The Hundred Years War with France (1337-1453) provided a major impetus to speak English, not French. At the same time, the outbreak of the mysterious disease known as “The Black Death”, by making labour scarce, improved and accelerated the rise in status of the English working man (a process that culminated in the Peasants’ Revolt of 1381). It caused so many deaths in the monasteries and churches that a new generation of semi-educated, non-French and Latin speakers took over as abbots and priories. After the plague, English grammar began to be taught in schools, to the detriment of French. In 1345, the chronicler William of Nassyngton wrote:

Latin can no one speach, I troth,
But those whose it from school do knowth;
And some know French, but no Latin
Who’re used to Court and dwell therein,
And some us Latin, though in part,
Who if heaven have not the art,
And some can understand English
That neither Latin knows, nor French
But simple or learned, young or old,
All understand the English tongue.

English now appears at every level of society. In 1356, the mayor and aldermen of London ordered that court proceedings there be heard in English; in 1364, the Chancellor opened Parliament in English. During War Tyler’s rebellion in 1381, Richard II spoke to the peasants in English. In the last year of the century the proceedings for the deposition of Richard II (together with the document by which he renounced the throne) were in English. Henry IV’s speeches claiming the throne and later accepting it were also in English. The mother tongue had survived.

MIDDLE ENGLISH

But English had changed; it had become the form known to scholars as Middle English, a term devised in the nineteenth century to describe the English language from AD 1150 to 1500. The distinction – given the collapse of Old English writing – is partly artificial. Much of what is called Middle English is no more than a record in writing of what had already happened to spoken Old English. Thus, while spoken Old English had almost certainly lost most of its inflections by the time of the Norman Conquest, it is not until seriem Middle English that the changes show up in the documents. Perhaps the most vital simplification, now fully established, was the loss of Old English word endings, which were replaced by prepositions, words like by, with and from.

An example of what happened in the transition from Old English to Middle English is shown in the story of the letter y. In Old English, y represented, in some cases, the sound which French scribes wrote as u: a short vowel. So Old English mycel became Middle English muchel, which ends up as Modern English much. But when y stood for a long vowel the long u was written by the French scribes as u. So the Old English fur, becomes the Middle English fair and the modern fire. To make the matter more complicated, the original vowel sound, short or long, represented by the Old English y, sounded different in different parts of the country. In the North and East down to the East Midlands as far as London, the short vowel sound became roughly like that represented by modern English i, as in kit. In Kent and parts of East Anglia it became the sound represented by a, as in merry. In the West Country, it became the sound now represented by oo as in mood, but in those days spelt u. The same word at the same period in Middle English was therefore spelt differently in different parts of the country: Old English for “kin”, cyn, for example, could be kyn, ken, or Kun. In the case of byrgan (which had Middle English variants birian, birien, birien) Modern English has kept the western spelling, buyry, while using the Kentish pronunciation, bare, while buere reflects the western spelling but is pronounced as the London/East Midlands “bizzy”.

So what had happened to the language map of England? The short answer is that it had not changed much from Anglo-Saxon times, though with the development of written English it had developed strong local forms, written and spoken. For instance, the author of Curator Mundii, already quoted, notes that he found the story of the Assumption of Our Lady in southern English and translated it for “northern people who can read no other English”. And even Chaucer launches Troilus and Criseyde with his famous “Go, litel book”, adding

And for ther is so gret dotevise
In English and in worthy of ounce tonge,
So prey I God that non me mistervise the,
Ne the miasmyr for defaunce of tonge.

Spoken English differed from county to county as it does in rural districts to this day. The five main speech areas – Northern, West and East Midlands, Southern and Kentish – are strikingly similar to contemporary English speech areas. Within the East Midlands, one small nucleus of power, trade and learning – the triangle of Oxford, Cambridge and London – shared the same kind of English, which may be said to have become the basis for Standard English in the twentieth century.

Stanley Ellis, an authority on English speech varieties, has devoted his life to studying the bizarre nuances and definitions of English speech. He takes his tape-recorder into the English countryside and by a process of gentle inquiry discovers local variations in usage, of both vocabulary and accent. In this passage, he is trying to establish the local Yorkshire for a watercourse. His informant speaks broad Yorkshire, pronouncing “no” as nau, “made” as moody and “lap” as lepe.

**STANLEY ELLIS:** You’ve been in farming all your life. Farming’s altered a lot, hasn’t it?

**INFORMANT:** Oh, my God, there’s no comparison to when I started.