It takes two to make a word – but that W still remains

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I think we can agree that there is something odd about the spelling of the word two. It's the same thing which is odd about sword, and answer – and Norwich. These words have a letter w in the spelling, but the w is not present in the pronunciation. This is because we used to pronounce the w in words like this but it has been lost over the centuries through language change.

In Old English the masculine form of the numeral two was twegen, while the feminine and neuter form was twa – which is the form that our modern word two descends from.

The w is still retained in most of the languages which are closely related to English, such as Scots, where two is 'twa'. In German the word is 'zwei'. In Dutch and Afrikaans it's 'twee'; in Frisian 'twa'; in Swedish 'två'; in Icelandic 'tvö'; and in Faroese 'tvey'. But the Danish word for two, which is 'to', has lost the w just like English. The original tw does actually survive in English, though, in many related words. Twelve was originally 'two-left' – that is, 'two are left if you subtract 10'. Twenty is two tens. Twice, obviously, means two times; and twins refers to two children born together.

■ The word twin is derived from Old English, and is similar to other words meaning "two".

Twain, an archaic word which still survives in phrases such as "never the twain shall meet" and splitting something "in twain", comes from the Old English masculine form twegen.

Twine goes back to an Old English form meaning double thread, where the threads have been twisted – another related word – together. Twill was also originally a cloth woven from such double thread. And the first meaning of twig was fork – a branch which divided into two.

Between and betwixt are derived from Old English forms of the number two preceded by be-, which was a reduced form of bi, modern by. In Norfolk we also have the forms atween and atwixt, which go back to an Old English form with an 'on-' rather than bi.

We have also kept the w in another set of words, where it appears as u. Ancient Proto-Indo-European dwo meaning two was the source not only of Old English twa but also of Latin duo.

This Latin form appears in some words which we have borrowed from the classical language or from Italian, such as duality and duet.

So English has a dual origin for words related to two.