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Accent is on origin of regional dialect

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The West Midlands' linguistic heritage is set to be explored in a new research project comparing the way today's 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 document contains more than 350 texts spread over 700 pages and weighs a whopping 22kg.

Made up 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.

Researchers will now be holding sessions in Wolverhampton on Wednesday and Walsall on Thursday and Friday and are 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.

The sessions will be held at Wolverhampton Library in St George's Parade on September 14 and at Walsall Museum's education room in Lichfield Street on September 15 and 16. Research scholar, Luke Darbyshire from the university's English department, said: "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 which 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 will see the manuscript transformed into an interactive, digital research resource DVD complete with 'live' transcriptions.

To find out more contact research scholar Luke Darbyshire on 0121 415 8662 or email ld974@bham.ac.uk.