Of sundry folk as I shall you devyse / And thus ye wot that ony Evangelist

That tellith us the peyne of Ihu Crist

Ne saith all thing as his felawes doth / But yet his sentence is all soth.

And alle accorden as in her sentence

All be there in here telling difference / For som of them more and som lesse.

When thei his pitous passion expresse

I mene of Marc Mathew Luke and John / But douteles her sentence is all

Therfor lordinges alle I you beseche

If that you thinke that I varye in my speche / As thus if I telle somwhat more.

Of proverbes than ye have herd before

Comprehendid in this litill tretice here / To enforce the effect of my matere.

And thouz I nat the same wordes seye

As ye han herd yet to alle you I praye / Blameth nouzt me for as in my senten

Yet shall ye fynde difference

For this sentence of this tretice lite / After which this mery tale I write.

And herkeneth what that I shall say

And late me telle my tale I pray.

Here endith the tale of Maister Chaucer.

And here ye shal fynde a moral tale of Melibe an

yong man callid Melibe

myzty and riche begat his wif that cal upon

led was Prudence a douzter which that

callid was Sophie upon a day befel that he

for his disport he went in to the feldes

him to pley his wif and eke his douzter

hath he left withynne his hous of

Lost in translation

In the beginning was the word... English has changed dramatically over the centuries, and understanding the language of the past can help give voice to our ancestors, says **David Crystal**

ONE OF THE THINGS YOU NOTICE, when you're researching ancestry, is that the further back in time you go, the less familiar the language becomes. So it can pay you to become a bit of a philologist – a word that has itself undergone something of a transformation over the years, from its original meaning of a lover of words, to today's more common usage as someone who studies the history of languages.

It's important to note that when looking at the language in Britain, we're talking about languages, in the plural, and we don't just mean Welsh and Gaelic. Go back far enough in time and you'll be hard-pressed to find any documents in English at all. When the Normans arrived, the official language of the English aristocracy became French, and it stayed that way until the 13th century, when it was gradually replaced by English. Latin was an important language too, being used as the chief language of religion, education, and learning. The Domesday Book was not written in English, but in Latin.

After William I, we don't find an official document written in English until a proclamation by Henry III in 1258. And the first time parliament was opened by a speech in English (as opposed to French) was as late as 1362. In the same session of parliament, a Statute of Pleading was approved that allowed members to use English when debating. In 2009, a group in Winchester, who are currently planning the world's first English Language Museum in that city, thought this was so important that they decided to call 13 October 'English Language Day', in memory of that moment in 1362. Who knows it might well catch on, and you can read more about their plans at **www.englishproject.org**.

The official language of the English aristocracy was French, until the 13th century

Perhaps it would have been more correct to say: 'go back far enough and you'll be hard-pressed to find any documents you *recognise* as English', because before the Norman Conquest the language we encounter is not readily intelligible to people today without some training. Old English is the name of the language introduced into the British Isles by the Anglo-Saxon invaders, who first arrived in 449 AD. You can get a feel for it by reading a familiar text, such as the Lord's Prayer. It's definitely English, rather than any other language, but there are lots of differences.

An example of Middle English from an early edition of *The Canterbury Tales* from the 15th century

THE ART ARCHIVE / BODLEIAN LIBRARY OXFORD

Documents in Old English have survived from the 8th century, and there are some earlier inscriptions too. Several of them will be on display in an English language exhibition to be held at the British Library in London later this year (from November 2010 to April 2011).

Old English evolved into Middle English during the 11th and 12th centuries. When we read documents in the next two centuries, the language feels much more like modern English – and it looks more like it too. Most people have no difficulty understanding these lines from Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, written towards the end of the 14th century, despite the old spellings and the occasional word in an unusual form (such as *fro* for from, *riden* for ride):

A knyght ther was, and that a worthy man,
That fro the tyme that he first bigan
To riden out, he loved chivalrie,
Trouthe and honour, fredom and curteisie.

