

Oxford English Dictionary News

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Editorial

As I take over as the next editor, I would like to thank Jemma Best, who edited *OED News* from the December 2004 issue and has now moved on to a new job in London, for her contribution, and wish her well.



I have worked in the English Dictionaries department at OUP in various capacities since I came to Oxford in 1970, and once again find myself taking on a new and different role, one which I am sure I will enjoy as much as all the others.

At the other end of the spectrum, Alex Steer, who joined the *OED* as an Assistant Editor in January of this year, assesses his route to this job, and what he found when he got here.

We then return to the voice of experience par excellence. John Simpson gives an account of the genesis, development, and outcomes of the 'Balderdash and Piffle' series, the latest in the *OED's* history of appeals to the public. This forms a sequel to Jemma Best's article in the last issue, which looked at *OED's* appeals in general, culminating in this recent television series.

Juliet Field, Editor

Balderdash! And Piffle!

It was several years ago that Takeaway Media approached the *OED* with the idea of making a series about words for BBC2. Word programmes are notoriously tricky to make for television (rather than radio), as the fluidity and interconnections of language are difficult to portray on the screen in a way that captures the viewer's imagination.



But with 'Balderdash and Piffle' the Takeaway directors, Archie Baron and Neil Cameron, hit on the idea of giving the general public the opportunity to 'change the Dictionary' by tracking down earlier usages and etymological information which the *OED* had, for one reason or another, previously overlooked. Now the general public has not been uninvolved with the compilation of the *OED*, as anyone will know who has read Elisabeth Murray's biography of her grandfather, *Caught in the Web of Words*, or thrilled to the beat of Simon Winchester's

bodice-rippers about the *OED*. In fact, the general public (or the 'GP', as the Fowlers familiarly called their worldwide helpers) has always been central to the *OED*. But here was a chance to reach an audience of millions with some of the real conundrums of modern-day lexicography.

Once we had heard last autumn that BBC2 had decided to commission the programme, the *OED* and Takeaway Media set to work in earnest. Phase One required that we draw up a search-list—a list of fifty words with which

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we knew we needed help. The words finally chosen were typically informal, twentieth-century expressions, probably coined within living memory (such as *bog-standard*, *nit nurse*, and *something for the weekend*) but difficult for the *OED*'s researchers to track down in the regular sources. In addition, Takeaway threw in one or two well-known posers (*cool*, *gay*), on the off-chance that television might bring the problem to the notice of someone who had the answer, but didn't realize that the question had set generations of lexicographers scratching their heads.

The list was finalized and loaded on to the *OED Online* site. At the same time Archie Baron and I paraded around numerous radio and TV studios plugging what was now known as 'The Wordhunt'. With widespread publicity such as this it wasn't surprising that the programme started to receive emails from all and sundry, contributing nuggets of information about our fifty words.

As plans for filming the results of the Wordhunt developed, it became clear that the programmes (six in all) would consist of short films, fronted by well-known figures led by series presenter Victoria Coren, following the trail of discovery for a number of words. After each word had been investigated, the findings would be brought by Victoria back to Oxford and cast before the *OED*'s 'panel of experts' (Tania Styles, Peter Gilliver, and myself). When this had been done, our duty was to weigh up the new evidence and to judge whether it was acceptable and valid for the *OED*. Sometimes it was, and sometimes (often to the programme-makers' dismay) it was deemed invalid.



Is the film crew taking 'Wordhunt' too literally?
© Penny Silva

With widespread publicity such as this it wasn't surprising that the programme started to receive emails from all and sundry, contributing nuggets of information about our fifty words.

As soon as each programme was aired, viewers were able to visit the BBC's 'Balderdash and Piffle' web site and to see how the programme's findings had 'changed' the *OED*. In the background were Yvonne Warburton and Jane Windebank from the *OED*'s online group, who prepared screenshots of the changes for public consumption, as the actual changes themselves would not be accessible on the *OED Online* until the next regular site update several weeks later, in March 2006.

So what were the results of the Wordhunt, and how did they change the *OED*? First of all, it's worth noting that very few of them came from regularly published books, a staple of

the *OED*'s reading programmes over the last one hundred and sixty years. Those offerings that came from classic literature often proved to be false leads. Take, for example, the search for earlier usages of 'cool' in the modern sense of approval. A number of wordhunters sent in the same passages from Victorian literature. Particular favourites were:

'No other house can receive her with propriety but yours. I invite you to open it.'

