

# Halfway to Estuary English with H. G. Wells (1866-1946)

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## Abstract

*The speech of seven Kentish informants born in the closing decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (recorded by the Survey of English Dialects), and of their contemporary, the author H. G. Wells (also Kentish), is reviewed with respect to six sound changes already present in varying combinations in their Kentish speech, in order to elucidate the routes and timing for how they were being spread. The recordings have caught moments in the period 1860-95 where a new accent (Estuary English) was spreading across rural Kent from the towns along the shore of the Thames estuary, each informant exhibiting an individual mixture of new pronunciations and earlier Kentish pronunciations. Similar sound changes were occurring throughout the home counties, but their precise timing, progress and routes were not studied for this article. The changes examined here are loss of rhoticity, TRAP shifted away from DRESS, THOUGHT modified from [ɔ:] to [o:], LOT from [a] to [ɔ], PRICE from [Ai] to [ai], and MOUTH from [εu] to [æʊ]. The results indicate that the sound changes started at different times, and spread through Kent over several generations, each starting from the north (London and the estuary coast), and ending in the east and south. Each change appears to have started spreading to neighbouring rural areas within a generation of appearing in estuary towns. The earliest of the six changes was PRICE, estimated appearing around 1800 in estuary towns (acquired by seven informants); then THOUGHT (acquired by five); MOUTH and rhoticity loss (four each); TRAP (three); and the most recent was LOT (two).*

## Introduction

This talk has two topics: (i) Estuary English (EE), the new accent that spread through south east England in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and (ii) the speech of biologist and author H. G. Wells, an example of someone who had acquired part of this new accent.

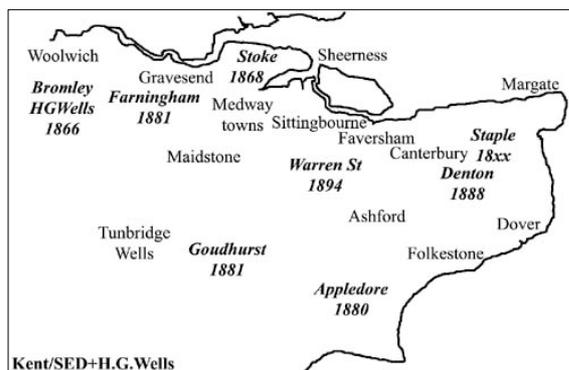


Figure 1. The locations and birth years of the seven SED informants and H. G. Wells (in italics), and various towns.

The recordings were made by the Survey of English Dialects (SED) (Robinson) in the 1950s, explicitly targeting rural areas in order to find

more surviving dialect features. They are available online in MP3 format from the British Library. Figure 1 shows how the SED informants were distributed across rural Kent, together with neighbouring urban areas. They were born in the interval 1860-1895, all were male, and had such varied occupations as blacksmith, coal miner, farmer, groom and traction engine driver. The recording of H. G. Wells is from a BBC broadcast (BBC Archive 1931). Wells was born in 1866 at Bromley, at that time a large village growing into a substantial urban area, later into a suburb, and now the centre of a London Borough. His speech is comparable to that of the contemporary SED informants, except it is on the highest end of the regional sociolect scale (the SED informants all have popular accents).

The following phonetic character substitutions are made for this article: (i) the character **a** (officially *open front cardinal 4*) is used for vacant *open central*, and (ii) the character **æ** for unshifted TRAP (officially *lowered half-open front*) is also used for shifted TRAP (officially *open front a* adjacent to cardinal 4).

Expressions like FOOT, STRUT, TRAP, BATH are keywords used by Wells (1982) for lexical sets that took part in various sound changes. They are more convenient than phonemes for studies of dialect or sound change, where actual pronunciations are being modified and phoneme systems revised.

