D

For this reason, some people have thought that Egypt was only among those islands, with the Nile dividing itself to create a triangular shape. Consequently, many have called Egypt by the name of a Greek letter, delta.

~ Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, 5.9, 77–79 CE

Reader, I must confess – I've been avoiding something up to this point. You may have noticed its absence. The thing is, the history of the alphabet outlined in Chapters A, B and C gives us the origins of only some of the letters that you're reading right now. Specifically, it can explain only nine of the letters of this paragraph so far: the capital letters R, I, Y, T, C, A, B and S. These are the letters whose journey we have traced from the Middle Kingdom of Egypt to Rome in the time of Julius Caesar. They're very much in the minority though, compared with all the shorter letters in between.

Capital letters are very old, and they stand in contrast to the more frequent, bunched-up letters that we call 'lower case' (a, b, c, d). Shorter and squatter they may be, but lower-case letters are also characterised by the upward stalks (ascenders) or downward tails (descenders) that stick out from their main body. Some lower-case letters really don't look much like their capital counterparts. The two-legged and one-headed R is far more elaborate than a diminutive r.

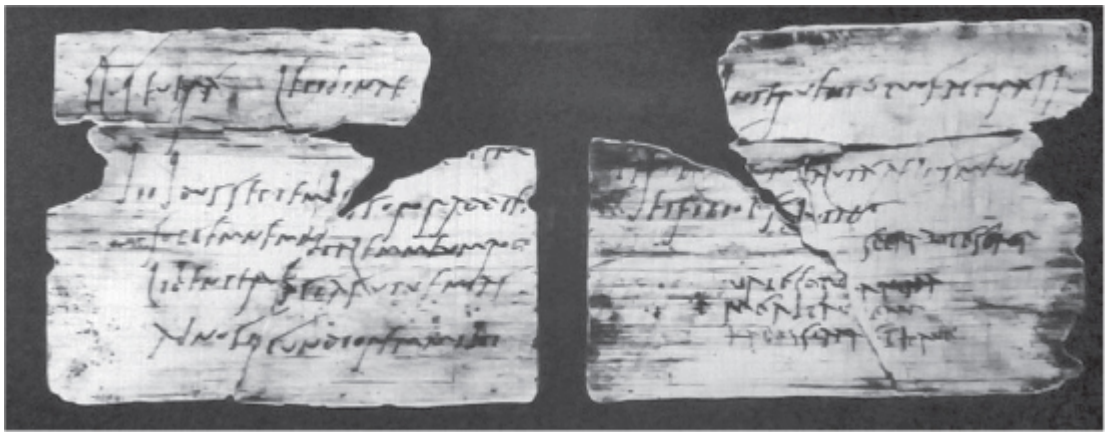
The origins of this difference again go back to the Romans, yet they would not have recognised or understood it. Classical Roman texts may look like angry shouting in all-caps, but the fact is that there were no lower-case letters, and no divide between two cases that writers would switch between within the same text. Yet the Romans had already begun to distinguish between different styles, according to what they were writing, what it was written on, and who it was written for. The letter D offers us a way into this story.

This symbol, standing for the consonant /d/ (as in *Danny*) for the Phoenicians and Greeks, probably gets its shape from a hieroglyphic depiction of a door.[24] Its Greek name, *delta*, comes from a Semitic word meaning ‘door’. The standard shape of the Greek letter delta has for centuries been a triangular Δ, pointed upwards. That letter’s shape has left a mark on our geographical vocabulary, giving great rivers their deltas.

However, it was a sideways-pointing variant of delta (◁) that the Etruscans adopted. The point became a curve, and D as we know it was born. How then did this curving capital letter, like a sail billowing to the right, come to shrink, gain an upward stalk and turn to face the left? That is to say, how did we get d from D?

***

Many centuries ago, a woman dearly wanted her friend to come to her birthday party. We can imagine her seated and waiting, as a professional scribe takes down her message in his neat handwriting. His style is not unique, but typical to countless scribes across the empire. The woman, called Claudia Severa, watches his hand pass over the thin wooden tablet, and she reflects for a moment on how this handwriting is a far cry from the bold lettering that she reads in public places. The letters are small yet fluidly written, with long flicking tails. The scribe puts aside his pen, and turns around the wooden tablet for her approval. The message is good, the invitation clear, but it lacks the personal emotion to convince her friend Sulpicia Lepidina to come. Determinedly, she picks up the pen herself, and adds a final few lines, trying to impress on her friend a little of her longing for loved ones far away.



sperabo te soror	I will expect you, sister,
vale soror anima	be well, sister, soul
mea ita valeam	of mine, so I may be well,
karissima et have	dearest one, and farewell

Claudia Severa's letter did reach her friend at Vindolanda, today in northern England, where the letter was excavated in the 1990s. What Sulpicia Lepidina's response was, though, we will never know.

The two letters from Claudia Severa that the oxygen-less earth at Vindolanda have preserved for us are the oldest surviving Latin (*c*. 100 CE) known to have been written by a woman. The many letters dug up there offer excellent early evidence of how Roman writing was developing in everyday uses, away from the formal contexts of monuments and public inscriptions. Not expecting her words to be read by nosy archaeologists, the writing of Claudia Severa and her scribe is cursive – more joined up, and written quickly and flowingly. Crucially, for our purposes, the letter shapes in this everyday style are changing, thanks to the speed and materials of writing. It is out of this cursive style that our lower-case letters will emerge.

To track their emergence, we should start with the bigger letters of Roman times that are behind our modern-day A, B, C and D. These, as mentioned, are capital letters. They are specifically referred to in historical research as 'square capitals', which are spacious and curvaceous, with thick and thin lines that end in serifs, and so roughly fill the space of a square.[25] As well as carving capitals into stone, the Romans also wrote them down in manuscripts. The resulting 'bookhand', commonly known as rustic capitals, was shaped by its context of handwriting with ink on papyrus; the letters appear thinner and more bunched together. Rustic capitals maintained a certain prestige in creating documents, but they were nonetheless still quite separated and ample letters, which used up space on the page and interrupted the flow of writing. Hence, the Romans developed cursive handwriting – from the Latin verb *currere* 'to run'. This lent itself to speed, joining up letters with a greater fluidity, making it ideal for urgent messages between Roman soldiers or for note-taking by traders in a hurry.

