

# Believe it or not, English was once a minor language

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In 1600, English was a minor language in the world, with fewer than four million native speakers.

It didn't have any important role as a foreign or second language outside the British Isles. English was basically just the native language of the indigenous population of most of England, and the south and east of Scotland.

In 1600 it wasn't spoken in most of Cornwall, where they spoke Cornish, or in Welsh-speaking parts of Shropshire and Herefordshire.

Ireland was mainly Irish Gaelic speaking; nearly all of Wales was Welsh speaking; natives of the Highlands and Hebridean Islands of Scotland spoke Gaelic; Orkney and Shetland inhabitants spoke Scandinavian Norn; Manx was the language of the Isle of Man, and on the Channel Islands they spoke Norman French.

During the 1600s this situation changed dramatically with an explosive spread of English across the Atlantic Ocean. This process led in the end to the death of very large numbers of the indigenous languages of the Western Hemisphere.

The history of the anglicisation of the Western Hemisphere is complicated,



■ Jamestown in Virginia, USA, where the first sizeable group of native English speakers outside the UK was established. Picture: ANJOE FUDGE

involving competition between Spanish, Dutch, French, and English. Some of the expansion was the result of large-scale, planned, official attempts at colonisation.

Other English-speaking settlements happened as a result of haphazard settlements by refugees, pirates, runaway slaves, sailors, shipwrecked mariners and passengers, and deserters from the English army of Oliver Cromwell which had captured Jamaica from the Spanish in the 1650s.

The first place where any sizeable group of native speakers of English was successfully established outside the British Isles was the 1607 Jamestown settlement in Virginia, in what is now the USA. This successful colony had been preceded by an unsuccessful one on

Roanoke Island (now in North Carolina), which had been organised by Sir Walter Raleigh in the 1580s. In 1587 the governor of the Roanoke colony returned to England for help, leaving 117 colonists behind. He was delayed by the Spanish Armada and was not able to return until 1590, only to find the settlement had been abandoned.

No one knows what happened to the colonists: their fate is a mystery. But one theory has it that they assimilated with a group of local Native American Indians: there is a tradition that the modern Lumbee Indians of North Carolina are their descendants. Some reports even suggest that when the Lumbee were first encountered by Europeans, they were already speaking English...