

# HIDDEN HISTORY

1

A good ETYMOLOGICAL dictionary reveals many clues to the past:

remnants from war and conquest,  
exploration and trade,  
culture and religion,  
inventions and inventors.

A wealth of history may be hidden in an ordinary paragraph:

Getting off the bus in a panic, Sue Webster dropped her rucksack. The nylon zip burst, scattering books, biro and shopping in the street - a mess of ink, tea, potatoes, shampoo, currants, and eggs.

The Shorter Oxford Dictionary unravels the clues:

street from the Roman occupation after 55 BC.  
burst, dropped Old English, from the Germanic language of the early Teutonic settlers.

get, eggs, scatter

from the Old Norse spoken by Viking invaders.

Webster one of Sue's ancestors was a weaver.

currants came in the middle ages from Corinth.

mess came with the French invaders in 1066.

potatoes Spanish, derived from Haitian, recorded in 1565.

panic from the Greek god, Pan; first used in 1603.

shopping was first used in 1764;

shop an Old English word meaning a lean-to or outhouse.

bus from omnibus, Latin, meaning for all - 1832.

zip in 1875 meant the sound of fast movement;  
in 1925 it was used for the garment fastener.

nylon invented in 1938, following the pattern of rayon and cotton;  
the NY is for New York.

\* Look up for yourself the origins of: book, biro, ink, rucksack, shampoo, tea.

\* List some other items that Helen might have had in her bag -  
then find out when the words entered our language.

# FROM CELTIC TO COMPUTING

2

The earliest language in Britain was CELTIC, traces of which remain in place names.

55 BC Julius Caesar and his Roman army brought LATIN words.

449 AD The Teutonic invaders (Angles, Saxons and Jutes) spoke a common GERMANIC language.

This developed into what we now call OLD ENGLISH.

597 England's conversion to Christianity brought more LATIN, in the language of the church, education and documents.

787-850 The Viking invaders spoke OLD NORSE.

We call the language from 1100 to 1500 MIDDLE ENGLISH.

1066 The Norman Conquest, making FRENCH the official language, radically changed native English.

1476 Caxton introduced PRINTING into England, bringing the first standard written English.

From about 1500 our MODERN ENGLISH became established.

15th century Exploration and trade brought language imports.

16th century The Renaissance brought LATIN and GREEK.

19th century The British Empire brought words from distant lands.

Scientific discoveries needed new words for new ideas.

20th century New words arrive with mass communications: telephones, radio, films, T.V, air and space travel, computers.

\* Look in the reference library for examples of Old and Middle English.  
How many of the words can you recognise?

\* List words from our micro~chip era. Are they in the dictionary?

# EARLY DAYS

# 3

CELTIC, in various forms, was once spoken across much of Europe.

As populations changed, it was replaced by other languages. Celtic survives today in Irish and Scots Gaelic, and Welsh.

Celtic words remain in our place names:

broc (badger), tor (high rock), cumb (valley), pen (mountain)  
as in Brockham, Torbay, Ashcombe, etc.  
Many river names (e.g. Avon, Esk, Cam, Dove) are also Celtic.

The Angles, Saxons and Jutes who invaded these islands from 449 AD spoke Germanic languages; they settled in different regions, giving rise to a range of local dialects.

These became what we now call OLD ENGLISH.

Old English differed in many ways from the language we use today.

Not only words have changed, but also grammar and structure.  
Words had different genders (masculine, feminine and neuter),  
with different endings for different functions.

Many of our pronouns still change according to their function:  
I, me, my, mine; he, him, his, etc.

We also have some words of different genders (e.g. fox / vixen).

Most modern sentences follow a set pattern: subject / verb / object,  
the cat bit the dog is not the same as the dog bit the cat.

In Old English, words could come in any order, as the endings made clear which animal was the biter!

\* Look on a map to find place names of Celtic origin.

\* Make a list of words that still change to show different genders.

# ROMANS AND COUNTRYMEN

4

In 55 BC, Julius Caesar invaded Britain.  
He soon retreated, but ten years later the Romans came again.  
This time they stayed for 300 years.  
They brought order and organisation, and the Latin language.

The words the Romans left give us clues to what they did:  
they built walls and streets,  
had mills to grind their corn, made cheese, drank wine.  
They set up camps which we can trace from our place names:  
Chester, Manchester, Lancaster, etc.

600 years after Julius Caesar came Christianity, bringing more Latin,  
the language of the church.

Many religious words date from that time:  
monk, monastery, bishop, priest, etc  
From the rich fabrics of the ecclesiastic robes, we have gained words like  
silk and purple.  
The monks' cultivation of herbs gave us plants.  
Monks were also teachers and scribes. They gave us words like:  
school, master, and verse.

\* Look at a map to find places where the Romans made camp.  
(Look for names ending in caster, chester, cester etc.)

\* Look in an etymological dictionary to find the origins of  
anchor, copper, brooch, inch, mile, salary, Saturday.

What clues do these words give to the people who gave us them?

\* Find out some names of trees and herbs that came from the  
monasteries during the Old English period.

# THE VIKINGS

## 5

From about 800 AD, Norse invaders raided parts of Northern Britain.