LOVE OF LETTERS

The old Anglo-Saxon letters died out in Middle English, leaving only a hint of their existence behind. When you see a sign saying 'Ye Olde Tea Shoppe', the first letter is a remnant of the Old English letter thorn (þ), which people no longer recognised, so they misread *þe* ('the') as *ye*.

English spellings changed dramatically once the Norman French scribes got hold of the language. The word we now spell as queen was spelled *cwen* in Old English; however, the French preference was to use qu- to write down the cw- sounds, and that spelling practice remained. Thousands of words came to be spelled in a new way. Names too. Place names in Old English can often look very different in Middle English. *Ceaster*, for example becomes Chester, because the scribes respelled the c of Old English with a ch. You'll find the same change in Chorley, Chelsea, and Cheltenham. Personal names also differ. Many Anglo-Saxon names have died out, such as Beowulf and Eadfrith, but the old spelling obscures the fact that Eadweard, for example, is still with us as Edward.

The Middle English period lasted until the 15th century, when the language began to change very rapidly. William Caxton introduced printing to England in 1476. *The Book of Common Prayer* was written less than a century later. Shakespeare's plays were published half a century further on. In 2011, we will celebrate the 400th anniversary of the publication of the King James Bible. Although the 1611 Bible contains occasional words and phrases that are unfamiliar to modern ➡

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God cr
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eyes and ears, the vast majority of the vocabulary it uses is the same as present-day English:

In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.

However, it's worth noting that the original text wouldn't have looked exactly like that. In 1611 the alphabet was not exactly as it is today. For instance, the letters u and v were still not differentiated, so we find such forms as *vpon* for upon:

In the beginning God created the Heauen, and the Earth. And the earth was without forme, and voyd, and darkenesse was vpon the face of the deepe: and the Spirit of God mooued vpon the face of the waters.

The conflation of u and v is one of the main things you have to watch out for, when reading documents from that time. The modern distinction between i and j had not been made either, so you find such unusual looking spellings as *ianuary* and *iuly*.

LANGUAGE LESSONS

The other point of contrast is that the spellings are different. English spelling was still very idiosyncratic in the 17th century. Even a century later, in the time of Dr Johnson, we find hundreds of differences in the way words were spelled (or should that be spelt?) compared with their present-day spellings. Words ending in -c , for example, were all spelled with -ck, as in *musick* and *publick*; and we find in Johnson's *Dictionary of the*

> In 1661 the letters u and v were still not differentiated so we find forms such as *vpon* for upon

English Language such spellings as *fewel*, *raindeer*, *villany*, and *summersault*. Documents from the 18th century also look very different in the way they used capital letters. Most nouns were given a capital letter, not just names of people and places. To give you an idea here are the first four lines of Jonathan Swift's poem *Baucis and Philemon* (1706):

In antient Time, as Story tells
The Saints would often leave their Cells,
And strole about, but hide their Quality,
To try the People's Hospitality.

As you can see virtually every noun in the poem begins with a capital letter, which to our eyes looks rather odd. This fashion to capitalise died out in print, at least, during the 18th century, but you will still find many domestic letters peppered with capital letters a century later.

But spelling isn't the only aspect of language that has changed. You'll also find that many old documents are punctuated very differently from what we are used to today. English punctuation took a long time to develop. Documents before Caxton had hardly any punctuation at all. And even in the 19th century, printers were still worrying over how best to punctuate texts. So always expect to encounter some idiosyncratic uses of punctuation in any document that is more than a century old.

This is an example from the 18th century: *The answer, is to be found in the Bible.* This punctuation is not modern usage. We no longer put a comma between the subject and the verb in a sentence, even if we would insert a pause in speech. But we will often find people from a few generations ago who still used punctuation marks in their letters to reflect the rhythm of the way they spoke. Some still do.