There are two distinct stages in the history of cursive: older and later. Older Roman cursive is essentially the same familiar letters, but without such sharp angles and full curves. Some letters are changing more than

others; R, for instance, gets unravelled by cursive writing and simplified into two lines, a vertical shaft and a wavy line resting on top. This simplification would produce our r.

By the third century CE, we start to see examples of a later cursive style. This is quite a departure from the original capitals, still very much in use in certain contexts. Up until this point, the letters have been written between two (usually imaginary) parallel lines, one upper and one lower, like so:

The new cursive was not written as if between two lines, but rather four. The main ‘body’ of the letter is small and condensed, confined between two inner lines, but it may have a helpful ascender or descender that juts out towards two outer lines.

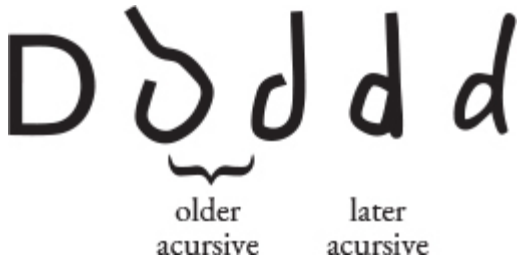
In this new style and the difference between old capitals and the new cursive, we have the split that we think of today as our two cases. In technical terms, the divide is between ‘**majuscule**’ and ‘**minuscule**’ letters.

As the Romans’ handwriting accelerated, the shapes of the individual letters morphed to keep up with the pace. I think you will agree that the eight lower-case letters above are simpler than their capital comrades, with some primarily consisting of a single loop. Without the ascenders and descenders, we would struggle to tell b, d, p and q apart. It was a bar-less A that got its left leg looped back, resulting in a round shape that defines its lower-case form today.

▶ Description

Likewise, the upper bulge of B got flattened into the stalk of b through this cursivisation, although C survived the process without a scratch.

As for our starring letter, D, the stalk and curve of the capital effectively swapped roles, since the original round edge became the downward stroke of d, and the straight side of D became its new loop.



▶ Description

It is therefore in mass literacy and the resulting adaptation of capital letters that we find an origin for the lower-case letters that we so depend on today, and a reason for why D became d.

Why, you may be asking, do we still have both capital and lower-case letters? Why did the younger minuscule styles not replace the older capitals? These are very fair questions, and to find the answer we need to take our chronological cruise further forward in time, and enter the post-Roman world.

* * *

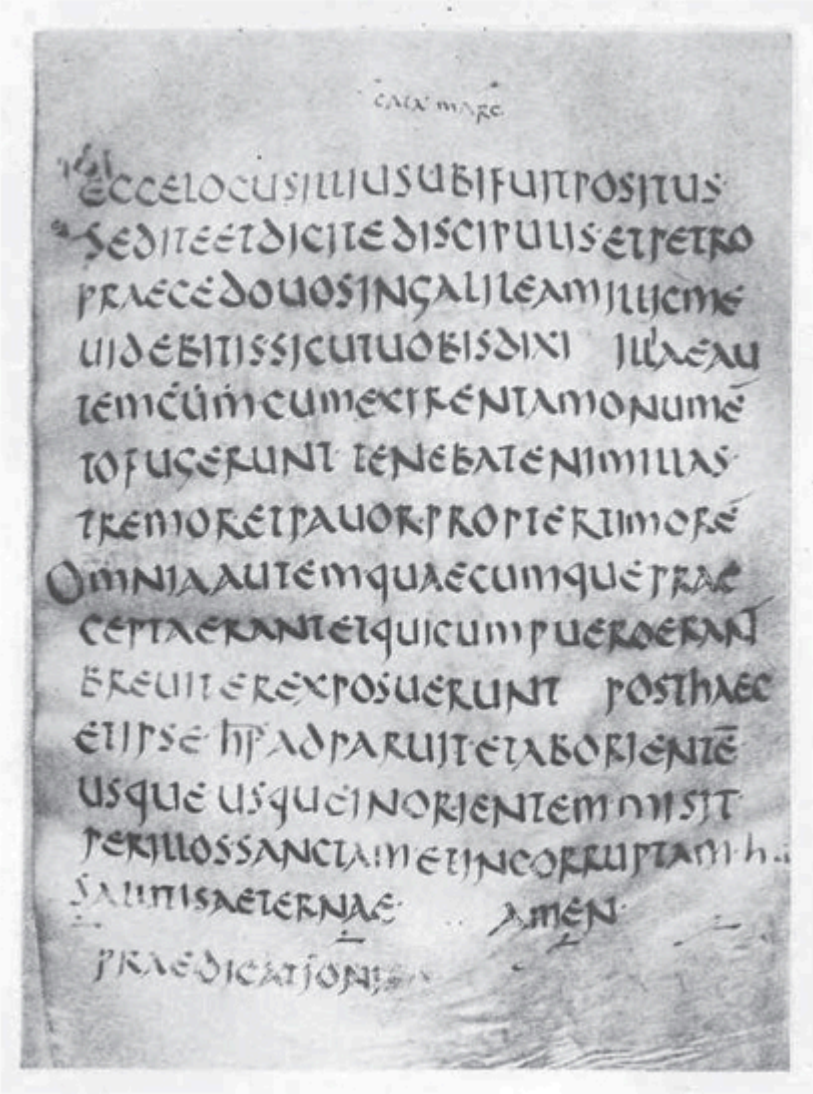
In the year 476 CE, a Roman emperor was sent into retirement. He was just a boy, likely only allowed to resign his position and survive on account of his youth, and his pitiful deposition provides us today with a neat line between the end of the Roman era and the beginning of the Middle Ages.

The thing is, though, history is not neat. Even with unusual and significant events, like the deposition of Romulus Augustulus in 476, we don’t tend to realise how we in the present are living through what people in the future will understand as the progression of ‘history’. The change from classical to medieval was imperceptibly gradual. So many of the key

qualities of the medieval world were already in place before 476, while so many hallmarks of Roman society continued after that year – including the small detail of a whole other emperor in the east, whose kingdom would last for another thousand years.