Some of the words the Vikings brought with them reflect the terror of their appearance and behaviour:

awkward, ugly, ransack, rotten, scream, screech, scowl, skulk, slaughter.

They controlled parts of the country (Danelaw) for 200 years.  
In these areas, Old Norse became the dominant language.

As the Norsemen settled and intermarried, many of their domestic words entered our vocabulary: e.g. egg, scrub, whisk, seat.

Many of our pronouns are Scandinavian: they, their, them.

Old Norse, like Old English, was Germanic in origin.  
Many words were very similar.

Sometimes the Old Norse and the Old English words co-existed:

no / nay    craft / skill    hide / skin

In Old English, words beginning with sc- had a soft sound [sh];  
Old Norse had hard sounds [sk].

Some identical words in both languages took on separate meanings:  
shirt and skirt were originally similar tunic-like garments.

Some native words changed their pronunciation:  
e.g. scab and scathe.

- \* Look up words beginning with sc- and sk-. How many of them come from Old Norse?
- \* Find the original meanings of window, fellow, by-law.

Many places in Britain have names based on Scandinavian words like:  
beck, brick, brook, by, thwaite, garth, toft

- \* Look at a map of the northern part of England.  
How many place names of Viking origin can you find?

# 1066 AND ALL THAT

6

The Norman Conquest brought the greatest change to our language.  
Before 1066 it was basically Germanic,  
After, it shared many features of Latin-based Romance languages.

For over 300 years French was the official language of the country:  
the royal court and nobility,  
government officials and lawyers,  
business and commercial enterprises -  
all these used French.

English, still spoken by the ordinary people, was seen as inferior.

The Norman invaders spoke a regional dialect.  
French from Paris had different spelling and pronunciation.

This has given us two versions of some words:  
warden / guardian    warranty / guarantee.

Today much of our vocabulary and spelling is French,  
though the pronunciation has often changed:  
e.g. beauty, intelligence, charity,

Some French remains unchanged:  
The motto of the Royal Coat of Arms is French.  
We still put RSVP on invitations.

\* What is the royal motto? What does it mean?

The French brought with them their excellence in cooking.  
Even today, many culinary terms are French.

Our animals have English names;  
but if we kill and cook them, we use French:  
e.g.: sheep becomes mutton, from the French mouton.

\* What do we call meat from cows, pigs, deer, calves?

\* What do the French call these animals'?

\* Make a list of cookery terms that are still French.

# PRINTERS` INK

7

1476 was another landmark in the history of English.

William Caxton brought to London the new craft of printing.  
For the very first time books could be easily reproduced.

In an era of word-processors and photocopiers,  
it's hard for us to realise the importance of this step.

Until then, all books had to be copied out by hand.

    This was slow work.

    It was often inaccurate.

    No two copies would be exactly the same.

Now, for the first time, identical copies could be produced.

Caxton printed books in English, the language of the common people.

    This made English respectable.

    It was no longer seen as second best to French.

This also marked the beginning of STANDARD WRITTEN ENGLISH.

    Fixed patterns of grammar and spelling were used,

    though printers often added an extra e to make words fit the page,

Caxton came from London. He spoke the dialect of the South East.

There were no northern or other regional words in his books.

    This is how the English of the South East  
    came to be accepted as standard English.

\* Using an etymological dictionary,  
    find out why ghost is spelt as it is;  
    look up the original meaning of manuscript;  
    find the literal meanings of cliché and stereotype.

\* Find out more about William Caxton from your reference library.

# THE REVIVAL OF LEARNING

8

During the 16th century  
with the RENAISSANCE of interest in classical Greece and Rome,  
Latin and Greek became the languages of learning.

Thousands of Latin and Greek words entered our vocabulary.

This gave us many more SYNONYMS  
Everyday words were English in origin,  
more formal ones French or Latin:

English	French	Latin
kingly	royal	regal
size	calibre	magnitude
ask	question	interrogate etc

New ideas and studies were given Latin or Greek names:  
curriculum, encyclopedia, geography, psychology, etc.

Many words from the myths and legends of Greece and Rome entered our vocabulary.

\* Find out about the Greek and Latin legends that have given us the following words:  
atlas, cereal, echo, jovial, martial, mercury,  
music, narcissus. tantalise.

The use of classical PREFIXES multiplied our vocabulary still more.  
e.g. from form could be made  
reformation, transform, performance, cruciform, etc.

\* Find out the Greek and Latin prefixes we use for numbers.

\* How many different words can you make from these'?

# THE BIBLE

9

The Bible is of great importance,  
not only in religious terms but for its significance for the English language.

It is the only book that has been available in English  
non-stop from 995 AD until today.  
This makes it unique as a record of our language.

The first full English version of the Bible  
was produced by the monks at Lindesfarne in 995.

Lindesfarne Gospels, 995:  
Fader ure þu eart on heofonum, si þin nama gehalgod.

Authorised Version, 1611:  
Our father, which art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

Good News Bible, 1976:  
Our father in heaven, may your holy name be honoured.

\* Make a list of the changes you can spot.

The Bible was read aloud.  
Even people who could not read remembered its words and rhythms.  
Many of these have become part of our language.

