

## Researchers to unlock distinctive West Midlands accent

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



Excerpt from Vernon Manuscripts

Written in the West Midlands dialect around 1400AD, the lavishly illustrated Vernon Manuscript contains more than 350 texts spread over 700 pages and weighs 22kg. 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** (<http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/schools/edacs/departments/english/research/projects/vernon/joinin.aspx>), 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'.

Over the next two weeks, 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.

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

"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."

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.

**[Find out more about the Vernon manuscript project \(http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/vernonmanuscript\)](http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/vernonmanuscript)**

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