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Stories behind

W O R D S

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introduction

introduction

In 2013, Macmillan Dictionary ran the 'Stories behind Words' series on the [Macmillan Dictionary Blog](#).

In the series we asked teachers, authors, linguists and other language enthusiasts to share a personal anecdote about a word (or phrase) that they felt strongly about: a word that had a personal meaning to them.

We received many contributions of funny, sad and heart-warming stories that appeared on the blog in the first half of 2013. In the summer, the series continued with a twist and featured new stories about interesting terms and phrases – where they came from and how they changed over time. These stories are also included in this collection.

Macmillan Dictionary would like to thank all guest authors for writing their wonderful stories and for their permission to republish their posts in this online flipbook.



dapper

dapper by [Michael Rundell](#)

I was never [cut out to be](#) a language teacher. In the summer of 1980, I was teaching English in London. The school wasn't very good, and I was even worse. I answered an ad for 'trainee lexicographers' to work on a new learner's dictionary, and soon found myself in a publisher's office, doing a test to see whether I had the requisite skills.

Part of the test involved writing sentences to illustrate particular words in natural-sounding contexts. And one of these words was [dapper](#). Hmm ... what to say? I knew it meant 'smart' (in the British sense of 'well-dressed') and I was pretty sure it was a word you only used about men. Eventually I came up with something like: *He was a dapper little man in a dark suit.*

There are two additional features here: the *dark suit* hints at a certain kind of 'smartness' (formal and correct, rather than stylish or unconventional); and the *little* implies that dapper men are usually of less than average height. With the language resources available to us now, we can confirm that both these features are typical. For instance, our corpus includes about 40 cases of *dapper* occurring with *small*, *short*, or (especially) *little*, and in most cases the subject is a middle-aged or older man – as these examples show:

"We were met by a regular army sergeant. He must have stood all of five foot tall, a short [dapper](#) little man.

Silver-haired and very [dapper](#) in black jacket, waistcoat, and striped trousers, he was the quintessence of an old-school Cambridge don."

But where did that sentence of mine come from? The late John Sinclair – the father of corpus lexicography – often warned against relying on intuition, rather than on the objective evidence of a corpus. And in principle he was right: our intuitions about language are subjective and often untrustworthy. But somewhere in our mental lexicons, there are facts about what words mean and how they combine. We may not be able to articulate them, but we draw on them whenever we write or speak. Donald Rumsfeld famously distinguished '[known knowns](#)' (things we know that we know), known unknowns (things we're aware that we *don't* know) and – what worried him most – 'unknown unknowns' (things we don't even realise we don't know). But he missed one out: unknown knowns – things we do know at some level, but without being conscious that we know them. And that includes our intuitions about language.

The test made me think about how wonderfully subtle words can be (offering such precise shades of meaning) and made me realise that it would make more sense for me to work with language than to try teaching it. Oh yes, and I got the job.

wayzgoose by [Dorothy Zemach](#)

I certainly understand why the Macmillan Dictionary is [moving to online-only](#). It's not only the sensible economic choice, but the correct environmental choice. And yet I felt a pang at the news, too (and not just because I'm the proud possessor of a *Macmillan English Dictionary* that I had Editor-in-chief [Michael Rundell](#) autograph, to his apparent astonishment). It's because as a child, I used to page through the dictionary looking for words, much the way I'd sometimes idly pick up a volume of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (which has also [moved online](#)) just to see what I could find inside.

It was during a search of this sort, going through the W's to see what might be there (and what might assist my Scrabble hand), that I met the word I now consider to be "mine" so much that I officially adopted it: [wayzgoose](#). What a wondrous word! It sounds good. It looks good. And its meaning doesn't disappoint: an annual summer outing, taken by members of a printing establishment, usually involving a picnic and a drive into the country. You couldn't make that up if you tried! And where exactly it did come from, nobody really knows. But what we do know is that it marked the time in the autumn when printers could no longer work by daylight alone, and would have to start lighting candles. To mark the passage of the season and the change of the work style, the master printer threw his workers a celebration.

Over the years I've collected examples of the word. I have it on a coffee mug and a t-shirt. I have wayzgoose menus from the 1800s from Cambridge University Press. I have a photo of an old wayzgoose on a postcard. I even have a magazine from *My Little Pony* in which the ponies all go on "My Wonderful Wayzgoose." Naturally, when I started my freelance career, I incorporated as Wayzgoose Inc.; and naturally, when I started publishing my own books (fiction, non-fiction such as David Nunan's memoirs, and ELT guides for both teachers and students), I had to call my imprint Wayzgoose Press. In fact, if you visit that [site](#), you can find on the homepage an exhaustive essay I wrote on the possible origins of the term.

Whether dictionaries are online or not, I strongly feel everyone should have a favorite word. It needn't be an unusual one, or one you have to find through a serendipitous search; it can be one you choose because of its sound or its look or its meaning. Or if you're lucky, all three.



learn



live



love



play

Persian

Persian by [Liz Potter](#)

When I was a student at Edinburgh University, more years ago than I like to admit, I was sitting in my room in halls one evening with the door open, talking to a friend, when a dark skinny man with an impressive [Afro](#) and an equally impressive moustache walked past. “Michael,” he said to my friend, “what are you doing here?” Being a well-brought-up young woman I invited him to join us for coffee, and in the course of the ensuing conversation asked where he was from. “Iran,” was the answer. Iran? Where was that? Kind of Middle East way, I thought. But then there was Iraq too; why give two different countries such similar names? I knew nothing about these places, could not even place them on a map.

Now I was very young and, as you will have noticed, pretty ignorant; and in my defence (this was a very long time ago) these countries were not so much in the news as they are now. In any case, the fog of confusion soon lifted because my visitor explained that he was [Persian](#). Ah, Persian, that was something I did [have a handle on](#). Iran might be a mystery to me, but Persian went with cats, and carpets, and poets and emperors; nightingales and exquisite miniatures and Arabian Nights folk tales; Cyrus the Great, a mighty empire. I knew where I was with Persian. Tell me more.

Well, he did tell me more. The conversation flowed, along with the coffee, on that and many subsequent occasions. Reader, to cut a long story short, I married him (eventually). And he’s still telling me fascinating stories about his homeland all these years later.

