

The Great Vowel Shift

When we compare the system of ME vowels with that of MnE we notice that every ME long vowel has become something else, while /e:/ and /ɛ:/ have merged. This complex development is known as GVS. It has been proposed that GVS constitutes a coherent set of changes where each development seems to be related to some other. More recently this view has been challenged, primarily because GVS must have taken over two centuries to achieve its final shape.

▪ **Stage I** (push chain initiated by the raising of mid vowels)

A) If a sound disappears after the change the symbol is written in .



Complete by about 1500

B) The potential empty space (a sound loss) is indicated with +.



Complete by 1550

RESULT

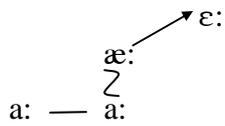


▪ **Stage II** (raising of the lower vowels, some people call it post-GVS raising)



Details of Stage II

ME a: (*mate*) → **ɛ:**
 1400 1500 1650



∩ indicates two varieties coexisting side by side

ME ɔ: (*boat*) and **ɛ:** (*meat*)

ɔ: → **o:**

ɛ: → **e:/i:**

16th c no change
 after 1600 (mid 17th c) raising to /e:/ and /o:/

As for **ɛ:** - **after regular raising to /e:/**, in the pronunciation of some advanced speakers it raises further as high as /i:/ but not the majority. During the 18th c ME /ɛ:/-words, e.g. *meat* (already raised to /e:/), increasingly joined ME /e:/ words (*meet*) in /i:/. This had become **the norm by the 1760s**, while /e:/ pronunciations remained mainly as poetic options or stylistic variants. A few ME /ɛ:/-words preserved /e:/ (later /ei/): *break, drain, great, steak, yea*.

i: ↑ [e:] ɛ: stage Ia	i: e: ↑ [ɛ:] stage II "regular" its legacy: /e:/-words <i>break, drain, great, steak, yea</i> which did not move up to /i:/	i: ↑ [e:] ↑ [ɛ:] stage II advanced pronunciation which ultimately 'caught on' and merged ME /e:/ → /i:/ and ME /ɛ:/ → /i:/ hence PdE <ee> and <ea> represent a historical contrast
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RESULT

	i:		u:
	e:		o:
ɛi	ɛ:	+	ɔu
	+		
	+		

The Great Vowel Shift – recap

	1400	1500	1550	1650	1700	1800
BITE	i:	ei	ei	əi	ʌi	ai
MEET	e:	i:	i:	i:	i:	i:
MEAT/BREAK	ɛ:	ɛ:	ɛ:	e:		
MATE	a:	a:	a:/æ:	ɛ:	e:	ei
DAY	ai	ai	ai ¹			
OUT	u:	ou	ɔu	əu	ʌu	au
BOOT	o:	u:	u:	u:	u:	u:
BOAT	ɔ:	ɔ:	ɔ:	o:	o:	əu

¹ This is NOT part of the Great Vowel Shift!!!