IN THE EARLY MIDDLE AGES, Scandinavian influence on British life, language and culture was profound. Probably its most significant, and certainly its most enduring and pervasive, effect was on the English language. A large number of important English words are thought to come from the language spoken by the Vikings, Old Norse, including such basic terms as sky, egg, law, leg, call, toke, window, knife, die and skin, and even the pronouns they, their and them.

Scandinavian settlement began in earnest in the late 9th century, especially in the North and East of England, and centuries of intensive contact followed between speakers of Old Norse and Old English, the language of the Anglo-Saxons.

The two languages were closely related, sharing a pre-historic Germanic origin. This meant that it would have been relatively easy for the two groups to communicate, just by speaking to each other in their own languages. Compare:

- **OLD ENGLISH**
  - ic wille habban fisċ (I want to have fish)
- **OLD NORSE**
  - ek wil hafa fisq (I want to have fish)

Although the Scandinavian incomers and their descendants gradually switched over to speaking English, a large number of vocabulary words from Norse had become integrated into the local language, and often spread more widely. Of around 2,000 Norse-derived words in medieval English texts, about 700 are still in standard use and many more can be found in various dialects. Unlike the large number of French words that came into English after the Norman conquest, most words from Norse were not technical terms, but common, everyday words.
OLD NORSE PLACE-NAMES IN ENGLAND

LOCATING SCANDINAVIAN SETTLEMENT

THE FIRST VIKINGS TO ARRIVE from the middle of the 8th until the late 9th century engaged in hit-and-run attacks. Then larger armies began to take over control of large parts of England in East Anglia, the Midlands and the North. The area they controlled was called the Danelaw.

Even after the Anglo-Saxons retook these areas, a significant Scandinavian presence remained, particularly in the lands around York and in the Five Boroughs of Derby, Leicester, Lincoln, Nottingham and Stamford. Some place-names are still very clear reminders of their presence, for example:

Names ending in –by, like Derby or Grimsby. The Old Danish word was by ‘farm(stead)’.

Names ending in –thorpe, like Kettlethorpe and Kirkthorpe. The Old Danish word was thorp or torp ‘hamlet, village’.

Names ending in –thwaite like Kirkthwaite or Langthwaite. Old Norse þveit (pronounced like modern English thwaite) meant ‘clearing’.

Scandinavian personal names also appear commonly in Danelaw place-names. Thus we see Grimr in Grimston and Grimsby, and Ketill in Kettleby and Kettlethorpe.
ENGLISH WORDS FROM OLD NORSE

TWO TYPES OF BORROWING

THE NORSE-DERIVED TERMS IN ENGLISH entered the language mainly between 850 and 1150, although most of them are first recorded in texts that were written after this period for a number of reasons: some of them might have been considered too colloquial to be included in literary texts, most of the texts that we have from before 1150 come from non-Scandinavianised areas and the West Saxon dialect had a significant influence on texts written in other Old English dialects.

We see an important difference between the terms recorded before and after 1150. Those hundred and fifty or so recorded before 1150, during the Old English period, tend to be technical terms, particularly terms associated with Scandinavian artefacts or cultural practices. Those first recorded after 1150, during the Middle English period, tend to be everyday, non-technical terms with native equivalents and we still use many of them today.

**EARLY BORROWED TERMS**
- OE *enear* < ON *knær* ‘warship, cargo ship’
- OE *dra* < ON *dura*, a Scandinavian unit of account
- OE *fæolaga* < *fælogi* ‘partner, shareholder; fellow, mate’

**EVERYDAY WORDS**
- window < ON *vindauga* ‘window’
- ugly < ON *ugligr* ‘to be feared’
- scare < ON *skirra* ‘to prevent’
- they < ON *þeir* ‘they’

The different character of the terms first attested during the Old and Middle English periods is likely to be the effect, to a great extent, of the ways in which the terms entered the language. On the one hand, most of those attested first are likely to have been brought over by the Old English speakers themselves, cultural terms being fairly easily borrowed because they often refer to new practices or artefacts (cp. *siesta, sangria, kamikaze, curry,* etc.). Most of those first attested in Middle English, on the other hand, are more likely to have been transferred when Old Norse speakers stopped speaking Old Norse and switched to English.

Above: 10th-century scales from Jötun, Jaren, Norway

Right: Södermanland Rune Inscription 282, Brötta, Sweden. A man called Vignar raised this stone in memory of a man he describes as his kinsman, *fælogi* (partner), and brother.
FINDING VIKING INFLUENCE
HOW DO WE KNOW WHICH ENGLISH WORDS COME FROM OLD NORSE?

THE GERMANIC LANGUAGE FAMILY

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GERMANIC</th>
<th>EAST GERMANIC</th>
<th>NORTH-WEST GERMANIC</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NORTH GERMANIC (OLD NORSE)</td>
<td>OLD EAST NORSE</td>
<td>OLD WEST NORSE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DANOIS, THANISH</td>
<td>NORWEGIAN, ICELANDIC, ICICLE</td>
<td>MODERN ENGLISH</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

THE FACT THAT OLD ENGLISH AND OLD NORSE were very close descendants of a common Germanic ancestor complicates the identification of Norse-derived terms. There are, however, various types of evidence that we can rely on:

1. FORMAL EVIDENCE
Old English and Old Norse had their own distinctive features in terms of their phonology and morphology. If a word shows the sounds or the inflectional endings that we would expect in Old Norse but not in Old English, we have strong evidence that we are dealing with a loanword.