What does this have to do with [Stories behind Words](#)? Well, as Juliet put it, [what’s in a name?](#) What’s in a name is that if he’d said he was Iranian rather than Persian I’d have had to admit my appalling ignorance, and who knows, the relationship might have foundered right there, before we’d even finished our coffee.

perspective by [David Crystal](#)

Since [The Story of English in 100 Words](#) came out in 2011, I've been giving talks based upon it to literary festivals. The idea was to choose 100 words, each of which represented a strand in the history of the English language. The hope was that, jigsaw-like, at the end of the book the reader would have gained a perspective on English vocabulary as a whole. But you can never satisfy a [lifest](#) audience. And after almost every talk, someone asks me: 'What would be your 101st word?'

It would have to be [perspective](#). I've been in love with this word for the whole of my academic life. My first academic article, in 1963, was called 'A perspective for paralinguage'. The next year I wrote one called 'A liturgical language in a linguistic perspective'. And there was a time when I played a game with myself, ensuring that everything I wrote contained the word somewhere or other. A 1966 paper, 'The linguistic status of prosodic and paralinguistic features', doesn't have it in the title, but it's there, at the beginning of the third paragraph. No book passed from my paws without the word being used at least once.

Fast forward 40 years, and things haven't changed a bit. It's the last word in the preface of my *Txtng* (2008). It turns up over 20 times in my autobiographical memoir, *Just a Phrase I'm Going Through* (2009). It's in the prologue to *Begat* (2010). Chapter 1 of my *Internet Linguistics* is called 'Linguistic perspectives'. It's in the preface to *The Story of English in 100 Words*, and I use it four times in my introduction to the latest book, *Spell it Out* (2012). If a computer were to carry out a [stylometric](#) study of the lexicon of my [oeuvre](#), *perspective* would rank abnormally high.

And, I suppose, if somebody were to ask me to sum up my approach to language and linguistics over the years, in a single word, that is how I would answer: to provide perspective...



learn



live



love



play

stroke

stroke by [Miles Craven](#)

There is one word in the English language that I will never forget. It's a word that I had heard of, but I didn't really know what it meant until it affected me personally. Back in 2008, someone who is very dear to me had a [stroke](#).

A *stroke* is a brain attack. It happens when the blood supply to part of the brain is cut off. This can be caused by a blockage (an ischaemic stroke), or a bleed (a haemorrhagic stroke). I thought that a stroke only happened to elderly people, but in fact it is possible to have a stroke at any age. For two months, I spent every day at the hospital. I saw the devastating consequences of what a stroke can do. It can take away your speech, your mobility, your mind, and, yes, your life ... For many people, a stroke is fatal.

Luckily my friend survived, but the journey back from the edge of death has been a difficult one. Some people suffer no long-term effects, but for most recovering from a stroke means a long, hard struggle to learn to walk, to speak, to think again. Life is never quite the same after you, or someone close to you, has a stroke. It is a truly shocking event; one that happens in seconds, but affects your life forever afterwards.

There are risk factors, and the internet is full of information about avoiding strokes. I would advise everyone to visit useful websites such as www.stroke.org.uk and read up on the subject. Keep an eye on your blood pressure, and if your family has a history of stroke, then take it seriously. We all take good health for granted ... until it is snatched away from us.

These days, we volunteer at the local hospital, helping stroke sufferers and their families with information, advice and support. We have raised money for stroke services, participated in focus groups and conferences, and lobbied Parliament for greater government support. We have learned it's important to be positive, and to enjoy the things in life you can do – rather than feel bad about the things you can't.

dandelion

dandelion by [Karen Richardson](#)

While not having one specific influence on the way I think or work, the word (and plant) [dandelion](#) is one that has accompanied me all my life.

When I was small, my grandmother taught me and my sister how to tell the time by blowing the seeds of a dandelion clock. Although the method was not very scientific, it was enough fun for us to make it want to work. So, instead of counting the amount of puffs it took to blow all the seeds away (which was how we were supposed to do it), we varied the strengths of our puffs so that if we knew for example that it was three o'clock, we blew all the seeds off in three strong puffs. We were encouraged to do this in the field and the park, but not in our grandmother's garden.

In my early 20s, while studying herbal medicine, I was chuffed to find out that the name *dandelion* comes from a mispronunciation of the French *Dente de Lion*, literally 'lion's tooth'. Look at the [shape of the leaves](#), and it will be obvious how it got this name. Even more relevant to a budding [phytotherapist](#), was finding out that the French give this [diuretic](#) plant another more vernacular name: *pisse en lit*. Where I live now, the plant's name in the local German Swabian dialect is: *Bettsoicherle*. Both of these folk-names mean the same thing in English, and that is 'wet the bed'. Be aware of this next time you drink a pot of dandelion tea before bedtime!

These days, as a garden-owner, I have a bit of a love-hate relationship with dandelions. On the one hand, when they appear in bright abundance, they herald the beginning of summer; on the other hand, if we don't keep them under control, their incredible root system and seeds will enable them to take over the garden in a very short time. So we dig some dandelions out, we leave some in to flower, but no one is allowed, at least within the boundaries of the garden, to blow their pretty fluffy seeds off the top of the stalk and tell the time with a dandelion clock.



my feet are killing me

my feet are killing me by [Adrian Tennant](#)

Back in early 1997 I was working as an English teacher in Quito, Ecuador. My family were over there with me and my daughter – Aliz – would have been 5½ at the time. I don't think I'm any different from other English language teachers in being fascinated by the way our children pick up languages. I would spend ages listening to my daughter amazed at the words and expressions she used, thinking about the grammar and the order she was acquiring things.

At the time her favourite video was *Pocahontas* and whenever we were walking down to the shopping centre or the park she would retell the story. It always made me laugh as she would start by saying “So John Smith went into the forest and then Pocahontas went into the forest. And then they met under the talking tree. And then ...” it seemed as though the only conjunction she knew was ‘and then’ so I'd always butt in by saying ‘and then’ at the wrong points. :-)

And then (you see it's catching) one day we were walking across Parque La Carolina, the big park just down the road from our apartment. I guess from one end to the other was easily 3 kilometres, so quite a long walk for a young child. Aliz had her head down, trudging along recounting *Pocahontas* for the millionth time when suddenly she paused, looked up at me and said, “Dad. My feet are [killing](#) me!” I was stunned. Here was a five-and-a-half-year-old using an idiom perfectly – at this time she still made mistakes with syntax, irregular past verbs (making them regular), past perfect etc and yet she could use an idiom in exactly the right way. I laughed so loud that my sides were killing me!

eye of the tiger

eye of the tiger by [Luke Vyner](#)

As non-academic and uncool as it may sound and after a few hour glasses of thought, my chosen phrase is going to have to be *eye of the tiger*.