'Cool. Here is a matrimonial hailstorm pouring.'
from Wilkie Collins's *Woman in White* (1868), and:

*'I try the rocks, and I think it cool
That they laugh with such an excess of glee,
As I heavily slip into every pool
That skirts the cold cold Sea.'*

from Lewis Carroll's *Sea Dirge*.

In both of these cases a cursory reading may suggest, to modern ears, the sense 'admirable, sophisticated, excellent', but a closer reading shows that this cannot be the case, and that (as with most false leads for 'cool') the required sense is probably *OED*'s sense 6 'calmly and deliberately audacious or impudent in making a proposal or demand' or one of the other senses known to have been in use in the mid nineteenth century. There was, in fact, a tendency for some Wordhunters to impose a modern interpretation on an older use.

Nevertheless, there was success with 'cool', from the African-American context from which we believed the word to have originated in this sense, with a Wordhunter providing an early use (1933) from the writings of Zora Hurston. And then in a seventh programme, made as a result of the mass of new

The June 2006 *OED Online* update includes many words to encourage you to eat and drink: so put on your pinafore, put some pimento and pineapple on the pizza on your plate, or pick up the plat du jour and a pint pot of piña colada, pinard, Pineau des Charentes, Pinotage, or piwari.

The newsletter of the *Oxford English Dictionary*

findings sent in after the first set of six programmes were broadcast, a further example from a song of 1902, leading us to uncover an even earlier glossarial usage from 1884, again from a text addressing African-American usage. So that was a spectacular result.

Printed sources provided further antedatings. *Now!* magazine predated the *OED*'s first use of 'chattering classes' from 1985 to 1980; Fritz Spiegel's *ABZ of Scouse* (1966) presented a short antedating of 'made-up' in the sense 'happy'; the *Economic Journal* of 1952 turned up a substantial antedating of the phrase 'back to square one' and bolstered credence of the fact that it derives from the game of Snakes and Ladders.

The *Economic Journal* reference hinted at new ways in which Wordhunters were accessing their information. When the *OED* edited its entry for *back to square one* in the 1990s we didn't have access to the range of historical databases that are nowadays available.

We might well have picked up the 1952 reference ourselves when we revised the entry, though that would have been at some time in the next few years. But Wordhunters were alert to the possibilities of the Internet, and the returns were rich: *bomber jacket* was taken back to 1940 from an American newspaper (now available online), and *smart casual*, *snazzy*, and *pass the parcel* were antedated in similar fashion. The options here are endless.

Some of the most interesting antedatings came from sources which relied on personal memory, often of old television and radio scripts, or gramophone records. These are sources which the *OED* can and does cite, but which are much less readily accessible to our researchers than regular printed texts. So someone with an unnecessarily fond memory of 'Last of the

Summer Wine' found us *mushy peas* in a script from 1973; 'Hancock's Half Hour' turned up *codswallop* from the 1950s; a 'Likely Lads' script supplied *on the pull* from 1975, with a Monty Python record (helpfully called 'Monty Python's Previous Record') offering *something for the weekend* from 1972. Eventually someone remembered hearing Ringo Starr saying that John and Paul were 'made up' in an interview in 1975, and that too was validated for the *OED* from the ITN archives.

A final category of productive sources was paper archives themselves, whether stored in a museum or record office, or stashed away in someone's home (and validated for date). The story of how *ploughman's lunch* was antedated to 1970 in a memorandum of a meeting held at the Milk Marketing Board and held at the National Archives deserves a programme to itself, as does the exploration of the origin of the 99 ice-cream.

Each of these findings tells us something more about the English language in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries than we knew before, and highlights the multiplicity of media in which the records of our language reside. Furthermore it brings into sharp focus the fact that compiling a dictionary of record such as the *OED* must rely not just on the skills of the lexicographers themselves, but on the wealth of information that only collaboration with the widest public can bring. I'd like to end by thanking both the programme-makers, Takeaway Media, and all of the Wordhunters who took part in the Wordhunt for their intrepid detective work and their remarkable findings, from which both the *OED* and all of its users worldwide benefit.