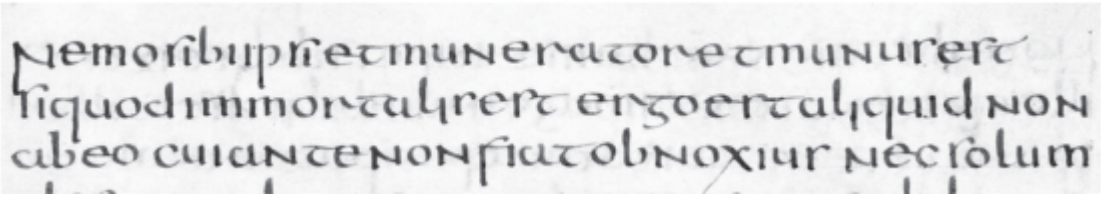
One change from the earlier time of Caesar and Cicero was that the Roman Empire had by 476 become predominantly Christian. The ancient crew of gods like Jupiter, Neptune and Venus had fallen from grace, and the Roman world was now populated with priests, bishops, deacons, monks and popes. Again, you might think of this rise of Christianity as another break with the past, but really it was perfectly possible to be a Christian and also keep up ancient interests. This general attitude of reverence for Romanity plays a big part in the story of our modern letters, including their shapes. People in this late-Roman era may have preferred to use the newer cursive letters for everyday needs and for writing large chunks of text, but they never forgot the old capitals.

Monasteries became powerhouses of intellectual innovation and conservation, and their monkish scribes churned out large books (codices) made up of sheets of parchment. Making copies of the biblical texts was naturally the main focus for them, and for this slow and sacred task a commonly preferred style was uncial.[26] This is an eye-catching majuscule script that starts to appear in our sources from the fourth century CE. It developed out of rustic capitals, and it is characterised by rounded shapes that roll across the line and page.



© *Unknown author, Wikimedia Commons*

Additionally, we find *half*-uncial, a minuscule script that was a beautified form of later cursive. It may have developed in Latin-speaking parts of northern Africa.



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Square capitals, rustic capitals, cursive, uncial, half-uncial – all these styles of writing the alphabet are now flowing through the pens of western

Europe. Yet not all scripts are considered equal: post-Roman writers put the different styles to different uses, determined by the material and format of the document they were making. All this variation was later arranged into an explicit hierarchy, formulated at the French abbey of Tours around the year 800 CE. To guide potential readers with big and bold letters, the writers at Tours would use square or rustic capitals for the titles of texts. This would then be followed by the smaller shapes of uncials and half-uncials for chapter headings and the first or last words of the text. The main text body, containing the most words, would be in some form of minuscule. Scribes might also switch to a 'higher' script in the hierarchy to give emphasis to some words. This gives manuscripts in this tradition a recognisable format:

> CAPITAL LETTERS AT THE TOP
> FOR THE TEXT'S TITLE, BEFORE
> SOME SMALLER UNCIAL UNDERNEATH FOR
> THE FIRST FEW WORDS OF THE TEXT, WHICH
> then gives way to some variety of minuscule, such as the
> 'Carolingian' minuscule, a style developed in the eighth century, and
> a very popular one, thanks to its promotion as part of the educational
> programme of the powerful emperor CHARLEMAGNE, ruler of a
> massive empire …

For our purposes, the key point to appreciate here is that different styles from Roman times are not only being preserved and developed; they are also being used side by side in the same document. The rules governing when to switch between the styles and majuscule/minuscule are not the same as ours today, but some of the principles are in place. Writing titles and emphatic things in capital letters, or capitalising the first letter of a sentence or verse, are practices that we still do with written English today.

This complex state of graphic affairs would continue throughout the Middle Ages, all the way up until the 15th century and the dawn of the Renaissance. Then, when Johannes Gutenberg invented Europe's first printing press in Germany in *c*. 1440, and kicked off a writing revolution, his new system had to be able to print both majuscule and minuscule letter forms. It worked by creating little metal blocks, each bearing a particular letter, which could be arranged however you wished to press ink onto a

page. This use of ‘movable type’ had been productive in China for centuries, and far-travelled stories of the system might have inspired Gutenberg. The blocks were stored in boxes or trays, and to help keep the process speedy, it was only sensible to keep majuscule and minuscule blocks in two separate boxes – a printer’s practice still reflected in our terms *upper* and *lower case*.

***

The post-Roman culture of western Europe did not stay within the borders of the old empire. Like a package deal, Christianity, Latin and writing were brought by missionaries to peoples and places outside the Roman world. Ireland was one such place. Through the efforts of saints like Patrick, Ireland took the new religion and writing to heart – so much so that the Irish exported them back to the Continent. Many historical sites across southern Germany, Switzerland, Austria and northern Italy have an Irish foundation. Irish scribes also took the half-uncial script and developed their own styles of writing, collectively known as ‘Insular’. It is in this style that the sublime, nationally treasured Book of Kells was written in the ninth century CE, now on display in the library of Trinity College Dublin. An offspring of Insular script, known as ‘Gaelic type’, still has limited use in Ireland today.

The Irish didn’t need to go as far as the Alps to find fertile ground for their mission. The big island to their east, Britain, had undergone a drastic social transformation over the course of the fifth and sixth centuries CE. The southern half of the island had once been a well-integrated and prosperous part of the Roman Empire, with all the forts, villas, forums and amphitheatres that you would expect.[27] The picture that historical sources and archaeological evidence paint is very murky, but around the year 400, a sequence of invasions, military withdrawals and economic crashes seems to have brought Roman Britain to its knees. Cities were abandoned; grand villas were repurposed into humble homes; roads were left to grass over. Surviving texts in Latin become rarer and rarer.

Into this desolation then sailed new peoples, looking to make a life for themselves in the Roman wreckage. They were, in language, customs and beliefs, pretty different to the Romano-Britons who were still living on the island. We refer to these migrants by three traditional labels – Angles, Saxons and Jutes – although even these three terms are likely simplifications. Altogether, we can call them the Anglo-Saxons, or simply the English.

Importantly for our story, they were not Christian. They at first worshipped a set of gods and goddesses who had travelled with them from the Continent. This old religion endures in our days of the week: gods like Tīw, Wōden, Þunor and Frīġ may feel alien to us, but they gave their names to *Tuesday*, *Wednesday*, *Thursday* and *Friday*.

The fact that there was now a large non-Christian population in Britain, within sailing distance from France, had not gone unnoticed. It was not just the Irish who saw Britain as an open goal for Christianity; the pope in Rome was looking to score some souls too. Perhaps the most important pope in the history of England is Gregory I, also called ‘the Great’. The traditional account goes that, after encountering some English slaves in Rome, and making some pretty terrible puns,[28] Gregory dispatched a man called Augustine to begin the conversion of the English in 595 CE.