It has become a phrase that is so frequently used in the confines of my immediate family that it's simply become part of the furniture, part of our natural lexicon, part of the fabric of how we all communicate. Like a family cat that lives far beyond its life expectancy, *eye of the tiger* seems to have unexpectedly been kept alive at every opportune moment. Be it job interviews, weddings, gigs, presentations, house offers, court cases, funeral eulogies, it just seems to come out instinctively in text messages, emails, voicemails and even in person.

[My old man](#) was a huge fan of the *Rocky* films and he tried his best to emulate the look. He bought a grey all-in-one tracksuit and would run around the house shouting '[Adrien](#)'. The only problem was my Dad was and still is a rather petite man. He's more Leonard Cohen than Sylvester Stallone but with a small sweat patch just above his chest he was able to dream ...

It was this love of the [Rocky films](#) that got my Dad using [this phrase](#) and for my brother, sister and I it would be said to us before school sports matches and exams. It is a phrase we remember from our childhood that has become synonymous with a Dad who was always there at every juncture in our life. To us it meant: have no fear and go for it with everything you have. Somehow that phrase has become a family heirloom and although as corny as can be, it represents how much we all love each other!



learn



live



love



play

blagrant

blagrant by [Andrew Delahunty](#)

My father, who was an exuberant talker and storyteller, used to conflate words, creating inadvertent coinages [on the fly](#) in the middle of a conversation or anecdote. He tended not to notice that he'd done it, but my brothers and I, and Mum, would pounce on them with glee.

One time he mentioned someone's [razier-like](#) wit, presumably wit as sharp as both a [razor](#) and a [rapier](#) simultaneously. On another occasion he described a group of late-night revellers as [legloose](#), a lovely, carefree, loose-limbed, slightly squiffy mixture of [footloose](#) and [legless](#). Then there was [interspinkled](#), which seems to incorporate elements of [interspersed](#), [sprinkled](#), and [intermingled](#), to name but three. My favourite, though, has always been [blagrant](#), as in 'a blagrant lie' or 'a blagrant disregard for the law', a highly satisfying combination of [blatant](#) and [flagrant](#). I think what I like about it so much is that it seems so plausible. It sounds like it ought to be a word.

Linguistically, these would be described as *blends*, words formed by combining parts of two other words, like [brunch](#) (from *breakfast* and *lunch*) or the recent [chillax](#) (from *chill* and *relax*). But Dad's versions weren't deliberate coinages, they were simply happy accidents. Accidental or not, there's a playful inventiveness about these made-up words that I really cherished when I was growing up, and still do. He did it naturally, like breathing.

Long before I became a lexicographer, I delighted in what you might call the joy of words: puns and other forms of wordplay, word puzzles, obscure words, made-up words. And I think *blagrant* (and those other curious lexical [mongrels](#)) may well be where it all started. I have wondered from time to time about sneaking *blagrant* in as a headword in one of the dictionaries I'm helping to write, and perhaps one day I will.

oblong by [Kerry Maxwell](#)

I'm sure I'm not alone in having really enjoyed reading [this series so far](#), and one thing that's struck me is how often 'Dads' seem to feature in people's anecdotes on lexical encounters. Well, here's yet another one ...

My Dad, [God rest his soul](#), was (unlike myself!) never much of a talker. Dad bought me my first ever big, chunky, English dictionary, and in the front page inscribed the message 'To Kerry – many words, from a man of not many words'. No, Dad was much more the pensive type, which meant that when he did open his mouth, what he said was usually worth listening to. He was a talented engineer, leading a team of draughtsman in the design of military vehicles in an era when plans were drawn with pencils rather than mouse clicks. The concept of shape, therefore, was very significant for him, and when talking about this he would often express an inexplicable dislike for the word [oblong](#). He had such an uncharacteristically strenuous aversion to the word that any mention of it would make his blood boil, saying things like 'it's a rectangle, a RECTANGLE for God's sake ... I [can't abide](#) anyone saying *oblong!*'. As you can imagine, from such a quiet, considered individual, this reaction seemed so odd and has stayed with me all my life. So much so that, even now, I can't bring myself to use the word for fear of him turning in his grave. I love words, I've even made a career out of writing about them, but whatever linguistic obfuscations I need to employ, I'll go to great lengths to avoid using the word *oblong!*

In case you were wondering, *oblong* clearly doesn't provoke a similar reaction elsewhere and shows no sign of disappearing any time soon. It's been around for a very long time, alive and well in British English before Big Ben was even thought about. It in fact dates back to the 14th century which makes it, sorry Dad, much older than *rectangle* ...

oblong



learn



live



love



play

as rare as hen's teeth

as rare as hen's teeth by [Simon Williams](#)

After several months of shopping for increasingly larger neck sizes in shirts, and feeling pleased that my weight-training regime was finally paying off, a routine X-ray revealed my [thyroid](#) was growing so much it had turned my trachea into a U-bend. Liking the idea of surgery by the sea, I decided to see a consultant in Worthing to have it removed. Most of us are worried about the possibility of developing the '[big C](#)', so when I understood there was a growth I asked him about the possibility. Consultants are often accused of [talking in riddles](#), so it was refreshing to find one that spoke the vernacular. '*As rare as hen's teeth*,' he said dismissively. Well, I knew hens didn't have teeth, so that was all right: it was an impossibility. 'No hurry for surgery,' he added. 'Leave it until next summer.'

After a few more months, as my throat became increasingly constricted, I persuaded him to operate sooner, and early one morning, I walked from the railway station to the hospital for surgery. Two weeks later, he sent his registrar to the follow-up appointment. 'Laryngeal nerve palsy,' she said, removing a tube from my left nostril, 'and we sent the tissue to the lab, as we always do, and I'm afraid it's come back positive for cancer.' Well, that was all right: they'd removed it. Back home on Google, I discovered there were actually four kinds of thyroid cancer, so I made another appointment with the consultant to ask him which one I had. It was the second most obscure. That was when I learned the meaning of *as rare as hen's teeth* is 'unlikely but not impossible'. I no longer weight train, my shirt size has returned to normal, and my knowledge of English idioms has vastly improved.

box by [Ana Maria Menezes](#)

2009 was a singular year in my life. I was diagnosed with breast cancer and had to stay home during the treatment. As I couldn't be in a real classroom, I moderated an online course for teachers. During my treatment, one of the participants of the course lost her mom to the same disease. Some weeks later, this teacher e-mailed me asking if she could send me a [box](#) with gifts she had bought for her mom but had no chance to give her before her passing. She told me she would send a book about cancer which would help me a lot. I was deeply touched by her offer and answered that I was honored to receive such a special gift.