John Simpson, Chief Editor, *OED*

Harmless drudgery: getting started at the *OED*

I joined the *OED* as an Assistant Editor in January 2006. This is how I got here, and what I've been doing since.

I probably always knew, deep down, that there had to be jobs for people who are interested in words, and that lexicography was one of those jobs. Maybe that was what prompted me to read English at university, but then again I think it was the interest itself that drove that decision, rather than the employment prospects. Well, perhaps a combination of interest and the glossy (and of

course perfectly written) brochures in which English departments advertise their degree courses, which no doubt this year, as every year, will promise a fresh batch of prospective undergraduates an education that will equip them with a greater sensitivity to language, and a clearer understanding of



what words really mean. And maybe in three years time as they flick with slightly greater urgency through other brochures—the ones full of good-looking people in designer suits staring into the distance who somehow represent the world of professional tax auditing—and glance at the section on employment statistics for arts graduates, they'll have a deeper feeling for what words and phrases like 'competitive', 'tight', 'downsizing' and 'law conversion courses available' really mean, too. Or recall Milton's *Paradise Lost*, and wonder whether the average newly-unemployed English graduate doesn't feel too oddly like the newly-fallen Satan, clearly also beguiled by glossy brochures, as 'he views The dismal situation waste and wilde..where peace And rest can never dwell, hope never comes That comes to all; but torture without end'. (No wonder one of the top routes for people who study English is into studying more English, which is how I came to spend an extra year haunting Cambridge's libraries, completing an M.Phil. on that most employable of subjects, Middle English popular religious writing.)

There are many jobs that use words, of course, just as one might console an out-of-work physicist by pointing out that most jobs do, in fact, make good use of the laws of gravity and motion. I think I assumed, though, that recruitment to something as big and old as the *OED* would be like recruitment to the CIA: a tap on the shoulder by a very old man with a long beard who asks you cryptic questions about phrasal verbs. (Okay, not exactly like the CIA, then.) So imagine my surprise when I saw an advert in the *Guardian*. I applied (and fast, because I'd noticed the advert just days before the deadline) and was sent a test to complete at home, examining competence in the Dictionary's mind-bending range of disciplines, from drafting definitions for new words to re-drafting old ones, through analysing the structure of an entry, assigning quotations to senses, to a brief grapple with the phonetic alphabet. Having sent that back, I was called for interview, which was both like and unlike an interview for any other job: like, in that I was asked about my abilities, experience and expectations; unlike, in that I was asked about neologisms in twelfth-century English. (I'd brought it up: I'd hate to think they asked that to non-medievalists.) While there I had the basics of the *OED* revision project explained to me, and was given a tour round the office and the 'quotes room' with its millions of paper slips, and I realised what a great job (in both senses of *great*, both 'wonderful' and 'immense') it would be.

Over the last three months I've been scrambling my way up the Dictionary's very steep learning curve, with the expert guidance and friendly advice of everybody on the project

I received a phone call a few days later offering me a position in the Revision group. The contracts barely hit my doormat before they were returned, signed and accepted, in the post. And so for anyone wondering how people become lexicographers, that's it. No tap on the shoulder, no Victorian beards, no secret handshakes or phrasal verbs (well, maybe a few). The positions are advertised, and people apply. The application process can be taken at face value—there's no Da Vinci Code-style codebreaking involved. The words themselves are what require the passion, the fascination, the scrutiny and the decipherment, and the people are the ones who are interested enough to invest that

effort. Samuel Johnson called lexicographers 'harmless drudges', but it's only drudgery when you don't care.

It's still hard work, mind, and over the last three months I've been scrambling my way up the Dictionary's very steep learning curve, with the expert guidance and friendly advice of everybody on the project. One of the best aspects of the training has been its focus on getting a feel for doing things right, which means learning all the core tasks, not just the one that will occupy most of one's time, so I've written out slips for the reading programme, sorted through stacks of paper (some of it covered in well-nigh indecipherable handwriting), searched databases, checked dialect dictionaries, drafted new entries, revised old ones, and even had the chance to put my M.Phil. to good use by checking the accuracy of some of our Middle English quotations.