This would bring written Latin back to Britain, and put its alphabet into the hands of the Continental migrants who had set up new kingdoms on the island. At last, dear reader, we have arrived at a fateful meeting. From Egypt to England, via Lebanon and Tuscany, we have tracked the progress of the alphabet all the way to its encounter with the speech of those migrants: English.

E

Sid is on his side with me; Tim is checking the time with me; I'm Magic E!

~ My primary school English lessons

E.is for English, and if there is a letter that seems to define Modern English spelling, it would be this fifth letter of its alphabet. It's widely known that E is the most common letter of written English, appearing more often in our books, newspapers, messages and signs than the rest of its alphabetic associates. It was thanks to this frequency that, after Alfred Mosher Butts had combed the front pages of American newspapers like the *New York Times* for his new word game, E was awarded the lowest value of 1 in what would become *Scrabble*.

The near-essential status of E is only partly because of the common sounds that it spells. E is a vowel letter, and is of course typically used to write down one of many vowel sounds. It can serve this purpose on its own (as in *bet*, *email*, *end*, *moment* or *demon*) or in combination with another letter (as in *eat*, *seek*, *steak*, *die*, *receive*, *reign* and *eulogy*). We call the latter practice a **digraph**, in which two letters are used for one sound.

Very often, E does not correspond to a particular sound in the spoken word. In other words, it can be silent. Yet silence is not necessarily uselessness. Very helpfully, E cooperates with other letters to tell us how to pronounce them. It can signal when C is soft, as in *price* or *face*. If I present you with the word '*nic*', I bet you'll pronounce the C differently if a final E is added, to make it *nice*.

E also assists in the pronunciation of letters that it does not stand next to. Adding E to the name *Tim* produces the word *time*; the presence of the E changes how we read the preceding I. Likewise, *fad*, *wag*, *bit*, *pin* and *nod* become *fade*, *wage*, *bite*, *pine* and *node*. I was taught this as 'Magic E', but

the duller technical term is a **split digraph**. The E works in combination with another letter, but they stand separated.

In contrast, across the many writing alphabets of Europe, E straightforwardly stands for one or two vowels. What's more, the specific vowels that English uses E for are at odds with other languages. For instance, a German, Italian or Polish writer would spell the vowel in *meet* and *greet* with the letter I, not with an E. The letter E in the German alphabet is used for the sound of the vowel /e:/ (similar to the vowel in English *wait*), which is how the Romans used it too.

But how did this all happen? Explaining English's unique uses for E is one task of this chapter. It is also the fifth and final part in our initial whistle-stop tour through the history of the English alphabet. It will take us through the story of our letters following their re-arrival in Britain in the early medieval period, all the way up to the modern era. This is a vast amount of linguistic ground to cover, so Chapter E concentrates primarily on two events that drastically changed the shape of the English language and its spelling. The first is a catastrophic conquest. The second is a serious shift in sounds. The chapter will also introduce you to what actually is the most common sound in English speech, for which its alphabet in fact has no dedicated letter at all.

***

All of that preamble about this invaluable vowel letter contrasts with its original purpose: to write down a consonant. As discussed in Chapter A, the Egyptian and Phoenician writing systems, from which English's own system descends, were all consonantal. There were vowels in their words, but they were few and were implied by the reader. In the Phoenician alphabet, the recognisable letter 𐤄 stood for the sound /h/, as in English words like *hat* or *help*. Its descendants in Hebrew and Arabic writing still keep up this function. For instance, English gets the exclamation *hallelujah!* from Hebrew. The Hebrew word is הללויה, which literally means 'praise God!'. The exclamation begins and ends with E's Hebrew cousin, ה.

As with A, it was the Greeks who turned E into a vowel. The name for the Greek letter E differs from the four previous letters, because it does not continue an older Semitic name. Greek E is called *epsilon*. Since ψιλός (*psilós*) is an Ancient Greek word meaning 'bare' or 'simple', epsilon is literally 'simple E'. The Greeks called it this to distinguish the letter from the digraph AI, which came to stand for the same sound.

From what we can tell, even in the absence of ancient recordings, the letter E seems to have been pretty stable in its pronunciation during the classical period of Greece and Rome. In Latin, it stood for one vowel, which could have differed in duration: short /e/ and long /e:/. The usage of E did not remain the same as Latin developed further, but for our purposes, what matters is that this vowel is how the letter had been primarily used when it was reintroduced to the island of Britain. In time, it got involved in writing down English.

* **

The English language emerges in the written record in the fifth century CE. Our earliest surviving sources for English are short and fragmentary – literally fragments sometimes: examples of bone and pot dug out of the ground. It should be noted that many bits of English from these early days are not written in Roman letters, but in another script (for more, see Chapter T). Nonetheless, the arrival among the English of the package deal of Christianity, Latin and manuscripts made the dominance of the Latin script basically inevitable.

While the Latin language dominated, we also have all sorts of examples of alphabetically written English from this early medieval period. Since not everyone could read Latin, the switch in language was practical. Some texts are very mundane, like personal letters and legal codes. Around 602 CE, Æthelberht, the king of Kent, published a long list of crimes and fines to be paid accordingly. It's not a thrilling read, but it is the oldest surviving proper text in English.

It became acceptable for the elite and more ordinary people to use Latin letters for English too, and we have all sorts of poems, stories, riddles, academic texts and translations in the everyday **Germanic** language of that era. My personal favourite is *The Wanderer*, a haunting piece of poetry written from the perspective of a nameless exiled man thinking back to better times. You might also have heard of the epic tale of *Beowulf*, full of brave heroes, kings, monsters, battles, ships, treasure and even a dragon.[29]

To be precise, the language of these texts is **Old English**. Historians and linguists prefer to use this term for the stage of English between roughly 500 and 1100 CE, because it rightly signals that the language is English, but really not as we know it today. Old English is a very different language, and not one that Modern English speakers can understand without training. The texts include many unfamiliar old words, or the unfamiliar ancestral forms

of current words. The language is also very different in terms of grammar, making much use of words' endings to convey grammatical information. True, English still does this (e.g. *play, plays, played, playing*), but it's on a greatly reduced scale. Here is an example of Old English:

ic seah þa fif godan hus

Incomprehensible? All six words are actually still current in English today:

I saw the five good houses

Speakers of Old English made the Latin script work well for their language. Old English spelling is, in my opinion, very logical and consistent. You can quickly learn the rules of how to pronounce written words, and there are no redundant silent letters. Old English spelling was not in thrall to the practices of other languages. There was no letter Q. Words like *queen* and *quick* were very sensibly written with an initial C instead. More on this, unsurprisingly, in Chapter Q.