One day, as I got home feeling a bit dizzy after a [chemo](#) session, I saw a big box on my sofa. "Wow, what a big box!", I said. "It's Andressa's box!", I explained while taking the box to my bedroom. I sat down on my bed and started opening the box. Inside the post office box, there was a beautiful second box tied with a purple ribbon. I was caught by surprise when I opened its lid and felt like a little girl opening Christmas presents.

Inside the box, there was the promised book along with delicate paper flowers, pieces of colored paper and several little gifts. In every little detail, I could notice Andressa's love for her mom and her kind gesture in including little treats specially for me, such as messages about education, hope and faith. I recorded a video message thanking my student and for the first time, wrote about my fight against cancer and the beautiful box which had brought me enormous joy and hope.



home

home by [Will Allen](#)

A large map of the world hangs on the wall next to my dining table. It features numerous coloured pins marking significant places in the lives of friends who visit: blue for upcoming trips, yellow for where they have lived, white for a dream holiday. But it is what red pins signify that is the most difficult to (literally) pin down, yet arguably reveals the most. On this map, red pins mark 'where is [home](#)'?

Born in South Korea, adopted to the United States, having worked at the US-Mexico border, and now living in the UK since 2009, I find it difficult to answer this question because it taps into my life story of [migration](#) – of having lived, learned, and loved in different places. In my case, the word juxtaposes memories like running barefoot through Michigan cornfields in warm summery evenings, waking up early to buy fresh produce at a local borderland market called Mata's, and sharing stories with friends under starry skies in the meadows near Oxford. As these experiences accumulate, they have created within my mind an equally stratified, mixed-up, imagined version of 'home' that transcends typical borders.

Yet, 'home' not only marks a discrete point of origin where we were born, but also conveys a degree of comfort and identification with a place: Ben Franklin observed that home 'contains food and fire for the mind as well as the body'. Viewed this way, my life has featured many homes, and will undoubtedly include many more. Therefore, asking 'where is home?' invites us to consider how we currently – as well as aspire to – relate with the continually changing mix of people, spaces, and values that surrounds us. Thinking about where and what we call 'home' in this way is an invitation I hope we can wholeheartedly accept.

South African

South African by [Laine Redpath Cole](#)

In the 1980s when I was at one of the very few 'non-racial' schools in the country, the word *South African* hung like a stone around my neck. We were all living in some kind of sin by association and although we were always surrounded by good people fighting a good cause, there was still a stink of shame in the air. At 18 I left the country and came to England. The English were (bless them) not exactly wild about white South Africans. People sometimes thought I was from New Zealand and so New Zealand became my adoptive country. I'd never been there but I [sure as hell](#) was from there now.

In 1994 the first open election was held in South Africa and I had just turned 19. It was the first time there was a reason to vote – I remember my mom saying she would never vote until she could vote [ANC](#). I wasn't very political but that day was something else. My friends and I went to vote in London, we had ANC colours painted on our cheeks. Nelson Mandela was going to be the new president, and he was black, *black!* What was that weird feeling fluttering away in my gut ... was it pride? White South African pride? That was new.

It's hard to fully understand the miracle that Mandela enacted by maintaining peace in this period. That year I went to visit a friend who came from a decidedly 'right-wing-racist-but-we-mean-well' sort of family. At some point in the evening my friend's father sat back in his chair and said: 'Mandela is a good man.' I had no doubt that that was the first time he'd used the word *man* when speaking about (or to) a black man. I was [in awe](#) at the fact that one man had been able to so fully affect another human being's outlook without ever having met him. That was real power. And that power came from a South African. The feeling of shame in the word slowly started to ebb away.

Now, only 20 years or so later the word *South African* is no longer a [stone](#). *South African* has come to symbolise change, liberalism, flexibility – of course there are problems; issues like racism and poverty don't disappear overnight, but the initial 'Rainbow Nation' idealism appears to have given birth to a vital, motivated, self-correcting next generation of South Africans. And I'm no longer a [Kiwi](#).



learn



live



love



play

thrice

thrice by [Saskia Iseard](#)

Ten years ago (has it been that long?) I started my studies of English philology, linguistics and literature. I loved reading for hours upon hours and one of my favourite authors was Charles Dickens. There was one class I wasn't too keen on though: language lab. Spending hours in a tiny booth recording and listening to your own voice, stumbling over tongue twisters ... Who invented that?!

In his post '[These three things](#)', Jonathan Marks writes that the *th*-sounds (*th*ink, *th*is) are something that many learners of English find difficult to master, but that learners shouldn't worry too much about pronouncing them correctly.

Not so for me: I felt I had to get it right! I spent several hours a week in the booth, trying to master those sounds that were not native to me. *Three* was *sree* and *though* was *dough*. On learning about my frustration, a teacher advised me to do the following exercise: push the tip of your tongue against the back of your top front teeth, and repeatedly make a *d* sound: d-d-d-d-d. After hours of practice at school and at home (sorry mum!) I finally got it right.

A few months later I was visiting an English friend at her home in London. She asked me a question about how many times I'd read a particular book. "[Thrice!](#)" I said with confidence, knowing that this time my pronunciation wouldn't fail me. "Thrice?" she said, laughing at my comment. What kind of old-fashioned word is that? You mean 'three times'!

And so I learned that pronunciation isn't everything and not everything can be taught from a book (not even one written by Dickens).

dench by [Liz Potter](#)

It's not uncommon for people's names to become words in their own right: a [Cassandra](#) is someone who predicts disaster but is not listened to, while a [David and Goliath](#) situation is one in which a small person or organization takes on and defeats a larger, more powerful opponent. Surnames can become words, too. The name [Jeeves](#) (originally a character in stories by the comic writer [P.G. Wodehouse](#)) is used to refer to a kind of personal assistant who can always find an ingenious solution to any problem. (The website '[Ask Jeeves](#)' claims to answer any question.)

So when the adjective *dench* (or *Dench*) started to be [banded around](#) in 2012 as a general term of approval, with a meaning similar to 'cool', some people's thoughts would have turned to the renowned English actor Dame Judi Dench. In fact Dame Judi had nothing to do with the word's evolution – though perhaps quite a bit to do with its subsequent popularization.

The term was coined by the British rap artist [Lethal Bizzle](#) while playing a video game with his cousin, Arsenal footballer Emmanuel Frimpong. The pair started using the word on social media then, after someone printed it on a T-shirt, launched a clothing brand with slogans such as STAY DENCH. In late 2012 and early 2013, with Judi Dench [doing the rounds](#) of the chat shows to publicize her role in the latest James Bond film *Skyfall*, Bizzle's coinage received a massive publicity boost. The mainstream media [latched onto](#) the fact that a much-loved actor's surname had become a hip term of approval – and one which Dame Judi herself endorsed. (She was seen at one interview wearing a cap with a 'STAY DENCH' logo.)

