

We've all forgotten our weskets from our waistcoats

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Education didn't become compulsory in England until 1880, and then only for 5-10 year-olds. Authors like Arnold Bennett and H. G. Wells didn't start writing for general mass consumption until about 1900, because it was only then that there were enough people who could read for pleasure. And we didn't get to a situation where nearly all adults could read until well into the 20th century.

It's interesting that this widespread literacy then began having an effect on the English language itself. It wasn't a very major effect, but from the 1920s onwards it did start having an influence on the way people pronounced certain words. There began to be a rise in what linguists call "spelling pronunciations". Because of the hostile attitude in this country to local ways of speaking, people had been made to feel uneasy about their own natural speech. So if you didn't feel entirely sure about how you "ought" to pronounce a



■ A man wearing a wesket - or as we would call it now - a waistcoat.

particular word, you might change your natural pronunciation to one which seemed more like the spelling, to be on the safe side. Not with very common words - no one started pronouncing the 'g' in 'night'. But other words were changed,

first by people who were particularly linguistically insecure, and then gradually by everybody else. In 1920, nobody pronounced 'handkerchief' like we do today. Everyone used to say "hankercha". No one used to pronounce 'waistcoat' as 'waist-coat'. The normal pronunciation was 'wesket'. And 'forehead' was not 'fore-head' but 'forrid'.

Americans, because of their greater insecurity - after all, a majority of them descend from people who weren't English-speakers - are even worse at this than we are. They pronounce the 'l' in 'salmon'. And Irish people say 'Anthony' with a 'th' sound instead of a 't'.

But here in East Anglia we are not immune to spelling pronunciations. Lots of people now say 'Low-ess-toft' when the real pronunciation is 'Lowst'ff'; 'Norritch' for Norwich instead of 'Norridge'. And 'Ail-sh'm' for Aylsham when it should be 'Elsh'm' - which is what I've always said. But I must confess that I'm wrong too. The proper pronunciation is 'Elss'm'. The original Old English name was 'Ægel's ham', where Ægel was a man's name, and 'ham' was the same as the modern word 'home', and meant 'homestead'. So the s and the h were in different words and were not pronounced 'sh'. The same is true of North Walsham. My Granny always called it 'Wals'm'. She was right.