That said, Old English spelling did not capture every aspect of the spoken language. A key feature of speech was the length of a vowel. Just as in Latin and Ancient Greek, how long a vowel was pronounced could make a difference in Old English. The word *god* might mean 'god', if the O was said quickly. If it was instead held for slightly longer, *god* was the word for 'good'. This contrast between **short** and **long vowels** is not such a significant difference in Modern English, but you can hear something close to it in the words *chip* and *cheap*. Since Latin letters hadn't come with a consistent way of marking vowel length, Old English writers usually left it unwritten. In occasional cases of ambiguity, readers could guess the right meaning from context.

Being quite a different language from Latin, Old English had its own distinct sounds, and put some letters to new uses. For example, the letters SC stood for the single consonant /ʃ/ (the sound in *shoe*),[30] so a *fish* or a *ship* was spelled *fisc* and *scip*. The EA digraph still seen in *bread, dead, head, dream, team* and *leaf* seems to be very old, and in Old English these words were actually pronounced with a kind of double vowel, technically called a **diphthong**. Writing that vowel with both E and A was a reasonable practice, or at least it was until English changed the spoken vowel but didn't update the spelling. Since then, EA has also been applied to words where it

has no historical reason being, such as words of Latin origin like *beast* or *please*.

Overall, in the consistency of its spelling and deliberate departures from the Latin model, Old English spelling gives the impression of having been well thought out and appropriate for the language. Some drastic changes in sound, spelling and society have happened to English since those days. One of those changes sailed to southern England and landed at Pevensey in the year 1066.

***

When I was a kid, my pencil case contained a wooden ruler that on one side displayed a list of British kings and queens. As a future history nerd, I loved it very much, although on reflection it was a historically problematic artefact. One issue was that it claimed to show ‘British History Rulers’, while not mentioning any kings or queens of Scotland or Wales. The Anglocentric list even skipped over the many monarchs of a united England who came before William the Conqueror. The ruler was of course a product of its English environment, in which the date 1066 looms very large, and not without good reason.

Historians would correctly reject that 1066 was in any way the start of English history, as my school ruler seemed to think, but nonetheless the events of that year did lead to significant tumult and regime change in England. In the decisive Battle of Hastings, Duke William of Normandy beat Harold Godwinson (King Harold II for only a few months), to become King William I of England. The battle had cut the head off the English elite, leaving the country ripe for the taking. With so many English leaders dead or fled, the conqueror was then able to put his Norman supporters in key positions of power as England’s lords and bishops.

This new status quo had an enormous and enduring impact on the linguistic life of the country too. In palaces, halls and other places of power, Old Norman (and later its English offshoot, called ‘Anglo-Norman’) could now be heard. When the entire upper class of a society starts speaking another language, the language of those socially beneath them will lose its prestige. Now that, according to the chronicler Henry of Huntingdon (*c.* 1088–*c.* 1157), there was ‘no prince of the ancient royal race living in England’ and ‘it was a disgrace even to be called an Englishman’, the Old English language must have been socially disadvantageous. Many of its speakers will then try to adopt the speech of their superiors, either

completely switching or at least adopting some of their words. Language does not exist in a political vacuum.

Moreover, Old English had previously acquired a standard way of spelling, a product of the court of the south-western kingdom of Wessex. With the Norman Conquest, both court and scribal tradition disintegrated, along with the standardised spelling. The few people who continued to write in English therefore did so with no social currency or rule book for spelling.

What the Normans were speaking was a descendant of Latin which we can call Old Norman or Old Northern French.[31] Though they probably didn't mean to, the Normans started a lexical flood of new words into English. It's hard to overstate the influence that their language has had on English. In writing this very paragraph, I'm living in their legacy by using words of Latin origin like *descendant, influence, language, very* and *origin*. The unequal status of the incoming language and English is still reflected in our vocabulary. Words from the former tend to be fancier than those from the latter; compare *grand* with *big*, or *pardon* with *forgive*.

Most literate people were now no longer writing things in English. Consequently, our sources for the language from the 12th and 13th centuries are minimal. When English later makes an impressive return to prestige and the written record, it is clearly a beast of a different nature. Crammed full of Norman, French and Latin loanwords, and radically different in its grammar, it has become the more familiar **Middle English**.

The centuries of French linguistic dominance also left a clear mark on the way that English was now spelled. Simply put, Middle English looks more French. Many practices from the Old English period had been abandoned and replaced. Along with new words, certain Continental habits of spelling were carried over into English spelling.

As a general rule, these originally made perfect sense for the sounds of Old Norman and French words. For example, the new habits included spelling vowels with AI and OU. The first we see in words like *grain* and *certain*, which go back to Latin *granum* and *certanus*. These words of Latin origin were transmitted to English via the Normans. The new AI digraph started out as an appropriate way to spell the spoken words. English took the words and the digraph, and in time applied it to existing English vocabulary too.

Likewise, OU first developed to spell the new French vowel /ou/ (a sound like the one in *goat*). However, this later shifted into an /u:/ vowel (as in *goose*). English had good linguistic and social reasons to adopt this OU duo for its own vocabulary and its sound from French writers. The practice is still present in our spelling of all sorts of words, including *doubt*, *flour* and *house*.[32] It's thanks to this that British spelling puts a U in words like *colour* and *favour*, even though these go back to the Latin words *color* and *favor*. The British spelling of these words keeps in with the French, while Americans take them back to the Romans.

Various words in Latin contained the sequence of sounds /kt/, as in *noctem* 'night' and *lactem* 'milk'. In the development of French, the /k/ in this cluster transitioned over time into a vowel-like sound, spelled with an I by the time of early French and Norman. This turned *noctem* and *lactem* into the French words *nuit* and *lait*. The same change in sound and spelling also happened with Latin *fructum*, and this is why English writes *fruit* with an I. Again, it may be silent in English now, but it hasn't always been.