On the Macmillan Dictionary site, *dench* got the full [BuzzWord](#) treatment back in April 2013, and subsequently [entered the Macmillan Dictionary](#) (with a [hat tip](#) to its originator) as part of the dictionary's most [recent update](#). Unaware of his word's new status, Lethal Bizzle launched a campaign to '[Get dench in the dictionary](#)', together with a [Facebook page](#), a [Twitter feed](#), and even [an ad](#) on the London Underground. So when we contacted him to let him know his word already was in the dictionary (in *this* dictionary, at least), he gave us a little more background about its origins: "Whenever we would score a goal [while playing the video game], we would shout 'What a dench goal', and then we started using the word on social media and in songs". It was taken up by a number of high-profile names (actors, musicians, footballers and so on), and was even heard on the popular soap *EastEnders*. He told us he was "very happy to find out that the word already appears in the Macmillan Dictionary!"

Dench made it into the dictionary not because it's topical but because it satisfied our usual criteria (in terms of frequency and breadth of use). It's hard to know why some words are more successful than others (after all, there are plenty of other ways of saying something is 'cool'). In this case, the (unintentional) association with Judi Dench won't have done any harm, coupled with the fact that it's short, [snappy](#), and has a satisfying sound. Whether it will still be around in five years' time is anybody's guess.



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red line

red line by [Liz Potter](#)

If you saw a line would you cross it? To do so might have serious consequences, as Chandler discovered when he [kissed Joey's girlfriend](#) in series 4 of *Friends*:

“Chandler: I have no excuses. I was totally over the line.
 Joey: Over the line? You ... you ... you're so far past the line that you can't even see the line! The line is a dot to you!”

The concept of the line as a metaphorical boundary is a rich and longstanding one. To [cross a line](#) is to go beyond accepted limits or standards of behaviour.

What if the line is a line drawn in the sand? A [line in the sand](#) is a warning that contains an implied threat. Crossing a line in the sand means laying yourself open to harm. The person who has drawn that line will hurt you if you cross it.

But now we have [red lines](#) too (the earliest use with this meaning seems to [date back to the 1970s](#)). When the President of the United States [sets out his red lines](#) everyone pays attention. They know that to cross a red line has even more drastic consequences than crossing a line in the sand, since red is the colour of danger and of blood. It is the colour of the coats of [Kipling's](#) “thin red line of ‘eroes” at the [Battle of Balaclava](#) in 1854. It is also the colour of pen traditionally used by teachers to mark wrong answers, and by bank employees to mark areas on a map whose residents are considered to be a poor risk. This cluster of metaphors suggests that crossing a red line is a very bad idea indeed.

keirin by [Liz Potter](#)

It is a little more than a year since the London Olympics and Paralympics thrilled even those whose usual reaction to competitive sport is to ignore it completely. Inspired by [stellar](#) performances from British athletes, people who could hardly tell one end of a hockey stick from the other swiftly became experts in the intricacies of rowing and the subtleties of [dressage](#).

One of the major focuses of attention was the [velodrome](#), where gold medals for GB in both the men's (Sir Chris Hoy) and women's races (Victoria Pendleton) brought the word [keirin](#) to brief prominence. This race, where riders are led for many laps by a [pacemaker](#) – usually a man on a motorbike – before sprinting for the finish, was invented in Japan in the mid 20th century and only became part of the Olympics in Sydney in 2000.

The literal meaning of [keirin](#) is something like “racing wheels” and the word seems set to join other words of Japanese origin like [kimono](#), [haiku](#) and [karaoke](#) that have incontestably become part of English. Unless of course, like the ill-fated [madison](#), the *keirin* is dropped from subsequent Olympics.



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unfriend

unfriend by [Liz Potter](#)

Do sentences like the following make you shudder?

*Surprisingly many of my friends don't know how to **unfriend** Facebook friends. For the record, I **unfriended** him like 2 years ago because I couldn't stand his rudeness.*

If I asked you when you thought the verb [unfriend](#) had started to be used, you would probably guess that it was when Facebook and the like started to become popular, in the mid [noughties](#). You'd be right on the whole – the earliest quote in the OED that relates to social media is from 2003. But fascinatingly there is a much older citation in the entry:

“1659 T. Fuller Let. P. Heylyn in Appeal Injured Innoc. iii, I Hope, Sir, that we are not mutually Un-friended by this Difference which hath happened betwixt us.”

Users of English have always made nouns of verbs and verbs of nouns, and added prefixes and suffixes in order to widen the range of what they are able to say. Thomas Fuller could easily have said ‘I hope our friendship will not end because of...’ or ‘I hope we will remain friends despite...’ but he didn't; he chose instead to use – perhaps even to [coin](#) – a verb which expressed his idea in a more active and dynamic way.

Bob's your uncle

Bob's your uncle by [Liz Potter](#)

There has been a lot of speculation over the years about the origins of the phrase [Bob's your uncle](#), but the fact is that no one knows whose uncle Bob was, or why he should have lent his name to an expression that means something will be very easy or quick to do. [Various 19th century public figures](#) have been put forward to explain the phrase's origin, but there is no contemporary evidence whatsoever to support any of these explanations.

The first citation of the phrase in OED refers to an entry in Partridge's *Dictionary of Slang*, 1937; but Partridge cannot shed much light, beyond claiming that it has been used since ca. 1890 and speculating that it may be an elaboration of the 'low-slang' phrase *all is bob*, meaning 'all is safe'. The slangy nature of the phrase is highlighted in the [earliest written citation](#), a book review in the *Observer* newspaper in 1932 which refers disapprovingly to the 'strident liveliness' of an author who uses it. The poet Stephen Spender (1946) believed the expression to be [cockney](#), though it's unclear on what grounds.

Bob was used from the 18th century as a generic name for a man (similar to [Tom, Dick and Harry](#)). Meanwhile, uncles are often seen as benevolent and potentially generous figures. These elements, combined with the 'all is well' meaning, may go some way to explaining the phrase's origin, though the actual story behind *Bob's your uncle* seems destined to remain a mystery.



Kith and kin

kith and kin by [Liz Potter](#)

If you have read Stan's recent post [Fossil words of yore](#), you will already know that kith in the expression *kith and kin* is one of these fossil words; that is, it has little or no life of its own but exists today only in that expression.