Lossy MP3 compression had degraded the online sound files so that formant analysis by LPC formant tracking in Praat (Boersma & Weenink 2014) yielded inconsistent results. Formants were consequently identified and measured on FFT slices from narrow band spectrograms. Only fully stressed exemplars of vowels taken from focally accented syllables were analysed in order to exclude variation due to vowel reduction. Formants were measured at the moment where the vowel was least affected by adjacent consonants (to minimize measurement scatter caused by coarticulation effects), determined by observing CV and VC formant transitions on spectrograms. A typical five minute recording of spontaneous speech might yield 5 or more focally accented instances of the most frequent vowel phonemes, but just a few or even none of the least frequent.

## Background

### Southern British English

Southern British English (SBE) is the dialect of English spoken in England south of a line roughly between the Wash in the east and the Severn Estuary in the west (Wales 2006, Map 1.6). It is distinguished from Northern English by two sound changes (that occurred in the 15<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> centuries): the FOOT-STRUT split and the TRAP-BATH split. In SBE, words in the FOOT and STRUT classes and the TRAP and BATH classes are pronounced with four different vowel phonemes (today roughly [ʊ] and [a], and [æ] and [ɑ:] in the home counties).

Four regiolects are recognised within SBE: East Anglian, London, Home Counties and Western. Within each regiolect, there is social variation along a scale from popular to standard sociolects (Gimson 1962 §6.92, Wells 1982 §1.1.5).

### Estuary English

The expression *Estuary English* became well known following Rosewarne (1984), unfortunately often misunderstood, or worse still vulgarized as Received Pronunciation (RP)

(Jones 1918, Gimson 1962, Wells 1982) modified towards East End Cockney.

During the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, the popular London accent had been brought by Londoners migrating along both shores of the Thames Estuary, occasioning the sound changes of EE in the local population. That is the story we were told at school by our English master in 1950. We spoke Estuary English, our teacher said, we were bilingual, switching as we came in through the school doorway. Translated into linguistic terms, we were diglossic with two sociolects: popular EE on the playing field and standard EE inside school. The staff had graduated from a fair spectrum of British universities of the 1920s-1940s, none spoke RP, a few were from the north and spoke Northern English, but most were from the south east and became our model for standard EE.

However, similar changes were occurring throughout the Home Counties and today the accent is fairly uniform right across this area, and not just around the Thames estuary.

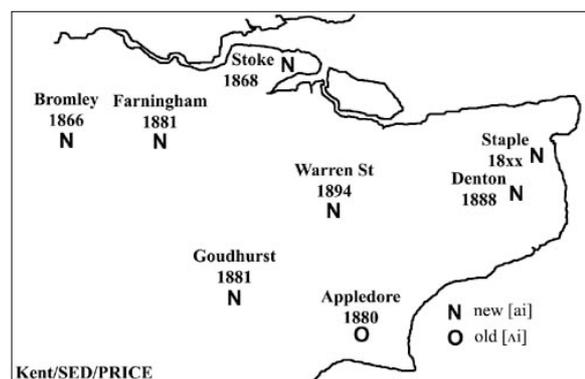


Figure 2. The distributions of PRICE pronunciations in rural Kent. This sound change was almost complete in Kent by 1860-95, the earlier pronunciation still occurring in the SE.

Parish & Shaw (1888 p. vii) gave an introductory account of how the London accent was being spread via the estuary towns, although, sadly, it reveals more about these authors' attitude towards popular speech than about their linguistic skill:

“The purity of the dialect diminishes in proportion to the proximity to London of the district in which it is spoken. It may be said that the dialectal sewage of the Metropolis finds its way down the river and is deposited on the southern bank of the Thames, as far as the limits of Gravesend-Reach, whence it seems to over-flow and saturate the neighbouring district.”