In these individual practices of spelling, English more generally acquired French's preoccupation with Rome. As mentioned already, French is one of the many languages that developed out of Latin, collectively known as the Romance languages. We recognise today that this broad group includes French, Spanish, Italian, Catalan, Portuguese and Romanian, and that they are all very different languages to what we know as Latin. However, just as new languages emerged in the post-Roman world only slowly, recognising them as distinct from each other and from Latin happened very slowly too. They would have started as regional flavours of Latin, spoken in casual contexts, before tiny changes collectively widened the gap between 'proper' Latin and these substandard offshoots.

It's because of their ancestry and profound connection to mighty Latin that some Romance languages may have something of a backwards-looking quality. Yes, they have innovated greatly in their sounds, words, grammar and writing, but they have also clung on with one hand to Latin. And why shouldn't they? Rome had been prestigious and powerful. It was in the interests of medieval Europe to partake in that prestige by maintaining old linguistic habits.

Later on, as the medieval became the modern, and European scholars gained better access to the texts of the past, this attitude was taken up a

notch. Writers worked to get their own native languages up to what they saw as the superior standards of Latin. The whole phenomenon of silent letters, which would have seemed bonkers to the Greeks and Romans, owes a great deal to this nostalgic attitude.

For example, when the words *debt, doubt* and *subtle* first appear in English texts, we find them sensibly spelled '*dete'*, '*dute'* and '*sotil*' by medieval writers. Ultimately though, they descend from the B-full Latin words *debitum, dubitare* and *subtilis,* and so a silent B was 'restored' to their spelling after around 1500. Learned scholars of this era, more interested in the glories of the classical past than the living speech of the present, were keen to stress the Latin pedigree of their words. The addition of B was an indication of their linguistic priorities, and such an expression of identity is an additional factor in how we spell, even if it doesn't seem valid to us today.

Admittedly, a few silent letters are not etymological – that is, they were not actually part of the older word and its pronunciation. *Island* for example has a silent S, inserted into its spelling from the 16th century onwards. This likely arose because the speakers and writers thought that the first part of *island* was the synonymous word *isle*. The two are in fact unrelated. *Isle* also has a silent S, but this one at least derives from a once-spoken S, since *isle* comes from Latin *insula*. The S in *isle* may therefore have had a certain classical prestige that helped its mistaken transferral to *island*.

All in all, the Norman Conquest was a landmark in the history of English not just because it brought a whole load of vocabulary. It also brought new sounds and new practices of spelling such sounds, which were inevitably applied to native words. Even more significantly, these imports resulted in a different attitude towards English. The consequences of the Norman Conquest situated English within a post-Roman linguistic landscape. It yoked its spelling to the story of Latin and the new Romance languages. This is why, as discussed two chapters back, English still has the system of soft and hard C. It's also why we cannot bear to get rid of that most useless of Roman gifts, the letter Q.

Old English used Latin letters, but its status outside the Latin-speaking world and the emerging Romance family meant that it had a very free hand to adapt the alphabet to suit its needs. By comparison, Middle and Modern English spelling is quite distinct. It is suffused with imported practices, and has a backwards-looking preoccupation with a word's history. For better or

for worse, 1066 and the following centuries joined English closely, perhaps forever, to Roman writing.

* * *

Moving from the end of the Middle English period, we can return to this chapter's starring letter, E. During this period, around the year 1400, English was back. It had returned to the mouths and the quills of the elite. However, speech is restless. Both English and the letter E were about to undergo a significant change in sounds.

Take the modern word *meet*. It is a verb, and in the past tense, *you meet* becomes *you met*. Today, the vowels in *meet* and *met* are quite different. In IPA notation, *meet* has a high and long /iː/ vowel, while *met* has the lower vowel /ɛ/ in my accent. Yet, going only off their shared spelling with E, you might expect the vowel in both words to be the same, with the only difference being that the vowel in *meet* would be twice as long as the vowel in *met*. This in fact used to be the case. If we travelled back to the 14th century, *meet* would sound like a drawn-out *met* (‘*meeht*’). Likewise, *good* and *root* sounded like an elongated *god* and *rot*.

Doubling the letter E in *meet* was therefore a reasonable practice of spelling. It makes occasional early appearances in Old English texts, and became the norm in Middle English. However, since the 14th century, the vowels in *meet* and *met* have drifted apart, through a massive change in spoken English that really deserves to be much more widely known. Appropriately, it is called the **Great Vowel Shift**.

To understand it, let us start with Middle English before the shift. If I gave you a sample of Middle English, I reckon you would be able to understand a great deal of it.

Whilom ther was dwellynge at Oxenford
A riche gnof, that gestes heeld to bord,
And of his craft he was a carpenter.
With hym ther was dwellynge a poure scoler,
Hadde lerned art, but al his fantasye,
Was turned for to lerne astrologye
~ Chaucer, *The Miller's Tale*, *c*. 1390

There are of course many differences here in grammar, choice of words[33] and spelling (*gestes* for *guests, scoler* for *scholar*), but overall the language

of Chaucer looks much closer to our own than that of *Beowulf*. One thing we cannot appreciate from texts like *The Miller's Tale*, though, is how spoken Middle English sounded. Drawing from a wide pool of evidence, historical linguists have reconstructed what authors like Chaucer and Shakespeare sounded like. The major difference is in their vowels. For instance, *whilom* in the passage above did not sound like modern *while*, but more like *wheel*.

Middle English is an umbrella term for a variety of different dialects spread across Britain. Seeing as this period saw English fight to (re)establish itself as a language worthy of being written down, there was no written standard to stick to. Compared with the official Wessex spelling that dominates later texts in Old English, Middle English shows great variation from region to region, writer to writer. Chaucer himself wrote that there was 'so greet diversitee in English'.

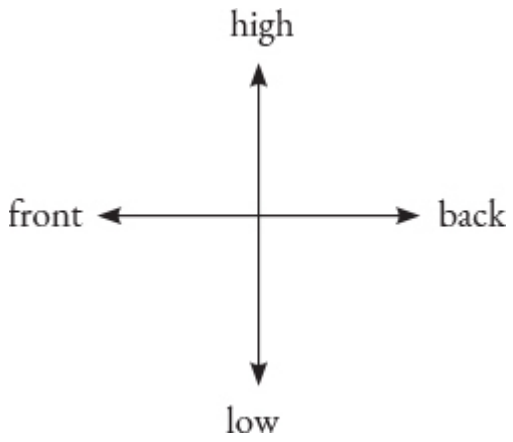
Yet written Middle English was not random or chaotic, far from it! Generally speaking, differences in spelling reflected differences in speech, as writers tried to make the Latin letters (with a French perspective) fit the sounds of their dialect. There were also notable innovations during this period; for example, English writers utilised the digraphs EA and OA to spell vowels that were slightly different from EE and OO. *Meat* and *boat* were pronounced with a tongue slightly lower than in *meet* and *boot*, and the added letter A helped to signal that. We still maintain this reasonable Middle English practice in our modern spellings *eat, sea, steam, oak, coal* and *toad*. Since it was current in speech, this difference in spelling between EA/OA and EE/OO made it into the standard orthography that began to emerge in the 15th century, connected to the arrival of the printing press in England.

