

Yes or no... help us shed light on two little words

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■ So, is it raining? Jearse!

Picture: GETTY IMAGES.

though we are not sure about their geographical spread. In fact, we would welcome information from EDP readers about this, and about whether these words are still being used by younger people today. You can, if you like, let Stephen know at www.stephenhowe.info/survey/

The first word is the negative form "dow!". It rhymes with now and is said with very emphatic intonation. This was certainly very common when I was growing up in Norwich. It meant something like "No, of course not!". You might hear: "Ha' you done your hoomwork yet? – Dow!" (= No, don't be daft, of course I haven't!)

The other word is a version of yes.

Stephen spells it jearse, and it rhymes with fierce. It, too, is used emphatically. "Are you gawn out Saturday night? – Jearse! (= Yes, of course, obviously, naturally, you needn't have bothered to ask)".

We can't be sure about the origins of these terms, but Stephen suggests that jearse could well be derived from "dear, yes" in the sense of "oh dear me yes". Similarly, dow might be derived from "dear, no". But the truth is we are not sure.

Anyway, what we'd like to know is whether these forms were used all over Norfolk, eastern Cambridgeshire, northern Suffolk and maybe beyond. And are they still in use?

I have written before about how English used to have two different ways of saying yes. "Yea" was the normal word; but when you were disagreeing with something, you would say "yes". For instance, if someone said "It isn't raining" when it actually was, you would reply "Yes!", meaning "Yes it is raining – you're wrong".

We also used to have two different words for no: nay and no. "Nay" was the negative form most usually employed: "Are you ready? – Nay [I'm not]". "No" was only used if you were agreeing with something negative someone else had said: "You're not ready? – No [you're right]".

Modern English is much more boring, since we have lost those interesting distinctions, with yea and nay being archaic forms most of us have heard of but whose special meanings are no longer known.

But here in East Anglia we do have an extra layer of sophistication in connection with yes and no. Dr Stephen Howe, a linguist who grew up in Soham, has been doing some interesting work on two different yes and no words which seem to be peculiarly East Anglian,