The work is a combination of old-fashioned pen-and-paper sleuthing and up-to-the-minute computing procedures, and I divide my time between hunting down quotations from medieval manuscripts and early printed books, and learning the detailed entry-tagging structure that holds that information on the *OED*'s database. The project, too, is in an exciting phase, with the revision programme for the third edition under way, a new computer system, and an increased public profile thanks to the BBC's wordhunt series 'Balderdash and Piffle' (which has drawn wider attention to what we do, and maybe dispelled some of that beards-and-cryptography image). As for me, I'm only just getting started, still finding my feet, and still loving the challenge. As I write this, I'm working on the entry for 'prosy, adj.', meaning bland, matter-of-fact, ordinary - the very word, in fact, for harmless drudgery. And the last word I'd use to describe my job.

Alex Steer, Assistant Editor, *OED*

The June 2006 *OED Online* update could also help you to enjoy yourself either with an energetic game of **pinball**, **ping-pong**, or **pize-ball**, footing it to the **pipe dance** or **planxty**, or else in a quiet game of **pinache** or **pinochle**, some **plasticine** or **Play-Doh** modelling, or a practice on the **piob mhor** or **player-piano**.

Appeals

Words or phrases which appear on the Appeals List are those currently being drafted or revised for the *OED* for which the documentary evidence is incomplete. Often these are slang or colloquial items which cannot be researched in specialist texts and are most likely to be found by a general reader in non-specialized or popular literature.

Usually the appeal is for an earlier example than our current earliest (e.g. 'antedate 1970' for a word for which our earliest example comes from 1970), but sometimes the appeal is for an interdating where there is a large gap in the *OED*'s quotation evidence (e.g. 'interdate 1589-1910'). Occasionally we ask for a post-dating (e.g. 'post-date 1875'), if an editor feels that an item being revised is still current but has failed to find any recent examples through the usual avenues of research.

Please note: it is generally safe to assume that examples found by searching the Web, using search engines such as Google, will have already been considered by *OED* editors.

box standard (adj.: cf. *bog-standard*) antedate 1983
pampelmoes (n., in this spelling: South African name for a citrus fruit, esp. used to make marmalade) post-date 1980
private highway (n.: having the form of or resembling something) antedate 1724
procuratorate (n.: in China, a legal term) antedate 1918
proke (v.: chiefly Irish English, to poke) post-date 1969
prosumer (n.: a consumer pro-active in the development of a product) antedate 1974
prosumer (n.: an amateur using products designed for professionals) antedate 1987
vox (n.: vocals, freq. as part of the credits on record sleeves, etc.) antedate 1984

Please send submissions to oed3@oup.com

Interesting antedatings

Revision of the entries in the June 2006 *OED Online* update has revealed an earlier origin than previously known for many words, including:

pimpish (adjective, antedated from 1935 to 1877)
pimpship (noun, from 1682 to 1621)
pit bull (noun, from 1974 to 1927)
placard (verb, from 1813 to a1713)
placatingly (adverb, from 1919 to 1875)
placeable (adjective, from 1802-12 to ?1551)
pleacher (noun, from 1889 to 1607)
pleasurous (noun, from 1839 to 1595)

Quotable quotes

Thought-provoking snippets from the *OED* quotation files:

Self-defeating as a gardening strategy, surely

1931 *Charleston (West Virginia) Gazette* 19 April, I give you the real feature of a rockery. It is better than any other kind of a garden because you always have plenty of rocks to throw at cows and horses and dogs and children and other garden enemies.

More bad behaviour in the garden

1988 *Practical Gardening* May, Osteospermums..provide constant, cool colour but some have appalling habits and none of them open in dull weather.

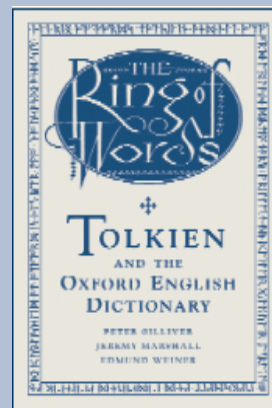
Here, however, is virtue (and ambition) rewarded

1880 *Times* 23 Sept., Mr. Richard Dean's 'Vicar of Laleham', clad in pontifical purple, earned the prize for the best dish of any coloured round potato.

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"... this fascinating assessment of Tolkien's life as one of England's most distinguished wordwrights. Anyone enthralled by the story of English language will be captivated by this account..." *Simon Winchester*

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