

Mawther - a word associated with region for centuries

Peter
Trudgill



email: newsdesk@archant.co.uk



■ These young girls pictured at school in 1973 would not have been surprised to be referred to as 'mawthers'. Picture: LIBRARY

Cornwall, and Pembrokeshire.

The word has since come to have another meaning, but the earlier longer form, maiden, meant young female person or virgin.

The origin of this word is rather less mysterious than the others, since all the other West Germanic languages have related forms, like Dutch maagd.

Everywhere else in England - from Lincoln and Nottingham, through Leicester and Northants, right down to the south coast from Hampshire to Kent - the word was girl.

This is the term for a young woman or female child which has now spread throughout the English-speaking world.

But its origin, too, is doubtful, although there are many theories.

One is that it was borrowed from Low German *gōr* "small child". Others have suggested that it comes from the Old English word *gyrela* "dress".

But in Norfolk and Suffolk, *mawther* is what we say.

This word has been associated with our region for centuries.

In a 17th century play, a character says: "Th'art a Norfolk woman, where maids are mothers, and mothers are maids". Some scholars believe that *mawther* is related to mother, as this quote suggests.

Others think it may be related to maid. Yet others are happy to admit that, as with lass, wench and girl, we just don't know where it comes from.

contexts. *Wench* is a shortened form of medieval English *wenchele*, which may be related to an old word *wancke* "to totter".

Originally it applied to children of both sexes.

Maid was the normal form for girl in southern Gloucester, Oxford, Wiltshire, Somerset, Dorset, Devon and

Most people in Norfolk and Suffolk know what *mawther* means - it's our word for a young female person. It is rather perplexing, though, that nobody is very sure what the origin of the word is. And, interestingly, *mawther* is not the only word for girl whose origins are problematical.

In Scotland and Northumberland, the everyday word for girl is *lassie*; and in Cumbria, Yorkshire, Durham, and parts of Lancs, Notts, Derbyshire, and Lincolnshire, the dialect word is *lass*.

As with *mawther*, the origin of *lass* is uncertain, but it may come from Old Norse *lasqa* "unmarried", which perhaps had some connection with "loose".

From southern Lancs down along the western part of England as far as Hereford and northern Gloucester, people say *wench*, or used to.

All over Britain people still know this word, but it is mostly used in joking