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Opening Extract from...

The Story of English in 100 Words

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And

an early abbreviation (8th century)

Early in the 8th century, monks at the monastery of St Augustine in Canterbury wrote out a long list of English translations of Latin words, in roughly alphabetical order. Towards the end, in the section on words beginning with U, we find the Latin phrase *ultraque citroque* – in modern English we'd say 'hither and thither'. The scribe must have been feeling tired that day, because he glosses it wrongly as *hider ond hider*. The second *h* should have been a *d*. But the phrase is interesting for a different reason: *ond* is an old way of spelling *and*. Doubtless the Anglo-Saxons used the word a lot in their speech, as we do today; but in these ancient glossaries we see it written down for the first time.

Why get so excited over a 'little word' like *and*? In most wordbooks, it's the 'content words' that attract all the attention – the words that have an easily statable meaning, like *elephant* and *caravan* and *roe*. The books tend not to explore the 'grammatical words' – those linking the units of content to make up sentences, such as *in*, *the* and *and*. That's a pity, because these 'little words' have played a crucial role in the development of English. Apart from anything else, they're the most frequently occurring words, so they're in our eyes and ears all the time. In our eyes? The four commonest written words in modern English are *the*, *of*, *and* and *a*. In our ears? The four

commonest spoken words are *the*, *I*, *you* and *and*. In Old English, *and* is there from the very beginning, and when it appears it's often abbreviated.

We tend to shorten very common words when we write them. *It is* becomes *it's*. *Very good* becomes *v good*. *You* becomes *u* (especially in internet chat and texting). *Postscript* becomes *PS*. The shortened form of *and* is so common that it's even been given its own printed symbol: &, the 'ampersand'. The modern symbol is historically a collapsed version of the Latin word *et*: the bottom circle is what's left of the *e*, and the rising tail on the right is what's left of the *t*. The word *ampersand* is a collapsed form too: it was originally *and per se and* – a sort of shorthand for saying 'ampersand = and'.

When did people start shortening *and*? We find it in some of the earliest Old English manuscripts. It's written with a symbol that looks a bit like a modern number 7, but with the vertical stroke descending below the line. In some documents, such as wills and chronicles, where strings of words are linked by 'and', we can see 7s all over the page. They're especially noticeable when they appear at the beginning of a sentence.

And at the beginning of a sentence? During the 19th century, some schoolteachers took against the practice of beginning a sentence with a word like *but* or *and*, presumably because they noticed the way young children often overused them in their writing. But instead of gently weaning the children away from

overuse, they banned the usage altogether! Generations of children were taught they should ‘never’ begin a sentence with a conjunction. Some still are.

There was never any authority behind this condemnation. It isn’t one of the rules laid down by the first prescriptive grammarians. Indeed, one of those grammarians, Bishop Lowth, uses dozens of examples of sentences beginning with *and*. And in the 20th century, Henry Fowler, in his famous *Dictionary of Modern English Usage*, went so far as to call it a ‘superstition’. He was right. There are sentences starting with *And* that date back to Anglo-Saxon times. We’ll find them in Chaucer, Shakespeare, the King James Bible, Macaulay and in every major writer. *And God said, Let there be light ...* Joining sentences in this way has been part of the grammatical fabric of English from the very beginning. That’s one of the lessons the story of *and* teaches us.



Loaf

an unexpected origin (9th century)

Something to eat; something to drink. Words to do with nutrition always play an important part in language history. In particular, the essential role of bread in society, known since prehistoric times, is reflected in a variety of idioms. In English, it can stand for ‘food’, as in *breadwinner* and the plea for *daily bread* (in the Lord’s Prayer). It can mean ‘money’. It can

identify a state of mind (*knowing on which side one's bread is buttered*) or a level of achievement (*the best thing since sliced bread*).

The surprising thing is that *bread* didn't have its modern meaning in Old English. In one of the word-lists compiled by Anglo-Saxon monks, we find *breadru* translating Latin *frustra* – 'bits, pieces, morsels'. What seems to have happened is that the word came to be applied to 'pieces of bread' and eventually to 'bread' as a substance. It's still used in this way in some dialects: you might still hear someone in Scotland asking for *a piece*, meaning 'a piece of bread'.

So how did the Anglo-Saxons talk about bread? In another list we find a word from the Bible, *manna*, translated by the phrase *heofenlic hlaf* – 'heavenly bread'. We would know *hlaf* today as *loaf*. The *h* stopped being pronounced at the end of the Anglo-Saxon period, and the long 'ah' vowel gradually changed into an 'oh' vowel during the Middle Ages. While that was happening, *hlaf* came to be more restricted in meaning, eventually being used for just the undivided, shaped amount of bread that we now call a *loaf*.

There are very few instances of the word *bread* in Old English, but *hlaf* appears frequently – and in some interesting combinations. The head of a household was seen as the person who provides bread for all, a *hlaf-weard*, literally a 'bread-warden'. A servant or dependant was someone who ate his

bread: a *hlaf-æta*, ‘bread-eater’. A steward was a *hlaf-brytta*, a ‘bread-distributor’. A lady was originally a *hlæfdige*, ‘bread-kneader’. That *-dige* ending is related to the modern word *dough*.

Hlaf turned up quite a lot in Christian religious settings too. *Lammas* was 1st August, the day when the eucharistic bread was first baked from the new harvest. That name comes from *hlaf-mæsse*, ‘loaf-mass’. Walking to the altar to receive the host was a *hlaf-gang*, a ‘bread-going’. Bethlehem, where Jesus Christ was born, was a *hlaf-hus*, a ‘house of bread’.

Hlaf-weard changed its form in the 14th century. People stopped pronouncing the *f*, and the two parts of the word blended into one, so that the word would have sounded something like ‘lahrd’. Eventually this developed into *laird* (in Scotland) and *lord*. It’s rather nice to think that the ‘high status’ meanings of *lord* in modern English – master, prince, sovereign, judge – all have their origins in humble bread. And it’s the unexpectedness of this etymology that qualifies *loaf* to take its place in this book.

Loaf then went on new linguistic journeys. Different kinds of loaves appeared, such as *white loaf* and *brown loaf*. Several derived forms were coined, such as *loaflets* and *mini-loafs* (small loaves), *loaf-shaped* and *loaf-tin*. The shape generated a range of non-bread uses, such as *meat loaf* and *sugar-loaf*. There were technical senses too, such as the religious use of *holy loaf* (for bread distributed at Mass).

But nobody could have predicted the 20th-century