

Ditching a vowel – and its effect on the Norfolk dialect

Peter
Trudgill



email: newsdesk@archant.co.uk

In Norfolk, until recently, we used to have two different vowels corresponding to the single long “a” vowel of most other kinds of English. This is because, up until the 17th century, all forms of English used to have two different vowels. Most dialects then gradually lost the difference between the two, while we kept it. It’s mostly possible to tell which word had which vowel by looking at the spelling. This is because the spelling reflects the original Medieval English pronunciation.

In the old Norfolk accent, words which are spelt with ay, ai or ei – like day, may, praise, maid, raise, eight, weight – were pronounced with a diphthong (a vowel which begins with one sound and ends with another). Our vowel in day sounds rather like it begins with the short “a” vowel of cat and ends with the long “e” vowel of me. It’s not very different from the way these words are pronounced in other parts of southern England.

But words like gate, face, tape, lake, safe, which are spelt with a_e, were pronounced with a pure vowel (a monophthong). This vowel was rather similar to the one used in these words in some dialects of north-



■ Over the years we have come to pronounce wade and weighed the same.

Pictures: LIBRARY

air: “fairce” = face; but this spelling can be rather confusing for people like Scots or Americans who pronounce the r in words like fear. Perhaps the best way to describe the vowel is to say that it’s rather like the short “e” vowel of get, only longer: gate is pronounced like a longer version of get.

So in the Norfolk dialect, pairs of words like the following were not pronounced the same: daze and days, made and maid, wade and weighed, gaze and gays, gate and gait, graze and grevs, place and plaice, tale and

thong in both sets of words, so that daze now has the same vowel that was originally used in days.

This has led some Norfolk dialect supporters to erroneously write the Norfolk dialect using incorrect spellings like dairze for days and plaired for played. These are mistakes of a kind which are called “hyperdialectisms” – trying to speak or write the dialect but overdoing it!

A good way to avoid this hyperdialectism is to remember the different spell-