For instance, the Germanic cluster */sk/ in native words tends to be pronounced as */ʃ/ while in Old Norse it remains as */sk/; this is how we know that words like skirt (< ON skyrta ‘garment for the upper part of the body’), skin (< ON skinn ‘skin, hide, fur’) and sky (< ON sky ‘cloud’) are Norse-derived, but others like shirt, shame or show are not.

2. NON-FORMAL EVIDENCE
Here we rely mainly on issues to do with attestation. In English this means:

• Is it attested mainly in texts originating from the areas where the Scandinavian newcomers settled?
• Does it refer initially to Scandinavian cultural practices?

We also look beyond English to see if we have cognates (i.e. words that share the same origin) with the same meaning and form in Germanic languages other than Old Norse and Old English. For instance, we think that law is a loanword (cp. ON lóg ‘law’) because OE lógu is first attested around 950 as a term for Scandinavian laws, not English laws; and because, other than English, Old Norse is the only language where this root (Proto-Germanic *īōg-), which originally referred to something that is laid down (cp. OE lícgan ‘to lie’), means ‘law’. Attestation is less reliable than formal evidence.
OLD NORSE INFLUENCE
ON ENGLISH DIALECTS

MANY OLD NORSE BORROWINGS became part of standard English, and are used by all English speakers. But some are found mainly or only in regional English, and contribute to the rich and distinctive vocabulary of local dialects. This is especially true of the North, North Midlands and East of England, where Scandinavians settled in the greatest numbers.

Some of these words refer to features of the landscape that we associate especially with the northern parts of England. Good examples are:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Old Norse</th>
<th>English</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>dale</td>
<td>ON dál ‘valley’</td>
<td>(perhaps partly also &lt; OE dael) and fell</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ON fjöll, fjall ‘mountain’</td>
<td>key words for the topography of Yorkshire and Cumbria; and firth</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

And there are many other originally Old Norse words too, which are important parts of the dialect vocabulary of regional speech. Some are well-known markers of ‘northern English’, likely to be recognized and understood by English speakers more widely, like nay ‘no’ (< ON ne) or lass ‘girl’ (probably < ON *laskr ‘unmarried’). But many others are still restricted to local dialects, like attle (or ettle) ‘to intend’ (< ON ættla), gowk ‘idiot’ (< ON gaukkr ‘cuckoo’), laik ‘to play’ (< ON leika), lig ‘to laze about’ (< ON liggja ‘to lie’) and mun ‘will, shall’ (not a corruption of English must, but < the ON verb mun).

It is important to realise that, just as much as the Scandinavian borrowings in standard English, these words go back to one of the major languages of the Middle Ages. They are not ‘bad English’, but Viking cultural artefacts which tell us a lot about the rich history of the English regions.

This Scandinavian influence also extends to words used to name parts of towns and cities. The best known is gate < ON gata ‘street’ (a different word from English gate as in a garden or a city gate), which is part of many street names in towns and cities like York, Lincoln, Doncaster and Peterborough.
OLD NORSE INFLUENCE
ON SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT

DIALECT WORDS OF OLD NORSE origin are not just part of the story of spoken English. In the Middle Ages, before the language of the South-East of England (especially London) took over as the model for writing English across the whole country, dialects from all over England were used in writing. During this period, the North Midlands and the North of England were major sources of poetic storytelling, including famous poems like Pearl, the alliterative Death of King Arthur and Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is one of the great romances of medieval England, written in the late fourteenth century in a dialect probably from Cheshire. It tells the dramatic and atmospheric adventures of one of King Arthur's greatest knights, and his encounters with the monstrous Green Knight whom he has to leave Camelot and travel far into the wilds of northern England to seek out. This poem is celebrated for the richness of its style, one of the key elements in which is the breadth of its regional vocabulary, incorporating many words of probably Scandinavian origin. In the following passage, which describes how the Green Knight bursts into King Arthur's hall one Christmas, these words are highlighted:

"There hales in at the halle dor an aghlich mayster... Fro the swyre to the swange so sware and so thik, And his lyndes and his lymes so longe and so grete, Half esyn in erde I hope that he were. Bot mon most I algate mynn hym to bene, And that the myrist in his muckel that myght ride.

"There bushes in at the hall doore a terrible knight... From the neck to the waist so well built, And his loins and his limbs so long and so great, I suspect that he was half giant, actually. But at any rate I must reckon him to be a man, And the fairest for his size that could ride."

Here are some other words in the language of this poem which come from Old Norse:

- bayn ‘obedient’
- brothe ‘fierce’
- frayst ‘to ask’
- kayre ‘to go, ride’
- mugged ‘drizzled’
- thro ‘intense’
- bigge ‘to settle’
- busk ‘to get ready’
- hernez ‘brains’
- layt ‘to seek’
- tulk ‘man’
- wykez ‘corners (of the mouth)’