

OE /h/ very common, **almost any** position

**habban** ‘have’ **hit** ‘it’ **heah** ‘high’ **behindan** ‘behind’ **hnutu** ‘nut’  
**hring** ‘ring’ **hlud** ‘loud’ **hwit** ‘white’ **hwæt** ‘what’ **niht** ‘night’  
**leoht** ‘light’ **tahte** ‘taught’ **hlæhhan** ‘laugh’ **ruh** ‘rough’ **syhð** ‘sees’  
**seah** ‘saw’ **þurh** ‘through’

– sound pronounced **vigorously**, not soft/smooth but loud/scrappy  
cf German **Bach**, Spanish **José**, Hebrew **chaim** also Scottish **loch**

1. already in OE: **weakened** at the beginning of words

after the Norman Conquest, ‘**dropping of aitches**’ began (fierce English teachers of the day would have been angered)

word-initial /h/ in words like **loud, ring, nut**

2. in the meantime, **spelling** change:

sensible old **hw** ⇒ **wh**, so **hwit, hwæt** ⇒ **white, what**

the /χ/ sound word-medially and finally came to be spelt as **gh**:

**light, night, bright, laugh, rough, through**

3. new spellings **established**, then: dropping of more aitches

15th c. /χ/ spelt **gh** was lost (by the 16th c. only a few pedants still pronounced the **h** in **night, through** — except in Scotland);

in some words, something strange happens:

scrappy /χ/ **replaced** by /f/: people who were *not* using their aitches **misheard** /χ/ as /f/ cf. **laugh, rough**

– this time, teachers probably objected

4. dropping of aitches goes on:

**he, him, her, which, why, where, whether** though not under **stress**,

cf. **What did ‘e give ‘er?**

the pronoun **hit** (which is almost always unstressed) lost the /h/ completely

5. next to go: aitches in all other **unstressed** syllables: **vehicle, annihilate**
  6. /h/ **initially**: speakers have had trouble making up their minds  
**historical, hotel**
  7. 19th century: aitches disappear from all words with **/hw/** — spelt **wh-** in England:  
**which = witch, whales = Wales**
  8. some speakers begin dropping **all** their aitches  
**hair = air, hear = ear, harm = arm**  
(Shakespeare e.g. makes jokes about this pronunciation in 16th c.)  
h-dropping is **strongly stigmatized** in England  
(although the most determined teacher does not try &  
restore it in **light, it, what**)
- vast majority of speakers of English in England have **no aitches** at all