It was not always so, though it is a long time since any of the meanings of kith (a word of Germanic origin meaning 'known') given in the OED have been used independently. Three of the senses are completely obsolete, while the fourth is used only in the set phrase. So if your [kin](#) are all the people in your family, who or what are your kith? OED says:

"The persons who are known or familiar, taken collectively; one's friends, fellow-countrymen, or neighbours; acquaintance; in later use sometimes confused with kin: see 5. Obs. or arch. exc. as in 5."

Over 90% of the citations in a sample of 100 corpus lines contain the fixed expression, along with a few proper names and oddities. And although *kith and kin* is also what is generally known as an irreversible binomial, meaning that the nouns always occur in the same order, a small number of citations do nevertheless reverse the order. A few citations also separate kith from its usually inseparable partner (though not by much), showing that the word's independent meaning still lingers:

"Remember you have kith, if not kin, in these parts.
I had neither kith nor kin in England.
Because they are kith and not kin they will not receive anything from her estate."

iconoclast by [Michael Rundell](#)

London's Tate Britain gallery has a new [exhibition](#) called "Art under Attack: Histories of British Iconoclasm", which will explore "the history of physical attacks on art in Britain from the 16th century to the present day". This invokes the original – now rare – meaning of *iconoclast*, as someone who broke or destroyed "icons" (or religious images), which comes from the medieval Greek εικονοκλάστης. When it first appeared, the word *iconoclast* referred specifically to a group of people who, in the 8th and 9th centuries, destroyed religious images used in worship in [Orthodox Christian](#) churches. With the rise of Protestantism in the 16th and 17th centuries, England got its own taste of iconoclasm, as religious statues were decapitated and stained glass windows smashed – notably during Henry VIII's [Dissolution of the Monasteries](#).

In the OED's [citations](#) for the word, iconoclasts are invariably portrayed in a negative light, and at first sight, this pejorative tone seems to have carried over to the word's contemporary [meaning](#), as "someone who attacks the beliefs, customs, and opinions that most people in a society accept". But data from the corpus suggests a more [ambivalent](#) position. Some examples do indeed characterize iconoclasts as pointlessly subversive – as wanting to tear down existing conventions simply [for the hell of it](#):

"It would be a mistake to dismiss Morin as an egocentric iconoclast who produced little of lasting significance.

This poorly researched and shamefully iconoclastic article repeats many old and long-disproved stories about Churchill."

But most examples are more approving, portraying iconoclasts (often artists, writers, or musicians) as people with independent minds, who are not afraid to challenge accepted ideas and conventions, and whose readiness to question [the status quo](#) may lead to brilliant innovations:

"These are two qualities immediately recognisable in Eric Rohmer's work, a director who is a quiet iconoclast: classical, modern, revolutionary.

Lennox is celebrated as an innovator, an iconoclast, and a symbol of enduring excellence within a culture too often fixated on the lightweight."

It's not surprising that the word "faces both ways", since it reflects our equally ambivalent attitudes to what is [conventional](#) – which, as our entry shows, may be seen as positive or negative.



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loophole

loophole by [Michael Rundell](#)

There was a news story in the UK last week about the government's failure to "close a tax loophole which costs the UK economy at least £500m a year". A *loophole* is, according to [the Macmillan Dictionary](#), "something that has been left out of a law or legal document that people can use to avoid obeying it". Taxation is one of the most common contexts in which we find this word. Tax laws are extremely complex, and there is an ongoing battle of wits, where one side (clever accountants, typically working for big corporations or wealthy individuals) try to *find* and *exploit* loopholes in the legislation, while the other side (the government) tries to *plug* or *close* them. (These are the most common verb collocates.)

But why *loophole*? The word originally referred to those long narrow openings in the walls of old castles, which allowed defenders to fire arrows or bullets at an enemy with little risk of their attackers' missiles finding their way in through the loophole. This usage dates back to the 16th century, but the object it describes is far older, and was originally just called a "loop". (The OED's earliest citation for this meaning is dated 1393, and comes from the poem [Piers Plowman](#).)

The "modern" meaning of *loophole* is itself over 300 years old, but it's not entirely clear how we get from a narrow window in a castle to an omission – in a law or contract, for example – that provides an opportunity for evading its intended purpose. The consensus seems to be that the current use developed not from Middle English *loop* (a window) but from Dutch *loop* (which is related to the verb *loopen*, meaning "to run"), and from the now obsolete Dutch word *loopgat*, which was a hole through which someone or something could "run away" or escape. Somehow this concept – which is also reflected in *loophole*'s near-synonym *escape clause* - attached itself to the existing word *loophole*, and it's easy to see why. The loopholes in a castle give you an advantage over your adversary, and so – potentially – do the loopholes in a law or contract.

madeleine by [Michael Rundell](#)

In his recent 'Word roots and routes' [post](#), Jonathan explored the connections between the word *voiced* and its numerous [cognates](#). He noted that:

"Sometimes you hear, see, smell, taste or read something that *evokes* a certain feeling, emotion or image from your memory or experience."

A famous case of *evocation* relates to the word [madeleine](#). A madeleine is a kind of small buttery sponge cake from France (there's a recipe and picture [here](#)), which gets its first (English) mention in a cookbook published in 1846. But when we look at corpus data, we find that at least half the examples of *madeleine* refer not specifically to the cake but to its "evocative" role in Marcel Proust's novel *À la recherche du temps perdu* (variously translated into English as *In Search of Lost Time* or *Remembrance of Things Past*). This huge novel was published in seven volumes over a period of 14 years, and its first part, known in English as *Swann's Way*, appeared exactly 100 years ago, on 8th November 1913. So this is a good week for talking about madeleines.

In a key passage in the novel, the main character, Charles Swann, finds that the smell of a madeleine dipped in tea sets off a whole [raft](#) of memories from his childhood. The funny thing is that this episode seems to be familiar to people who have never read the novel – and who may not even know what a madeleine is. In the corpus data, we find occasional references to the cakes themselves:

"Usually, we go in for the coffee, but who can resist one of their Proustian madeleines?"

More often, though, the reference is to the whole scenario, where the cake acts as a trigger for old memories:

"The process of going through customs and passport control provokes, like Proust's madeleine, waves of memory of Soviet times past. To Savoy, the opening bars of a 1950s Rock 'n' Roll or R&B single are more of a temporal disruption device than Marcel Proust's madeleine ever was. For them, an authentic bagel, perfectly formed cannoli, or a properly turned-out tortilla can prove as evocative as Proust's madeleines."

And many more [in the same vein](#). There is usually a reference to Proust (or *Proustian*), but we find the occasional example where the original story is simply [taken as read](#):

"One thing has not changed...I find the smell of polish as palpable as in my first week: my own private madeleine. I vaguely remember a splashy launch, consultation exercises in church halls, a website. Happily, this proved enough of a madeleine to get me directed to the Labour Party HQ."