People misread the Old English word *þe* for ye

WORD OF MOUTH

The most obvious differences in the language of texts over the past 300 years lie in the vocabulary. Thousands of words have gone out of use. Here are some of the words we find in Johnson's dictionary that are no longer with us:

merrythought – wishbone
fopdoodle – fool
smellfeast – human parasite
nappiness – having a nap

The letters of our grandparents and great-grandparents often contain puzzling expressions – though most of them you will find explained in the pages of the great *Oxford English Dictionary* (which can be accessed at **www.oed.com**). Here are some you might find in the first decade of the 1900s:

deevy – delightful
funk-hole – place of safety

ALAMY/HULTON ARCHIVE-GETTY IMAGES

Jeepers! It's a flapper from the flicks with a gasper...

A page from the first edition of the King James Bible

hair-tidy – receptacle for hair combings
landaulette – a type of car with a leather hood above the rear seats
pip-pip – goodbye.
These from the 1910s:
Boche – German soldier
bunny hug – ragtime dance
gasper – cigarette
napoo – finished
phonogram – telegram dictated over the phone.
And these from the 1920s:
bingle – short hairstyle for women
bung-ho – drinking toast
flapper – flighty young woman
flicks – cinema
jeepers – expression of surprise.

Slang words present the greatest problems of understanding. Slang by its nature changes very quickly, and we only have to go back a few decades to meet slang expressions that are meaningless today. Go back a couple of hundred years, and we can be in real trouble, especially if the people we are investigating have a connection with the underworld.

In 1809, George Andrewes published a dictionary of the slang of criminals, to help good citizens 'become acquainted with their mysterious phrases and be better able to frustrate their designs'. A few of his terms for types of criminal we still have today, such as footpads, shoplifters, and swindlers. But what would you make of these, if they turned up in a family history?
Adam Tylers – pickpockets' accomplices
beau-traps – well-dressed sharpers
cloak-twitchers – cloak-snatchers (from off people's shoulders)
clapperdogeons – beggars
duffers – hawkers
divers – pickpockets
dragsmen – vehicle thieves
filers – coin-filers
gammoners – pickpockets' accomplices
kencrackers – housebreakers
lully-priggers – linen-thieves
rum-padders – highwaymen.

Grammar has changed too in recent centuries, though by no means as dramatically as it did 800 years ago. If you have letters from the 1800s, for example, you may well find yourself reading sentences such as these. They are all perfectly understandable, but they all sound quaintly archaic: "Father said we might keep the basket." "That was where boats were used to be found." "I have it not by me." "Mayn't I go with ➡

PERSONAL FILE

SAMUEL JOHNSON

The English author was a poet, essayist, literary critic, biographer and editor, but he is probably best known as a lexicographer

SAMUEL JOHNSON was born in Lichfield, on 18 September 1709, and as Boswell's *Life of Johnson* records, "his initiation into the Christian Church was not delayed; for his baptism is recorded … to have been performed on the day of his birth."

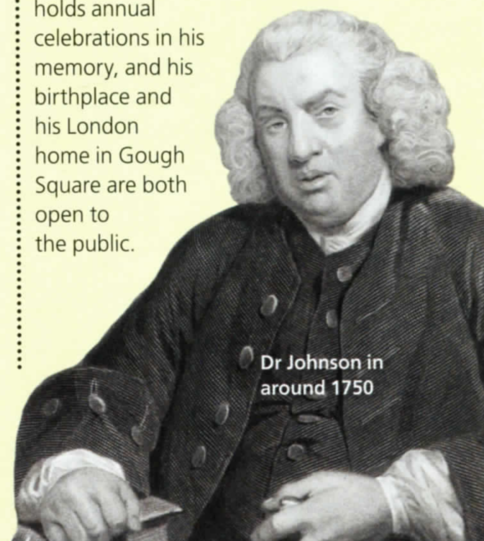
The bookseller's son survived to become one of the most dominant literary figures of the 18th century, and compiler of the great *Dictionary of the English Language*, which presented English words and their meanings in an unprecedented level of philological detail.

He began the project in 1746, and it was eventually published in 1755, priced £4.10s. It continued to be reprinted until the 1880s, and it only began to lose its authority with the arrival of the 'new' English dictionary, edited by James Murray, the forerunner of the present-day Oxford English Dictionary.

