

# O my... those Normans do have a lot to answer for

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■ Ovington, Uvington or Ovvington? Blame the Normans for the difficulty.

There are things to be grateful to the Normans for – Norwich Cathedral, for a start.

But they did cause us problems when they first arrived in 1066, and they're still causing us problems.

Here's one example.

The normal way of representing the short u sound in English is with the letter u, as in cup, up, butter. But, mysteriously, there are some words where we don't use a u and spell them with an o instead: above, come, dove, honey, London, love, monk, some, son, wonder...

Why on earth do we do that? For children learning to read, and for foreigners, this is a problem.

How are you supposed to know that "on" is on but "son" is son?

To explain this strange state of affairs, we can look at the spelling used by our Anglo-Saxon forebears.

Their orthography was much more sensible. In Old English, above was "abufan", come was "cuman", dove "dufe", honey "hunig", London "Lunden", love "lufu", monk "munuc", some "sum", son "sunu", and wonder "wundor".

So why did the Normans start messing things up by abandoning this perfectly

sensible Anglo-Saxon system, and starting to use a letter which normally stood for the o sound, as in "on", to stand for the u sound, as in "son"?

The clue comes from noting that, in each of the words I've listed, the letter o comes before an m, v, or n.

The Norman scribes used a system of joined-up handwriting where, if you had too many u's and v's and m's and n's together, you couldn't tell where one letter stopped and another started.

If the kind people at the EDP will print "umununum" for me, you will be able to see the breaks between the letters.

But if you imagine how it would look in certain styles of handwriting, you can

work out what the problem would have been.

So by writing o instead of u, the scribes made texts easier to read, even if that made the spelling more difficult.

Because this "o" spelling is misleading, problems are occurring today with place-names, because non-local people come along and are, well, misled.

Ovington near Watton was, in Anglo-Saxon times, the settlement (-tun) of the people (-ing-) of a man called Ufa; the name used to be spelt Uvington, and was pronounced with the short u.

But these days, I'm told, there are people who call it "Ovvington".

Blame the Normans.