A very evocative cultural reference!



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rack and ruin

rack and ruin by [Michael Rundell](#)

Today's post was requested by one of our readers, Caroline Batchelder, who asked us to tell the story behind the expression [go to rack and ruin](#).

There is a line in Milton's [Paradise Lost](#) (1677) which goes:

"And now all Heav'n Had gone to wrack, with ruins overspred."

Wrack, meaning damage, devastation or destruction, is a word that goes all the way back to Old English (it is first cited in the 10th century). In Milton's poem, *wrack* is closely associated with *ruin*, but there is plenty of evidence for the word being used on its own, as in this quotation from the 19th century Scottish writer [Walter Scott](#):

"When he hoisted his standard black, Before him was battle, behind him wrack."

But the 'younger' form, *rack* (which first appears at the end of the 16th century), almost always occurs as part of the fixed expression "rack and ruin" – a form of [reduplication](#) (like *spick* and *span* or [kith and kin](#)) which gives it added emphasis.

Individually, both *wrack* and *rack* have died out (at least in this older meaning), but when used in combination with *ruin*, both are alive and well. Surprisingly (to me, at any rate), *wrack* and *ruin* is not that much less common than *rack* and *ruin*: our corpus has 57 instances in all, of which 22 favour the *wrack* spelling. The phrase is usually prefaced by "go to" but "fall (in)to" is fairly common, too, and there are occasional variations such as a village hall which is "*rescued from wrack and ruin thanks to a cash injection*".

Going to rack and ruin is something that mostly happens to houses, palaces, or cities, and sometimes to farms, fields, and gardens. It is generally a gradual process, a consequence of neglect:

"The Patti Pavilion ... is a lovely venue down on the seafront, being left to slowly decay into rack and ruin.
Here was a home gone to rack and ruin ... an air of mustiness and decay, dust everywhere."

But it occasionally happens to people or societies, too, and in this case it can either refer to financial ruin (*the derivatives market that wrought such wrack and ruin to the global economy*), or to a decline into moral [degeneracy](#) (*his account of a foolish young rake going to rack and ruin*).

humble pie by [Liz Potter](#)

Being forced to eat anything is unpleasant, but [humble pie](#) must rank among the most disagreeable dishes of all. By eating it you acknowledge that you were completely wrong and that someone else – the person making you eat it – was right. But what is *humble pie*? And was it ever a physical rather than a metaphorical dish?

Humbles are the [insides](#) of an animal, especially a deer, used as food. The original term *numbles*, from the Middle French *nombles*, acquired a variant *umbles*, sometimes later spelled *humbles*. All three of these terms are [archaic](#); your butcher will give you a baffled look if you ask for some *umbles* along with your chops.

The OED cites several references both to the organs themselves and to an actual pie containing them:

“1523 J. Skelton *Goodly Garlande of Laurell* 1240 The vmbelis of venyson ...
To fayre maistres Anne that shuld haue be sent.
1736 N. Bailey *Dict. Domesticum*, [To make] An Umble Pye. Boil the umbles of a deer till they are very tender [etc.].
1663 S. Pepys *Diary* 8 July (1971) IV. 221 Mrs. Turner ... did bring us an Umble-pie hot out of her oven.”

At some point, however, the resemblance of the deer's (*h/n*)*umbles* to the adjective [humble](#) became irresistible and the literal pie became a metaphorical one signifying self-abasement:

“1854 Thackeray *Newcomes* I. xiv. 136 You must get up and eat humble pie this morning, my boy.”

Today the literal meaning has vanished, lingering only in continuing ideas of *humble pie* as something physical, so people talk not only about ‘eating humble pie’ but about having ‘a big piece of humble pie’, or ‘another slice/helping’ of it. The expression, as well as recalling a vanished dish [redolent](#) of the medieval past, contains a fossil word (the noun *humble(s)* used attributively) and a [rebracketing](#) (of *umble* to *humble*). For more on fossil words see [Stan](#)'s post on [Fossil words of yore](#).



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Ruby, Britney ... and Andy too

Ruby, Britney ... and Andy too by [Liz Potter](#)

It's Friday night. Fancy a *ruby* washed down with a couple of *britneys*? Baffled?

What if I reminded you that Britney's surname is Spears (which rhymes with *beers*), and told you that Ruby is [Ruby Murray](#), another popular female singer, but one whose heyday was in the 50s? And Murray rhymes with *curry* ... there, you've got it.

This is an example of [rhyming slang](#), that strange form of wordplay popular with [Cockneys](#), or those who wish to appear to be Cockney. Typically in rhyming slang a phrase is chosen whose second element rhymes with the word in question (*stairs/apples and pears*) and the second rhyming element is generally dropped (*so apples = stairs*). Another example is *head/loaf of bread*, so use your loaf = use your head. As time went on the names of places, events and people tended to be used more (Barnet Fair = *hair*, Tony Blairs = *flares*).

It's unclear whether the original purpose of rhyming slang was to confuse outsiders or whether it is simply the result of linguistic exuberance. The [origins](#) of rhyming slang are thought to lie way back in the mid 19th century, but as the examples of Ruby and Britney (and Andy) show, this form of linguistic playfulness is alive and well and still developing. Britney shot to fame right at the end of the 20th century and as early as 2000 her name was being used as rhyming slang for Britain's favourite alcoholic drink.

So where does Andy come in? Ruby Murray was very popular in her day but most people these days won't have heard of her, so it seems the Scottish [tennis hero](#) may be taking her place.

chortle and galumph

chortle and galumph by [Liz Potter](#)

It's not that unusual for people to ask me how they can get a word into the dictionary. That's easy, I tell them. Get lots of different people to use it in lots of different places and in it will go. Actually it's not easy at all, as can be seen from the complete failure to catch on of the lists of words that people come up with every so often to fill a perceived gap in the language (you know the kind of thing I mean: you can see some of them [here](#)).

One person who was very good at getting words into the dictionary, though that was probably not his intention, was [Lewis Carroll](#), real name Charles Dodgson, Victorian mathematician and author of two of the most popular and successful children's books ever written. One of them, *Through the Looking-Glass*, and *What Alice Found There* contains the nonsense poem [Jabberwocky](#), which is the source of our two words.

To [chortle](#) is to laugh merrily, while to [galumph](#) is to move heavily and clumsily. Both are thoroughly established in the language, along with their derivatives:

"I often chortle at things that leave others stony-faced.
A good chortle boosts our immune system by boosting T-cells.
When you're around, the rest of us feel like galumphing giants.
They shove, they galumph by with their feet and huge bags."

