if the Ouse isn’t whisky, *Ouse* and the *whis* part of whisky were originally the same word.

#### BACKGROUND NOTES

*The Little Ouse forms the western end of the southern boundary of Norfolk. It flows from east to west, and runs into the (Great) Ouse along the western boundary of the county. The Yare is the river that rises in central Norfolk, runs along the southern edge of Norwich, and reaches the sea at (Great) Yarmouth. There are several rivers called Avon in Britain.*

### 1.4 Detective work: our ethnic background

We were told at school that the Germanic invaders who crossed the North Sea to Britain in the fifth century were the Angles and Saxons. The Saxons, who came from northwest Germany, settled in Essex, Middlesex, Sussex and Wessex. The Angles, who were from southern Jutland, dominated everywhere else, including Norfolk and Suffolk – thus “East Anglia”.

If anyone doubted the truth of what our teachers said, it can be demonstrated rather nicely through a little bit of linguistic detective work on our local

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place-names. Think about the Suffolk village called Saxham, near Bury St Edmunds. This name meant ‘the home of the Saxons’. That might seem to contradict what we were told at school, but of course it doesn’t. The village was called that because there was something unusual in Suffolk about being a Saxon. Everyone else was an Angle! Because there was nothing distinctive about being an Angle in Norfolk or Suffolk, we have no place-names with ‘Angle’ as an element. Where you do find such names is in Wessex. Englefield, in Berkshire, means the ‘field of the Angles’, which tells you very clearly that everybody else round there was a Saxon.

But East Anglia did have something of an ethnic mix – there were not just Angles and Saxons here. We also had Frisians, who made it over to England from their homeland along the Dutch/Belgian coast. We can see this from the Suffolk village names Friston and Freston, ‘the village of the Frisians’. There were also other Germanic tribes hanging around. Swabia today is the part of Germany around Stuttgart, but the Swabian tribe spread far and wide in those days: the name of our Norfolk town of Swaffham meant ‘the home of the Swabians’. Flempton in Suffolk, also near Bury, indicates the presence of Flemings, who had come from areas just inland from the Frisians.

As another part of this fascinating ethno-linguistic mix, East Anglia also had plenty of survivors from the original Celtic population. On the Norfolk coast, just across the sea from the Frisian homeland, is the village of Walcott, which in Old English meant ‘the cottage of the Welsh’.

So Celts, Angles, Saxons, Frisians, Flemings, Swabians – there was a rich mix of peoples in early East Anglia. With such a diverse gene pool in our ancestry – not forgetting the Danes who came along later – it is no surprise that the native people of modern Norfolk and Suffolk are such a fine bunch.

**BACKGROUND NOTES**

*The names Essex, Middlesex, Sussex and Wessex are derived from the geographical labels for the East Saxon, Middle Saxon, South Saxon and West Saxon kingdoms. The first three are now names of traditional English counties (and their cricket teams). Wessex was never a county but is the name of a region which is generally held to consist of Hampshire, Wiltshire, Berkshire, Dorset and Somerset, plus southern Gloucestershire and Oxfordshire, corresponding roughly to the limits of the Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Wessex: Alfred the Great was King of Wessex from 871 to 899.*



### LINGUISTIC NOTES

- The Angles, Saxons and Frisians were all speakers of West Germanic dialects that are generally grouped together under the heading of North Sea Germanic or Ingvaenian, and from which English, Scots, Frisian and Low German are descended. The other West Germanic groupings were Weser-Rhine Germanic or Istvaeonic, which gave rise to the language of the Franks, and later on to Dutch and related German dialects; and Elbe Germanic or Irmionian, which produced modern High German as well as the ancient language of the Lombards.

## 1.5 Anglo-Saxon kingdoms and “the Sheres”

In a piece I wrote for the *Eastern Daily Press* a while ago, I used the expression “the Sheres”, but the editors cut it out and it did not appear in print. I do not know why they did that, but I wonder if it was because they did not know what it meant. *Sheres* or *Sheers* is our way of referring to that part of the outside world which lies immediately beyond East Anglia.

If you have never heard the expression before, you can still work out where it comes from. The names of some English counties always have *shire* (pronounced “sheer”) at the end: Yorkshire, Berkshire. Others sometimes do and sometimes don’t: Somerset(shire), Devon(shire). And others never do: Sussex, Surrey. The names of the East Anglian counties of Norfolk, Suffolk and Essex are never followed by the suffix *shire*.

East Anglia is surrounded on three sides by the North Sea and the River Thames, and on the other side by counties whose names end in *shire*. If you leave East Anglia by land, you inevitably do so via Lincolnshire, Cambridgeshire or Hertfordshire; and beyond those counties again you come to Huntingdonshire, Northamptonshire and Bedfordshire. So if you are brave enough to decide that you really do want to leave East Anglia, however briefly, you have no choice but to do so through the Sheres.

Perhaps when we speak this way we are reminding ourselves that until AD 870, East Anglia was a separate kingdom in its own right, alongside Anglo-Saxon Northumbria, Mercia and Wessex. If that is what we are doing, though, it is not quite right. Our kingdom was bordered by the River Cam and the River Stour and never included Essex, which was a separate, rather minor kingdom. The people of Essex were Saxons – East Saxons. We – the North Folk and the South Folk – were Angles.

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But then, over the centuries, East Anglia annexed Essex through its dialect: Essex became part of linguistic East Anglia, as much influenced by the speech of the East Anglian capital Norwich as by the speech of the national capital London. Norfolk and Suffolk people traditionally said *he go, she swim, that do* and did not drop their *h*'s; and traditionally that was true of Essex too.

So if you want to be sure of hearing local dialect speakers say *he goes, she swims, it does*, you will have to pluck up your courage and cross over the border into Mercia, or as we say today, the Sheres.

BACKGROUND NOTES

*Modern East Anglia is a region which everybody in England knows about but which has no official status. It is the same kind of area as the English Midlands or the American Midwest. Everyone agrees that the counties of Norfolk and Suffolk are prototypically East Anglian, although some would argue about the inclusion of the Fenland areas of the western part of the region; and I have treated modern Essex in this piece as East Anglian as well. Many other people, on the other hand, would extend the boundaries to include Cambridgeshire or at least eastern Cambridgeshire, which used to be part of the ancient Anglo-Saxon East Anglian kingdom; and some would extend the boundaries even further than that.*

*For much of its length, the River Stour forms the boundary between Suffolk to the north and Essex to the south. It flows eastwards out into the North Sea, with its estuary lying between the Suffolk port of Felixstowe and the Essex port of Harwich. The River Cam flows through the modern city of Cambridge.*

LINGUISTIC NOTES

- *Shire* was the original English word for county, with *county* being of French origin and meaning 'area controlled by a count': the modern French word is *comté*. (A *sheriff* was originally a 'shire-reeve', where *reeve* meant a king's officer.) As a lexeme in its own right, *shire* is pronounced so as to rhyme with *fire*, but in county names *shire* rhymes with *fear*, hence "the Sheres".
- Grammatical forms such as *he go, she swim, that do* are referred to as demonstrating third-person singular (present-tense) zero. This feature is referred to a number of times in this book.