Calling the new accent *metropolitan sewage* is a measure of how it was regarded. Similarly, H G Wells, who never modified his EE accent to RP, was called a *Cockney upstart*. One discriminating feature between EE and RP is MOUTH. EE, like popular London, has [æɒ] while RP has [aʊ]. The late Edward Heath (1916-2005, UK prime minister 1970-74, born near Margate at Broadstairs) partially modified his native EE towards RP, but retained the [æɒ]-like MOUTH unchanged. He was satirized for that by *Monty Python's Flying Circus* (1971) in a sketch *Teach Yourself Heath*, a merci-less example of how EE was still regarded fifty years ago. The [æɒ]-like MOUTH was one of the shibboleths that immediately gave away anyone who was not speaking RP.

The SED recordings have caught new pronunciations for EE spreading from the estuary towns to rural Kent in the period 1860-95, the informants exhibiting varying mixtures of new features and earlier Kentish features, which permits the progress of this new accent to be evaluated (Wood, forthcoming).

These new pronunciations represent six sound changes that were present in varying combinations in the speech of these informants: PRICE modified from [Δi] to [ai], THOUGHT modified from [ɔ:] to [o:], MOUTH modified from [εu] to [æɒ], rhoticity lost (/r/ no longer pronounced in syllable codas), [æ] for TRAP shifted away from DRESS, and LOT modified from [a] to [ɔ].

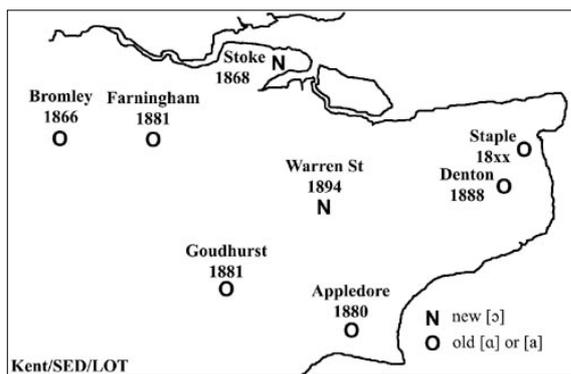


Figure 3. The distributions of LOT pronunciations. This sound change had barely started and was the most recent of the six.

Figure 2 records the distributions of PRICE pronunciations, showing that six SED informants scattered almost over all the county, and H G Wells, had already acquired the new [ai]-like timbre for PRICE, suggesting this sound change had commenced much earlier in the

estuary towns and was almost complete in the county by 1860-95.

For comparison, Figure 3 records the LOT pro-nunciations, showing that only two informants had acquired the new [ɔ]-like timbre, which was consequently one of the more recent changes, starting to spread in the 1860s and established in the Medway towns since the 1850s.

There were three different combinations of THOUGHT and LOT forms among the informants, summarized in Table 1: new THOUGHT and new LOT, new THOUGHT and earlier LOT, and earlier THOUGHT and earlier LOT. Oddly, the precise timbre of the earlier [a]-like LOT varied between the informants, from an extremely bright [a] to a darker [ɑ]. This is possibly not so random as it might seem (although there are only eight informants). The darker [ɑ] for LOT is by the three informants who still have the earlier THOUGHT and earlier LOT, while the brighter [a] for LOT is by the three informants who have the new THOUGHT together with the earlier LOT.

Combination	Informants
New THOUGHT [o:] New LOT [ɔ]	Stoke 1868 Warren St 1894
New THOUGHT [o:] Old LOT [a]	Appledore 1880 Farningham 1881 Staple 18xx
Old THOUGHT [ɔ:] Old LOT [ɑ]	Goudhurst 1881 Denton 1888 H G Wells Bromley 1866

Table 1. Combinations of THOUGHT and LOT outcomes.

If PRICE was the earliest of these six sound changes, and LOT the most recent, a rough timetable can be established for each of the six sound changes by timing progress across the county, assuming roughly a generation to spread between each informant's location when there is no better information. In addition, other sound changes were complete, and yet others had not commenced. There was clearly a long succession of individual sound changes at regular intervals starting back in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and continuing into the 20<sup>th</sup> century:

- PRICE (Figure 2) had spread to most of the county by the 1880s and was acquired by 7 out of the 8 informants. Assuming three or four generations to spread, this points to this change appearing by 1800 on the estuary coast.
- THOUGHT had reached parts of East Kent by the 1880s, and had been acquired by 5 out of

the 8 informants. It had spread more than loss of rhoticity but less than PRICE, and had perhaps started in the 1820s or 1830s in the Medway Towns, later further west (H G Wells, *Bromley 1866*, had not acquired the new THOUGHT).

