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Researchers to unlock distinctive West Midlands accent

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The region's linguistic heritage is set to be explored in a new research project comparing the way today's West Midlands residents speak to text from an ancient medieval manuscript originating from the area. The research by the University of Birmingham is looking at how far people in the region share the language of their predecessors captured in the Vernon Manuscript, the biggest surviving late-medieval English manuscript.

Written in the West Midlands dialect around 1400AD, the lavishly illustrated Vernon Manuscript contains more than 350 texts spread over 700 pages and weighs a whopping 22kg, the equivalent of a checked-in suitcase. Comprising of a collection of poetry and prose, the manuscript was created by two regional scribes aiming to make religious texts accessible to local non-Latin speakers, telling the stories in a way that will challenge modern readers' expectations of such texts.

The researchers are hosting a number of sessions across the West Midlands inviting residents to view images of pages from the manuscript and read some of the texts, putting today's accents to the test and unlocking the origins of the distinctive West Midlands dialect. Significant sounds from today's dialect which researchers think may stem from this period include:

- Use of 'er' instead of 'she' which derives from the word 'heo', meaning 'she' in West Midlands Medieval English
- The local pronunciation of 'you' may originate from the Middle English 'ow'
- The characteristic and often ridiculed pronunciation of 'ee' sounds as 'ay', which appears to feature in the West Midlands medieval accent, with 'lady' rhyming with 'say'
- The tendency, especially amongst Black Country speakers, for 'a' sounds to be articulated as 'o', such as 'mon' instead of 'man'

Example readings from the manuscripts can be accessed by downloading the following MP3 files:

- **Professor Wendy Scase reading from the Vernon Manuscript (MP3 - 14.1MB) (/Audio/news/wendy-scase-vernon.wav)**
- **The Birth of Christ in the Stable (MP3 - 2.44MB) (/Audio/news/christ-stable.mp3)**
- **This World Fares as a Fantasy (MP3 - 5.50MB) (/Audio/news/fares-fantasy.mp3)**
- **How the Devil appeared to St Martin (MP3 - 3.86MB) (/Audio/news/devil-stmartin.mp3)**

Research scholar, Luke Darbyshire from the University of Birmingham's Department of English explains:

"The Vernon Manuscript is an important, but forgotten, aspect of our local culture and history. We are investigating the relationship between the dialect of the Vernon Manuscript and the language of the modern West Midlands by asking local residents to read the transcribed texts.

"We are expecting to find that some common regional pronunciations and dialectical features present today stem from the medieval English used at the time of the manuscript. Eventually we are hoping to map where distinct regional characteristics have come from across the West Midlands, providing evidence that our regional dialect has been distinctive for more than 600 years."

Over the next two weeks, the researchers will be travelling across the region and filming local residents attempting to read the text in the current West Midlands dialect, investigating how the dialect has evolved over time and establishing what aspects are still present today.

This research is part of the University of Birmingham's wider ongoing Vernon Manuscript Project, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, which is seeking to offer opportunities for specialist and non-specialist audiences to engage with the text. The manuscript is being transformed into an interactive, digital research resource DVD complete with 'live' transcriptions and hyperlinks to make it more accessible.

Project lead, Professor Wendy Scase, head of the Department of English at the University of Birmingham adds:

"We are currently hard at work on the electronic edition but that is just the first stage of finding out more about the manuscript and making it more widely accessible. My forthcoming book, The Making of the Vernon Manuscript, will also shed new light on this extraordinary manuscript and next we hope to create apps that will enable people to interact with it in actual size.

"My ultimate aim is to see the manuscript itself return to the region, to be exhibited in the West Midlands. It is my dream to find a benefactor who could help to make that possible."

For more information, please contact research scholar, Luke Darbyshire via +44 (0)121 415 8662 or **lxd974@bham.ac.uk (mailto:lxd974@bham.ac.uk)** , or please visit **www.birmingham.ac.uk/vernonmanuscript (http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/vernonmanuscript)** .

Notes to Editors

• The researchers will be filming people from across the West Midlands reading passages from the manuscript between 5-16 September in the following locations:

- o Wolverhampton Art Gallery, 6th September
- o Birmingham Central Library, 3rd Floor, 8 and 9 September
- o Wolverhampton Library, 14 September
- o Walsall Museum, Education Room, 15 and 16 September
- o More dates and locations to follow

• The Vernon Manuscript is currently kept at the Bodleian Library, Oxford, where it has spent the last 350 years since it was donated from a private collection in 1677.

• Texts within the manuscript include: *The South English Legendary*, a collection of stories about the lives of saints; *The Northern Homily Cycle*, a series of explorations of the gospels and religious stories; *The Miracles of the Virgin*, a collection telling of miracles attributed to the Virgin Mary; *The Story of the Gospel*, a narration of Christ's infancy and William Langland's *Piers Plowman*, an epic dream vision that asks how an individual can save his soul.

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