

The English Project: **UNCOVERING THE DNA OF OUR LANGUAGE**

To mark the date in 1362 when the Chancellor of England first opened Parliament with a speech in English, 13th October 2009 was designated the first ever English Language Day, and was selected by Mace Group as the ideal date for an arts and culture breakfast briefing. Guest speaker Professor Christopher Mulvey, Trustee of The English Project, took guests on a journey into the history of the English language and explained how its DNA is being uncovered and brought to life.

Based out of Winchester, The English Project is an educational charity set up to collect the linguistic DNA of the planet's two billion English speakers and raise awareness of the 7,000 varieties of English spoken in more than 100 countries. The project collaborates with the BBC and the British Library and has published a number of books and sponsored numerous lectures on the subject.

In his opening remarks, Professor Mulvey explained that the English language has no discernable beginnings but that in 400 AD, as the Romans prepared to leave Britannia, some people were speaking the earliest form of what we'd recognise as English. Prior to that, the predominant language was proto-old English from which approximately 5,000 words can be identified as root versions of those currently found in not only English but also other major European and Indian languages.

In February 2009, linguists from the University of Reading discovered that words such as 'I', 'we', 'who' and the numbers 'one', 'two' and 'three' can be traced back 30,000 years and are therefore amongst the oldest words in all Indo-European languages.

He went on to explain that London English has played a large part in the development of the language and he therefore focused much of his presentation on the specific variations found

in the city over the last few centuries. A significant event in the development of English was the introduction of the printing press in 1473, which saw standard written English start to spread throughout the country. As the number of people able to read and write grew, so did the demand for rules resulting in the standardisation of spelling and grammar.

By 1900, accent became a clear indicator of rank or class and within London, three distinct accents could be identified: received pronunciation (the Queen's English), Estuary English and Cockney. Looking forward, Professor Mulvey suggests that the predominant Estuary, London Caribbean and London Asian will merge to produce what is becoming known as multi-cultural London English.

This Mace Group event took place at London's Roast restaurant, a venue chosen for its links to arts and culture sector: the atrium under which guests convened was donated to the London Borough of Southwark by the Royal Opera House when it was refurbished in the late 1990s.

Mace Group itself has a long history of working in the arts and culture sector and demonstrates a unique understanding of the particular challenges involved in delivering the museums, galleries and theatres that form such an important part of the urban landscape.