- MOUTH had reached the northern half of the county, from Bromley in the west (H G Wells) to *Staple 18xx* in the east and had been acquired by 2 informants and 1 partially and 1 transitionally; perhaps present in any of the estuary towns including Margate by the 1830s or 1840s
- Loss of rhoticity had reached the north-western half of Kent by 1894, 3 informants and 1 partially; similar to MOUTH, perhaps by the 1840s in estuary towns, while Ellis (1889) had evidence from Margate around the 1850s.
- TRAP had reached the central half of Kent, three informants, but excluding *Stoke 1868* and H G Wells (1866) at Bromley suggesting it started spreading to rural areas around the 1870s; perhaps in the Medway Towns by the 1850s.
- LOT (Figure 3) had reached only *Stoke 1868* and *Warren St 1894*, but not *Farningham 1881* or H G Wells at Bromley; perhaps in the Medway Towns by the 1850s.

Other, even earlier, sound changes were complete by 1860 and were shared by all the informants. For example, they all had the new [ao] for GOAT (the earlier pronunciation had been something like [ou]). A later sound change (after 1900) darkened BATH to [ɑ:], but all these eight informants still had the earlier [a:].

*Table 2. The acquisition of the six sound changes (ordered from the left by number acquired from most to fewest) by the seven SED informants and H G Wells (ordered from the top from west to east), showing completely acquired new changes (N), partially acquired (P), transitional (T), and older form still acquired (O).*

Informant	PRICE	THOUGHT	TRAP	MOUTH	Nonrhotic	LOT
H G Wells	N	O	O	N	N	O
Farningham	N	N	N	N	N	O
Stoke	N	N	O	O	P	N
Warren St	N	N	N	P	N	N
Goudhurst	N	O	N	O	O	O
Staple	N	N	O	T	O	O
Denton	N	O	O	O	O	O
Appledore	O	N	O	O	O	O

Table 2 indicates two factors that determined how these sound changes spread through Kent: the younger informants tended to have acquired more sound changes, and the informants located nearer the estuary tended to have acquired more sound changes. Each sound change started from estuary towns and spread gradually towards East Kent and the SE.

### The earlier Kentish accent

The main sources for the earlier accent in Kent are Ellis (1889) and Parish & Shaw (1888). Ellis rejected several districts because the earlier dialect was no longer spoken there, particularly the Hoo peninsula (opposite the Medway Towns, *Stoke* in Figure 1), the Isle of Sheppey (including Sheer-ness), and Thanet (including Margate, just north of *Staple* in Figure 1), all located along the estuary coast and close to estuary towns. Presumably that also meant EE was already becoming established along the whole length of the estuary coast by the 1870s, or a generation earlier, perhaps already by 1850.

Ellis reported the Kentish /r/ as a “burr”, which in the 19th century usually meant uvular (Sweet 1892: 31). This is how I also perceive the SED Kent informants’ /r/, and my own, a uvular continuant (not a trill or fricative). This was presumably not a spontaneous innovation of the 1880s but continued from the earlier pronunciation.

Ellis had heard fully rhotic speech in the towns of Tunbridge Wells and Maidstone, but gave no ages of informants or dates. Otherwise, /r/ had “a tendency to degenerate into the ordinary English vocal r, a mere vowel (ə v) ... the form it retains in London”, i.e. a general tendency towards non-rhotic EE. In the coastal town of Margate, a student teacher’s /r/ “followed London use” including “euphonic insertion”, which I understand as meaning it was non-rhotic with linking and intrusive r. Of a student teacher at Charing (between Ashford and *Warren Street 1894*, Figure 1) Ellis noted “with slight exceptions all recollection of the dialect seemed to have left her, the (r) was quite Cockney”. These student teachers were training at the esteemed Whitelands College in Chelsea (now Roehampton University) but there was no suggestion they were modifying their obvious EE tendencies towards RP.