Out of over 20 [nonce words](#) in the poem, only these two have become part of common usage, along with a meaning of *burble* that Carroll seems to have invented ("to say (something) murmurously or in a rambling manner"). Not a bad hit rate, but then we are talking about one of the geniuses of the English language. Less gifted word inventors are much less likely to be successful.



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carol

carol by [Liz Potter](#)

There are some things about Christmas that I can [take or leave](#), and others that I really love. One essential element of the festive season as far as I'm concerned is the [Christmas carol](#). If I haven't raised my voice to sing '[Once in Royal David's City](#)' or '[It Came Upon a Midnight Clear](#)' at least once before December 25th then I feel as if it isn't really Christmas at all.

[Carols](#) are such an intrinsic part of the British Christmas that people who don't set foot in a church from one year's end to the next make an exception for the Christmas Eve festival of lessons and carols. Most schools put on some form of festive celebration which includes the singing of 'Away in a Manger', 'While Shepherds Watched', 'Hark the Herald Angels Sing' and other favourites. And although communal carol singing is less popular than it used to be, it still takes place in the run-up to Christmas in public spaces across the country.

Carol is a very old word, dating back at least to 1300. It originally meant a [circle dance](#), and came from Old French *carole*, and possibly ultimately from Greek and Latin, but its etymology is obscure. As the OED puts it:

“The ulterior etymology of Old French *carole* and its accompanying verb *caroler*, is uncertain; nor is it clear whether the verb or the noun takes priority etymologically.”

adding sternly: “In any case, a Celtic origin is out of the question”.

The first OED citation for the current meaning – “A song or hymn of joy sung at Christmas in celebration of the Nativity. Rarely applied to hymns on certain other festal occasions” – comes from 1502:

“in N. H. Nicolas Privy Purse Expenses Elizabeth of York (1830) 83 Item to Cornishe for setting of a carralle upon Cristmas day.”

Elizabeth of York was the widow of Henry VII and mother of Henry VIII, and William Cornishe (or Cornysh) evidently composed the music for a carol to be performed at her court as part of the festivities.

And now if you'll excuse me I have to go and practise the [descant](#) for '[Oh Come All Ye Faithful](#)' ...

Christmas, Noel and Yule by [Liz Potter](#)

More Christmassy words this week; in fact, three words that refer to the festival itself.

The oldest of the three is [Yule](#), from Old English *geól*, which meant Christmas Day or Christmastime, and corresponds to an Old Norse word *jól*, which was a pagan winter feast lasting twelve days. The earliest citation of this word in the OED is from a work by the 8th century English monk Bede, although the first references to the specifically Christmas meaning date from the beginning of the tenth century. It survives today in the somewhat archaic word [Yuletide](#) as well as in the [yule log](#), originally a large log burned at Christmas but now more usually referring to a rolled up chocolate cake that resembles such a log.

[Noel](#) or Noël comes ultimately from the Latin *natalis* via Anglo-Norman and Middle French. Originally an exclamation of joy at the birth of Christ, in the middle ages it was also used to refer to the Christmas period. Like [carol](#) (and [holly](#)) it has found another life as a first name, especially for those born during the Christmas period, but otherwise is now found only in Christmas carols and as a greeting on Christmas cards:

“c1410 H. Lovelich *Merlin* (1904) l. i. 6870 Now cometh the feste of nowel, jn whiche the goode Lord was bore.

c1450 in R. L. Greene *Early Eng. Carols* (1935) 18 (MED), Nowel, nowel, in this halle, Make merye, I prey you alle.”

[Christmas](#) comes from Old English and means “the mass of Christ”. The earliest citations come from the early 12th century and it has completely superseded its rivals as the standard term for the festival celebrated on 25th December, as well as the period immediately before and after it. So three different words with three very different origins, all referring to the same thing.



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Boxing Day

Boxing Day by [Liz Potter](#)

The day after Christmas Day, traditionally known as [Boxing Day](#), is a public holiday in Britain and several other countries (if the 26th December falls on a weekend the holiday is moved to the first or second available weekday). But what does it have to do with boxing?

Actually nothing, if by boxing you mean the sport in which two people attempt to knock each other out. The name refers to the traditional practice of giving gifts to servants and tradesmen to show appreciation for their services throughout the year. The first references to it are found in the 1830s, when it seems that it was the practice to give a box of food and gifts to servants who had worked on Christmas Day. With the decline of domestic service this custom was transmuted into annual gifts of money to people such as postmen and dustmen, though the practice seems to be becoming ever less common.

In the church calendar 26th December is St Stephen's Day (the popular carol [Good King Wenceslas](#) is set on this day, the 'feast of Stephen'). In Ireland the festival is celebrated under this name, but in Irish it is called the [Day of the Wren](#). Traditionally [wrens](#) would be caught and taken from door to door by groups of singers and dancers dressed in old clothes and wearing straw hats. Nowadays the actual wrens have been replaced by fake birds and the custom is maintained in just a few places.

Hogmanay

Hogmanay by [Liz Potter](#)

31st December, the last night of the year in the Western calendar, is celebrated in many places, but nowhere more enthusiastically than in Scotland. The Scots even have their own word for this festival, shunning the pedestrian *New Year's Eve* for the Scots word *Hogmanay*.

The etymology of *Hogmanay* is complicated, but it is believed to be French in origin, coming ultimately from the Old French *aguillanneuf*, meaning 'last day of the year' or 'new year's gift'. This makes perfect sense in view of the [auld alliance](#), the traditional alliance between the kingdoms of France and Scotland before the latter became joined to England through the ascension of King James VI of Scotland to the English throne as James I in 1603.

There are several traditions associated with Hogmanay, including [first footing](#), which involves visiting friends and neighbours as soon as the New Year starts, often bearing gifts that may include whisky, [shortbread](#), coal (for good luck) and black bun (a type of fruit cake). Tall dark men are particularly prized as first footers, as they are supposed to bring the greatest amount of luck. Hogmanay is celebrated so enthusiastically that Scots have an extra day off to recover, 2nd January being an additional [bank holiday](#) just in Scotland.

Another tradition that has spread far beyond Scotland is the singing of [Auld Lang Syne](#) as midnight strikes. This traditional song, with words rewritten by Scotland's national poet Robert Burns, urges us to remember old friends for old time's sake, and those singing it frequently link arms to emphasize these sentiments.

And so now it seems appropriate to wish old friends and new a very happy and healthy New Year!



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