The problem is that speech kept changing. The sounds of the EA in *meat* and the EE in *meet* had remained the same up to the era of Shakespeare (who doesn't rhyme such words in his poetry), but they later merged over the course of the 17th century. Nowadays, *meat* and *weak* rhyme with *meet* and *week*. This merger was just one small part of a radical change that spoken English was about to embark on.

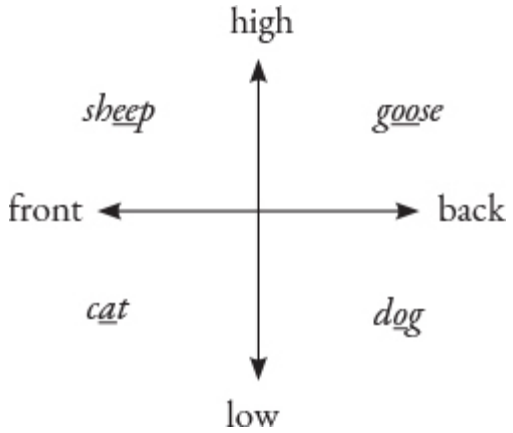
The Great Vowel Shift is a key dividing line between Middle English and the many varieties of Modern English today. That being said, it didn't happen overnight. Instead it is considered to have progressed slowly over

the course of the 15th, 16th and 17th centuries. So, what happened? And why does this particular sound change get to be called ‘great’?

To understand the Great Vowel Shift, we first have to pay attention to our tongues. The tongue is an enormously mobile and versatile muscle. It is of paramount importance in spoken languages, because with the tongue we can create a wide range of sounds. Importantly for our purposes, the possible positions of the tongue are how we produce vowels. For some vowels, the tongue is lifted up to the roof of the mouth; for others, it remains low. For some, we pull the tongue back; for others, we push it forward.



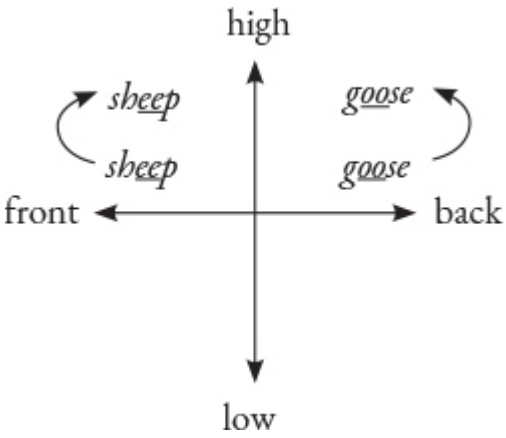
On this crude diagram, I can plot the vowels in certain words in my accent.



▶ Description

The Great Vowel Shift involved a set of connected sound changes, in which many vowels came to be pronounced with a higher tongue position.

As mentioned previously, Old English (and Middle English) made a distinction between short and long versions of the same vowel, and it was only long vowels that were affected by this medieval series of sound changes. *Sheep* and *goose* were two words containing two of the long vowels 'shifted' by the Great Vowel Shift. Before it, they would have sounded more like '*shehhp*' and '*gohhs*'.



▶ Description

Words with short vowels like *cat* and *dog* were left undisturbed.[34] The great change is known as a 'chain shift', in which the shifting of certain long vowels had a knock-on effect on the mouth height of others.[35] Very **low vowels** became mid-low. Mid-**high vowels**, like the one in *goose*, climbed even higher. Words in Middle English that already had high '*oo*' and '*ee*' vowels found themselves stuck at the roof of the mouth, and so shifted into new diphthongs. We can hear one of them in *house*, *flour* and *our*. These were once pronounced like '*hoos*', '*flooer*' and '*oor*' – and still may be in traditional accents of Scotland, far away from the English epicentre of its troublesome neighbour's '*Grit Vool Sheft*'.

It was this shift that phonetically separated different forms of the same word. *Meet* had a long vowel, but *met* did not. So, *meet* drifted away from its past-tense counterpart. This intra-verbal drift also happened in *shoot* and *shot*, *bite* and *bit*, *write* and *written*. The shift widened the gap between singular *child* and plural *children*, only the first of which happened to have a long vowel in Middle English.

Some words managed to avoid the shift by shortening their vowels just in time. The many words spelled with EA show a split in what vowel they have today. Compare *dream, team, leaf* with *bread, dead, head*. The *dream* group shows an expected effect of the Great Vowel Shift. The *bread* group is the result of the shortening of the same Middle English vowel. Since the vowel was short, it escaped the change. The reasons for the shortening in the *bread* group are not clear, but the D that follows the EA has been identified as a common denominator. A similar escape was made by the vowel in *blood*, which does not rhyme with *food* or *good*. Versions of such words with an unshortened vowel did also endure, and can be heard in dialects of English still, but they didn't make it into the standard pronunciation.

Similarly, some common English words went through the same shortening, except after the Great Vowel Shift. This accounts for the difference in the OO between long *goose, proof, tooth, moon* and short *good, foot, look, book, stood*. In the second group, which contains high-frequency words, the vowel has shortened in many accents to an /ʊ/ vowel, also found in *pull* and *full*. This split began only in the 17th century, and its exact causes are still debated. To hear the same words without the split and with the original outcome of the Great Vowel Shift, visit the great English city of Newcastle, where *book* and *look* still rhyme with *spook*.

In sum, wherever there were long vowels in (southern) Middle English, they were targets for the Great Vowel Shift. Not even the alphabet was spared! The names of our letters had long vowels, and so they show its effects. Once, the alphabet would have been pronounced '*ah, beh, seh, deh*', which sounds much closer to the names of the letters in other European languages, like German. This shift of course worked its way to the fifth letter of the alphabet, turning the letter '*ehh*' into the familiar '*ee*'.