Other pronunciations Ellis noted, transliterated into the IPA alphabet from his own palæotype transcriptions, are [ʌi] for PRICE and [ɛʊ] for MOUTH. He had heard that /ð/ was

pronounced [d], but failed to confirm it himself on Thanet or at Folkestone, accepting the word of his correspondents elsewhere. None of the SED Kent informants did it. It is preserved in the hundred verses of *Dick and Sal at Canterbury Fair*, written by John White Masters (1791-1873) of Sheldwich (a village near Faversham), published in Canterbury around 1820, and reproduced by Parish & Shaw as hard evidence of early 19<sup>th</sup> century rural Kentish speech. Masters was a horticulturist and pioneer of the Assam tea trade rather than a linguist. Here is one of the verses as published, in Masters' own modified spelling in order to simulate the actual pronunciation (the suggested narrow phonetic transcription is mine, writing *ʀ* for a uvular continuant and *a* for open central):

*He sed dare was a teejus fair,  
Dat lasted for a wick  
And all de ploughmen dat went dare,  
Must car dair shining-stick.*

[i sed dɛʀ wə z ə 'ti:ɟə s fɛʀ  
də ? 'la:stɪd fə ʀ ə wɪk  
ə n ɔ:w də 'plɛʊmə n də ? wen?  
dɛʀ mə s kɛʀ dɛʀ 'ʃlɪnɪn stɪk]

All the Kent SED informants have glottal stops, vocalized /l/, and /h/-dropping, in common with people all over the country, so these are not obviously uniquely London features. I assume they are older. There is also a distributional difference. None of the SED Kent informants had intervocalic glottal stops, perhaps because instead they had /t/-voicing (laxing, lenition, flapping) between syllabics, especially when stress is weakened or absent. Some examples: *get home* [ged 'aom] (*Appledore 1881*), *knock it on* [nɔk ɪd 'ən] (*Staple 18xx*), *at half past* [əd af 'pɑ:st] (*Goudhurst 1881*). With full focal stress, there is more likely to be an aspirated [tʰ].

## H. G. Wells

Wells was born in 1866 at Bromley, just outside London. His parents kept a sports and chinaware shop in the village. His father was also a professional county cricketer and his mother a servant.

Mugglestone (2003, p. 263) states that he "shed the Cockney markings of his youth", which probably meant he moved his accent up the sociolect scale to Standard EE

(Mugglestone, p. 56, points out that *Cockney* was widely used in prescriptive rhetoric as a stereotype for any undesirable language). There are no signs of modification towards RP in his speech. In the 1931 broadcast, his voice is high pitched, but he speaks very clearly with no syllable contractions, there are no dropped /h/, no vocalized /l/, and very few glottal stops (none intervocalic). On the other hand there are unmodified bright [u]-like GOOSE vowels and yod coalescence (both shunned in 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century RP), together with [æp] for MOUTH and [ao] for GOAT (that have never yet been recognized as RP, which has [aʊ] and [ɔ:] respectively). These characteristics of his accent can be seen in Figures 4 and 5.

