

Being able to enjoy a mardle is quite a new concept

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■ The way we speak today and the way these Norfolk fishermen spoke many years ago can be traced back to southern Scandinavia where the Proto-Germanic language was formed.

I'm sitting at my laptop, in the county of Norfolk, about 17 miles from the North Sea, writing about English, in English.

That's a very new thing to be able to do. I don't mean because laptops are a recent invention. And I don't mean because people of relatively humble origins like me have only recently known how to write. What I mean is that the English language itself is very recent. Human language is probably about 200,000 years old; but English hasn't been around for even 1pc of that time.

Five thousand years ago there was no such language as "English" – not even here in Norfolk which, I reckon, is where English was born. But there's an important way in which the language I'm writing in did already exist then – there actually was a language which BECAME English. Five thousand years ago, the language-which-became-English wasn't spoken anywhere in Britain. You would've had to travel eastwards from Norfolk at least 500 miles across the North Sea to hear the forerunner of modern English spoken. Around 2,500 BC, the linguistic ancestors of modern English speakers were in southern Scandinavia – in southern Sweden and on the Danish islands, in

the region where Copenhagen and Malmö are today.

During the millennia since, the language they spoke there has changed so much, as languages do, that if we could hear it today it would be unrecognisable and incomprehensible. But the English dialect I grew up speaking in Norfolk, on the other side of the North Sea, really is a direct descendant of that ancient language of southern Scandinavia – a descendant passed down directly from one generation to another over centuries.

We've got no idea what name the speakers of that language had for it – if it had a name at all – but today linguists call it Proto-Germanic. Two hundred genera-

tions later, my native language is called English by its speakers. But there's a direct line of transmission from the one language to the other. Proto-Germanic no longer exists, but it hasn't died out. It's simply become transformed, over the millennia, into English – and also Dutch, Afrikaans, Frisian, German, Yiddish, Swedish, Danish, Norwegian, Icelandic and Faroese, the sister languages of English in the Germanic language family.

It's very hard to imagine what the lives of our linguistic ancestors 200 generations back were like.

But we owe them our language. If they hadn't spoken like that, we wouldn't be speaking like this.