

The letter that has seen a change in pronunciation

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■ The letter H - but do you pronounce it 'aitch' or 'haitch'?

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There are 26 letters in the alphabet we use for writing English. Some of these letters are redundant.

We could easily abolish C, and use K and S instead: cathedral sity would work alright. X is a bit pointless too - we could write boks instead of box.

We could also, though, do with some extra letters, since we have no way of indicating the difference between the initial consonants of thy and thigh. And we have to write our single sh and ch sounds with two letters.

Mostly, the names we give our letters correspond to the speech sound the letter stands for: the name of the letter B begins with a b sound, and the name of the letter F has an f sound in it.

But there are exceptions. W does not have a w sound in its name, whereas the letter Y does! And in this part of the world, there is no "r" in the name of the letter R - we call it "ah" - even if Bristolians, Scots, Americans and Irish people do pronounce the r.

Another exception is the letter H, which

is called aitch - there is no aitch in aitch. Except that, now, there are quite a lot of people who do pronounce it "haitch", as you have probably noticed.

Nearly all of them seem to be under 35. On the train from Norwich to London, you can tell how old the buffet car staff are from whether they inform the passengers over the intercom that you can get a coffee in coach aitch or coach haitch.

The only exception that I know to this age differentiation is that haitch has always been the normal form in the Irish Republic, and among people who went to Catholic schools in Northern Ireland. In

the bad old days, it was said that you could be stopped in the streets of Belfast by men carrying guns, and ordered to recite the alphabet.

Australian Catholics tend to say haitch as well.

But why have so many younger people here in England started saying "haitch"?

It seems like a mistake, doesn't it? But of course it also makes the name of this letter fit into the general pattern that we use with our other letters. And perhaps some schoolteachers use that name because they think it will help small children with learning to read and write.