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An unplanned consequence of the Great Vowel Shift is the burden it has placed on the letter E. Over the centuries since, signalling a long and shifted vowel has become a function of silent E. At the end of words, it distinguishes a *cap* from a *cape*, a *fir* from a *fire*, or a *mat* from a *mate*. This chapter began with two relevant and E-bearing words: *side* and *time*. Before the Great Vowel Shift they would have been pronounced like *seed* and *team*, and today 'Magic E' tells us not to pronounce them like *Sid* and *Tim*. Even my own surname, *Bate*, benefits from its presence. But why was E

specifically chosen to indicate long vowels? Why is English spelling today so full of these silent signs of the shift? To be honest, this Magic E is a bit of an accident.

Once upon a time, centuries ago, any E at the end of a word would have sounded like a proper, distinct vowel, like the one in *bet* and *error*. However, short vowels at the end of words were losing their phonetic distinctiveness in Old English, and also in Old French across the water. From what we can see in the historical record, a word-final E came to stand for a vowel that is neither high nor low, front nor back.

We refer to this vowel as **schwa**, with the official symbol /ə/. This is the '*uh*' vowel pronounced in casual speech at the beginning of words like *about* and *again*. It is ridiculously common in spoken English today, perhaps even the most common English sound of all. Its status as a **phoneme** of English (one of the building blocks of speech) is debated, and the total number of its occurrences is difficult to count. It's also difficult for me to decide when exactly to introduce schwa in this book, being everywhere in speech yet nowhere in the alphabet. Since it has relevance for the development of Magic E, schwa's moment in the spotlight has come.

Because it was not so present in older stages of English and in influential languages like Latin, schwa lacks its own dedicated letter. It can be spelled with an A (as in *appear*), an E (*excellent*), an I (*similar*), an O (*police*) or a U (*suppose*). Schwa is consequently responsible for a lot of spelling 'mistakes'. It has for many speakers made the vowels in *complement* and *compliment*, *surprise* and *suppose*, and *could've* and *could of* sound the same.

What then is the pattern? When can we expect to hear and say schwa? The sounds of English, like those of any spoken language, are arranged into **syllables**. These are the beats of a word. Like musical beats, you can clap to them. *Language* has two syllables (*lan-guage*), *linguistic* has three (*lin-gui-stic*), and the word *one* appropriately has just one syllable.

The thing is, our mouths don't give all syllables the same care and attention. Whenever English words have syllables that are pronounced quickly and not fully – what we call 'unstressed' syllables – their vowel loses its distinctive qualities and a bland schwa tends to appear instead. For example, a schwa can be heard twice in the word *banana*, in the first and third syllable. Only the second A in *banana*, which belongs to the stressed syllable of the word, is actually pronounced like an *aah* sound.

Since we think about sounds so much in terms of the letters that spell them, awareness of schwa is not widespread. Yet it is one of the most, if not the most distinctive English sound, and something that the language's adult learners may fail to get the hang of. They will be left with a distinctly un-English-sounding accent when they replace a schwa with the sound that the spelling directs them to say. They may pronounce *thousand* as if it rhymes with *hand*, or *sofa* as if the second, unstressed syllable should sound like *far*, or *information* as if it straightforwardly rhymes with *in formation*. Once you have mastered schwa, I dare say you have mastered English.

* * *

We can return now to Magic E. Following its reduction into a simple schwa, it was not difficult for an E at the end of Middle English words to disappear from pronunciation altogether. This fall into phonetic oblivion seems to have happened around the end of the 14th century. A word like *time* (once pronounced like '*teama*' and later '*teamuh*') now sounded just like *team*. However, the final E was not dropped from the spelling, because it had gained a new function. To show that a vowel was pronounced long, Middle English writers had two choices: they could double the relevant letter, or they could use a final E.

Doubling letters for long vowels seems very logical, and is something we see with other languages, such as Finnish. Finnish, a Finno-Ugric language totally unrelated to English, constantly uses double letters to represent long vowels in speech (and also long consonants). For example, the formal way to greet someone in Finnish is *hyvää päivää* ('good day'). To say you're sorry is *anteeksi*. The practice has a long history in English spelling too, both before and after the Great Vowel Shift. Following occasional uses in Old English sources, Middle English scribes doubled vowel letters very consistently – not only E and O, but also I and A. We find spellings like *plaas* (for *place*) and *wiis* (for *wise*) during this period.[36]

Yet why should a final E serve the same purpose? For now, I will only give the unsatisfactory answer that many words with final E also happened to have a long vowel. The two were therefore closely associated, even after the written E stopped being pronounced. We'll return to this association in more detail in Chapter N.

This dilemma between doubling letters or using Magic E is a source of the confusion in modern spelling. Both practices had their logic, but English writers then and ever since have chosen to maintain both. The former

practice we still see in *moon* and *sheep*, the latter in *tide* and *tape*. Some words have even jumped from one to the other, since they usually spell the same sound; *heel* is pretty consistently written *hele* throughout the Middle English period, yet switches to the doubled group in the 16th century. Here, then, is an example of how modern spelling suffers not from a lack of consistency, but rather from an excess of it. The two ways to spell a long vowel have been in competition for the same job since Middle English.

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This chapter has been a whirlwind whizz through the history of the English language, covering material that usually takes a whole term for linguistics students at university. From now on, the book can take a more leisurely look at our letters.

We now have the skeleton of the alphabet's story in place, from its Egyptian origins to its English-shifted sounds. With the Great Vowel Shift, English becomes recognisably modern in its sounds, and also in how it uses the letters of the alphabet. It was in this new state that English would become the global language that it is today. It went from being a language of the southern regions of an island in the Atlantic, to one estimated to have 400 million native speakers spread around the world. This rise to worldwide status was of course achieved through the movement of people – specifically through settlement and colonisation, as first happened in Jamestown, Virginia in 1607. When those men of the London Company first landed on North American soil, their language would have been completely identical to the speech they had left behind. Yet wherever English has settled, it has continued to change.

So far, we have also encountered key themes in the history behind the alphabet, such as the role that innovation and conversation play in determining how we write things down. There are so many features of English spelling that result from phonetic ingenuity, making old symbols work better for a new language, but there is also a place for looking back and simply accepting things as they are. We will meet these themes again in the subsequent chapters, but for the moment, we should pause and reflect on the letter E – once an ordinary letter of the alphabet, chosen by fate to become essential for spelling English today.