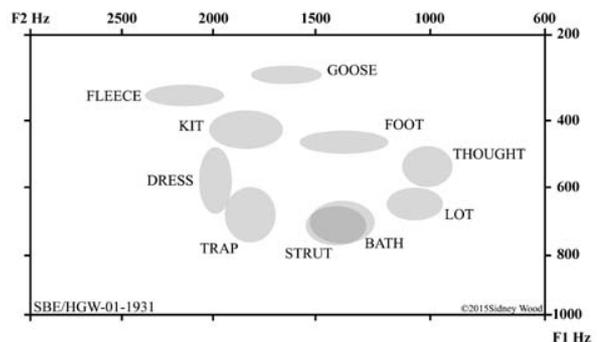


Figure 4. F1/F2 diagram for H. G. Wells' monophthongs, showing TRAP near DRESS, the same [a]-like timbre for STRUT and BATH (F2 around 1400Hz), the [a]-like LOT (F1 > 600Hz), the [ɔ:]-like thought F1 500-600Hz, and the bright [u:]-like goose (F2 > 1500Hz).

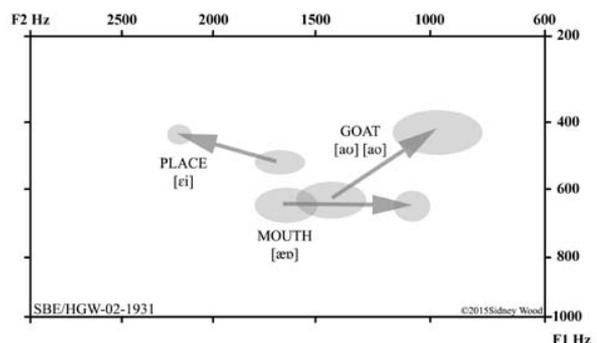


Figure 5. F1/F2 diagram for three diphthongs by H. G. Wells, all regional and none RP: [ei]-like PLACE (F1 starting from around 550Hz), [ao]-like GOAT (starting from F1 > 600Hz and F2 around 1400Hz), and [æp]-like MOUTH (F1 > 600Hz from start to end).

Table 2 records that he had acquired 3 of the 6 sound changes (he was non-rhotic, and he had [ai] for PRICE and [æɒ] for MOUTH). Otherwise he still had the earlier TRAP near DRESS, [ɔ:]-like THOUGHT and [ɑ]-like LOT. For comparison, his nearest SED neighbours had acquired 5 sound changes (younger *Farningham 1880*) and 3½ (contemporary *Stoke 1868*).

The vowel diagram in Figure 4 looks superficially like an RP vowel diagram (Figure 6), but that is coincidental because both are variants of SBE.

For comparison, Figure 6 shows a vowel diagram for 19<sup>th</sup> century RP (Harold Macmillan, 1894-1986, UK prime minister 1957-63). He too has TRAP near DRESS, and an [ɔ:]-like THOUGHT, but three of the SED informants had already shifted TRAP away from DRESS (higher F1) and five had already shifted THOUGHT to [o:]. RP would not shift TRAP until the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Fabricius 2007). Macmillan also has similar timbre for STRUT and BATH, but darker than Wells (more [ɑ]-like with F2 around 1100Hz). Macmillan has [ɒ]-like RP LOT, similar to Wells' [ɑ] but lower F2. Finally, Macmillan has a darker [u]-like GOOSE than Wells with F2 < 1300Hz.

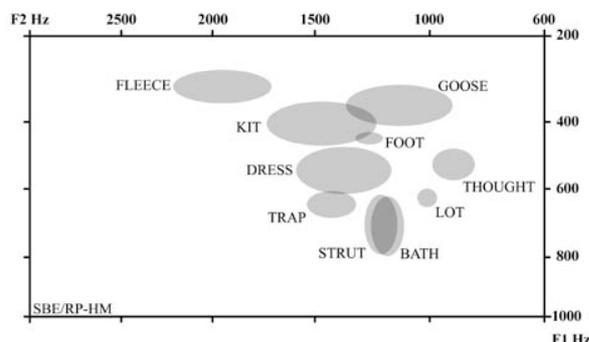


Figure 6. F1/F2 diagram for Harold Macmillan's 19<sup>th</sup> century RP monophthongs.

There are extracts from H. G. Wells speech recordings online at: <http://swphonetics.com/2015/02/10/halfway-to-estuary-english-h-g-wells/>

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