Some English words illustrating the Great Vowel Shift.

	ca. 1400	ca. 1500	ca. 1600	present
'bite'	biːtə	bəit	bəit	baɪt
'beet'	beːt	biːt	biːt	biːt
'beat'	bɛːtə	beːt	beːt ~ biːt	biːt
'abate'	abaːtə	abaːt > abɛːt	əbeːt	əbeɪt
'boat'	bɔːt	boːt	boːt	boʊt
'boot'	boːt	buːt	buːt	buːt
'about'	abuːtə	abəut	əbəut	əbaʊt

Note that, while Chaucer's pronunciation of the long vowels was quite different from ours, Shakespeare's pronunciation was similar enough to ours that with a little practice we would probably understand his plays even in the original pronunciation—at least no worse than we do in our own pronunciation!

This was mostly an unconditioned change; almost all the words that appear to have escaped it either no longer had long vowels at the time the change occurred or else entered the language later.

However, there was one restriction: /uː/ was not diphthongized when followed immediately by a labial consonant. The original pronunciation of the vowel survives without change in *coop, cooper, droop, loop, stoop, troop,* and *tomb;* in *room* it survives in the speech of some, while others have shortened the vowel to /ʊ/; the vowel has been shortened and unrounded in *sup, dove* (the bird), *shove, crumb, plum, scum,* and *thumb.* This multiple split of long u-vowels is the most significant IRregularity in the phonological development of English; see the handout on Modern English sound changes for further discussion.

The Middle English vowel /eː/ underwent a number of divergent developments which are difficult to date; the following are the important complications.

Instead of /iː/ we find a long e-vowel in *bear* (both meanings), *pear, swear, tear* (the verb), and *wear;* remarkably, all six of these words (counting *bear* as two) contained Old English SHORT /e/ followed by /r/ in an open syllable. The usual story is that this vowel was lengthened to /ɛː/ in open syllables in Middle English, but

the Modern English outcome suggests that when followed by /r/ it did not merge with the other vowels that usually gave Middle English /ɛ:/—at least not in one of the dialects that underlie London English. (On the other hand, OE *spere* gives ModE *spear,* with /i:/—either an isolated irregularity or from a different dialect. Labov 1994:152-3 points out that it is the more common words that show the unexpected vowel, hinting at a sound change arrested in progress, which is plausible—but delete his example *smear,* which actually reflects OE *smierwan* (*smerian* means 'ridicule'), and perhaps *weir* < OE *wer,* the phonological history of which is less clear.)

Likewise instead of /i:/ we find /eɪ/ in *great* and *break.* This is often attributed to the preceding /r/, or even on the Cr-cluster, and Labov's findings about the strong influence of initial obstruent-plus-liquid clusters suggest that that is correct (cf. Labov 1994:457-8). But the situation is more complex: contrast *breach, grease, cream,* etc., with /i:/. Complicating the picture still further is the evidence that these words were also pronounced with /i:/ in the 18th c., and the fact that the comparative of *great* was for a long time *gretter* (with a short vowel, rhyming with *better* in Shakespeare; see Jespersen 1948:338-9). The most plausible explanation is that the combination of initial Cr-cluster (which would tend to lower the vowel) and final voiceless stop (which would tend to shorten the vowel, maximizing the effect of the lowering) were the crucial factors, perhaps with an added push from *gretter* (as Jespersen suggests).

Finally, /ɛ:/ was shortened before dental and alveolar consonants in a considerable number of words, notably *bread, dead, dread, head, lead* (the noun), *red, shred, spread, thread, tread, fret, et* (the dialect past tense of 'eat'), *let, sweat, threat, breath,* and *death;* contrast *bead, knead, lead* (the verb), *mead, plead, read, beat, eat, heat, meat, beneath, heath, sheath, wreath.* Possibly *deaf* (vs. *leaf, sheaf*) belongs here too. So far as I know, this has not been seriously studied from a modern perspective; it looks like a promising case of intricate Labov conditioning, if the facts can be determined.

Examples of vowel alternations affected by the Great Vowel Shift.

Late Middle English	Early Modern English	
hi:də, hɪddə	həid, hɪd	'hide, hid'
či:ld, čɪldərən	čəild, čɪldrən	'child, children'
wi:zə, wɪzdom	wəiz, wɪzdom	'wise, wisdom'
fi:və, fɪfte:n	fəiv, fɪfti:n	'five, fifteen'
kri:st, krɪst(ə)massə	krəist, krɪs(tə)mas	'Christ, Christmas'
ke:pə, kɛptə	ki:p, kɛpt	'keep, kept'
me:tə, mɛttə	mi:t, mɛt	'meet, met'
fe:də, fɛddə	fi:d, fɛd	'feed, fed'
de:p, dɛpθ	di:p, dɛpθ	'deep, depth'
θe:f, θɛft	θi:f, θɛft	'thief, theft'
lɛ:də, lɛddə	le:d, lɛd	'lead, led'
klɛ:nə, klɛnzə	kle:n, klɛnz	'clean, cleanse'
hɛ:lə, hɛlθ	he:l, hɛlθ	'heal, health'
hu:s, hʊzbond	həus, hʊzband	'house, husband'
su:θ, sʊðərnə	səuθ, sʊðərn	'south, southern'
u:t, ʊt(t)ər	əut, ʊtər	'out, utter'
go:s, gɔzlɪŋg	gu:s, gɔzlɪŋg	'goose, gosling'
fo:d, fɔd(d)ər	fu:d, fɔdər	'food, fodder'
hɔ:li, hɔlɪdei	ho:li, hɔlɪdei	'holy, holiday'
nɔ:zə, nɔstrəl	no:z, nɔstrəl	'nose, nostril'
gras, gra:zə	gras, gra:z > grɛ:z	'grass, graze'
baθ, ba:ðə	baθ, ba:ð > bɛ:ð	'bath, bathe'
ma:ri, marɪgɔuld	ma:ri > mɛ:ri, marɪgɔuld	'Mary, marigold'

Late Middle English	Early Modern English	
muːs, miːs	məus, məis	'mouse, mice'
luːs, liːs	ləus, ləis	'louse, lice'
fuːl, fɪlθ	fəul, fɪlθ	'foul, filth'
goːs, geːs	guːs, giːs	'goose, geese'
toːθ, teːθ	tuːθ, tiːθ	'tooth, teeth'
foːt, feːt	fuːt, fiːt	'foot, feet'
foːd, feːdə	fuːd, fiːd	'food, feed'
bloːd, bleːdə	bluːd, bliːd	'blood, bleed'
doːm, deːmə	duːm, diːm	'doom, deem' ('judgment, judge')
hɔːl, hɛːlə	hoːl, heːl	'whole, heal'
dɔːl, dɛːlə	doːl, deːl	'dole, deal'