In the 18th century, he was known by the name Dictionary Johnson

In 1783 Johnson suffered a stroke that temporarily robbed him of speech but left him able to write. He died on 13 December 1784, and was buried a week later in Westminster Abbey. He was granted an honorary doctorate by Oxford in 1775, thus receiving the title by which he has come to be most widely known today: Dr Johnson. But in the 18th century, he was known by another name: Dictionary Johnson.

The Samuel Johnson Society in Lichfield, holds annual celebrations in his memory, and his birthplace and his London home in Gough Square are both open to the public.



Dr Johnson in around 1750

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Old place names

Names reflect England's changing language

A KNOWLEDGE of the history of place-names (toponomastics) is invaluable when investigating family history. Often, a person's surname derives from a location. Over time, John from Lincoln becomes John Lincoln. Jane living below a hill becomes Jane Underhill. Someone called Shaw once lived by a wood (from Old English *sceaga*), and you will often discover spelling variants, such as in Farn(s)worth and Kirkland/Kirtland.

Each wave of invaders brought with it its own naming practices. The Vikings settled all over the eastern side of England, establishing hundreds of villages ending in -by – the Norse word for 'farmstead' – Derby, Rugby, Grimsby… and many of these names also ended up as surnames.

French names flourished in the early Middle Ages. A common pattern was to name someone as coming from ('de') a place. So we find William de Paris (modern surname, Parish) and Alexander de Leycestre (modern Lester). Anyone called Delamere (or Dollymore, Dallimore, De La Mare...) had an ancestor who lived by a pool (from Old French *la mare).*

Each wave of invaders brought with it its own naming practices

When investigating old place-names, a useful strategy is to become as familiar as possible with the elements from which they are made. Here are a few Anglo-Saxon ones:
ham – homestead, as in Birmingham and Nottingham
ing – people of, as in Reading and Worthing
ceaster – Roman town, fort, as in Chester and Lancaster
beorg – burial mound, hill, as in places ending in -borough or -burgh
leah – clearing, glade, as in places ending in -leigh or -ly
tun – enclosure, village, as in places ending in -ton or -town

Many English surnames have their origins in place names

Stuart Hibbert's recognisable voice became synonymous with the BBC

you?' "It was quite too adorable." They're the kind of thing we might come across in a novel by Jane Austen or Mrs Gaskell. We can certainly hear echoes of *Cranford* in their phrases.

SOUNDS FAMILIAR

Pronunciation has changed too, of course – as we regularly hear today whenever we listen to an old radio or television programme. BBC announcers from the 1920s and 30s sound oddly clipped when we hear them today. We can actually hear recordings of people speaking that go back as far as Florence Nightingale – one of the first people to have their voice recorded. You can hear her on a CD issued by the British Library, along with other 19th-century voices such as Gladstone.

The voices of the 19th century sound very much like those of today, except that the pronunciation of many words has altered. They didn't say balcony, in those days, with the stress on the bal, but 'bal-coh-nee'. A word like lord would have sounded more like 'lard', daughter like 'darter'.

One of the most interesting experiments of the 2000s was the productions of two of Shakespeare's plays at the Globe Theatre in London using the 'original pronunciation' – the accents that would have been used around the year 1600. How do we know what these sounded like? Well, the chief evidence lies in the rhymes, puns, and spellings. Often when we read or see a Shakespeare play we hear a pair of lines that are supposed to rhyme – but they don't. Here's an example, from one of Puck's speeches in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*:

Then will two at once woo one –
That must needs be sort alone

Today, one and alone don't rhyme, and the lines jar in a modern accent. But in Shakespeare's day they would have rhymed: one was pronounced as 'own'. You can hear examples of how the poems and plays would have sounded at the website **www.pronouncingshakespeare.com**.

Philology involves the study of all aspects of language – sounds, spellings, punctuation, grammar, and vocabulary. The more we know about the history of our language, the more we will get out of the historical documents we read. Language is an essential part of the exploration into who we think we are, and is key to understanding the nature of our ancestry. ■

David Crystal is honorary professor of linguistics at the University of Wales, Bangor and one of the world's leading language experts

ALAMY/BBC