Some of our words were invented by biblical translators:  
scapegoat, prodigal son, tenderhearted.  
The Authorised Version of 1611 has given us expressions like:  
play the fool, eat, drink and be merry  
wolf in sheep's clothing the blind leading the blind, etc.

\* Look up the same passage in several different bibles,  
from the 1611 Authorised Version to the most modern one you can find.  
How has the language changed -  
in vocabulary, grammar, word order and level of formality?

\* Look at a dictionary of proverbs - how many are from the Bible?

Many individual writers have left their mark on our language.

Shakespeare is the most significant.

Even those who have never read his works still use his words:

what the dickens                      a foregone conclusion  
backing a horse                      to the manner born  
the course of true love never did run smooth, etc.

Many such phrases have now become clichés through frequent use.

Some dialect words have become standard English because of Shakespeare:  
e.g. dwindle.

So have many 16th century slang expressions.

Shakespeare experimented freely with words.

For example, he often used words as different parts of speech from normal:

but me no buts nor uncle me no uncles.

Other writers, too, have given us new words or phrases:

Edmund Spenser invented blatant;

John Milton gave us pandemonium (a meeting of all the devils)  
and phrases like a heaven on earth; a pillar of state.

Many of Alexander Pope's statements have become proverbial:

a little learning is a dangerous thing  
damn with faint praise  
hope springs eternal  
fools rush in where angels fear to tread, etc.

Many writers nearer our own time have also influenced our language;

e.g. Gerard Manley Hopkins, James Joyce, Dylan Thomas.

\* Look for phrases that you recognise in Shakespeare's plays.

What examples can you find of unusual uses of language?

\* Browse through a dictionary of quotations or proverbs.

How many common expressions come from particular writers?

\* Look at some work by the writers mentioned on this page.

From the 16th century, scholars started to catalogue our language.

Early dictionaries were lists of hard or unusual words.

Later writers tried to list all the words in English and to give their origins.

The first comprehensive English dictionary, compiled by Dr. Samuel Johnson, was published in 1755.

Johnson finally standardised English spelling.

He also tried to standardise pronunciation and usage.

The dictionary was seen as the final authority on correctness.

Scholars regarded Latin as the language of learning.

They tried to make English fit a Latin straightjacket, imposing rules that did not fit English patterns of use:

rules against using split infinitives (to boldly go)  
or against ending sentences with prepositions (I won't put up with it.)

Formal unnatural expressions: 'It is I'  
were preferred to normal English ones: 'It's me'.

Only recently has the emphasis changed.

Modern grammar books and dictionaries describe our language, rather than prescribe rules for its use.

\* Compare two dictionaries, with different dates and publishers:  
look up: definitions and origins of the same words,  
the newest words you can think of,  
advice on correct usage,  
guides to pronunciation, etc.

\* Which dictionary do you prefer? Why?

# FREE TRADE?

12

From earliest times, the British have traded with other nations, importing (and exporting) not only goods and commodities but also language.

The places we traded with can be traced in our vocabulary:

damask came from Damascus.

sherry is from Jerez in Spain.

\* Where did we find denim, jeans, muslin?

Some of our early trade was with the Dutch:

booze, decoy, dope, drill, groove, landscape, loiter, nitwit, wagon.

\* What do the word origins tell us about the trade and traders?

We traded with people who spoke Arabic:

alcove, algebra, arsenal, assassin, ghoul.

or Spanish, both in Spain and Latin America:

mosquito, potato, tobacco.

Some trade led to colonisation.

The East India Trading Company, forerunner of the Empire and Raj,

brought Hindi words:

bungalow, dinghy, dungarees, shampoo.

From the West Indies came.:

canoe, hammock, hurricane.

Many of the words we adopted from local languages give insights into the life of the natives and the British settlers.

\* From which areas of the world. did we import these words:

alcohol, barbecue, budgerigar, loot, tattoo, veranda?

\* Where did we first get the following textiles:

cotton, gingham, plaid, seersucker?

# BRAVE NEW WORLD

13

17th century migrants took the English language to America.

Some old words have stayed in use in the United States:

eg. fall for autumn  
gotten as past tense of to get

Some US spelling has been simplified, e.g. color, traveler.

Pronunciation differs, e.g. tomato.

New words have been added:

Indian words from native American languages:

raccoon, moose, squaw, tepee, wigwam.

Spanish words from Mexico:

canyon, incommunicado, ranch, tornado, stampede.

Financial and commercial expressions:

boom, strike, cooling-off period, white-collar worker.

Political terms:

landslide victory, rabble-rouser, filibuster,

New euphemisms have developed:

mortician, casket, underprivileged, rest room.

\* What do we call these things in Britain?

The same words may have different meanings:

U.S.      BRITISH

flat    puncture      dwelling  
mad    angry    mentally unstable  
trunk    boot of car      main stem of tree

\* Find U.S. words for: pavement, rubbish, holiday, biscuit, sweets.

\* Give the British terms for: elevator, sneakers, vest, closet, gas.

\* Find the origins of:

bonanza, caboodle, cantankerous, cockroach, gobbledegook, patio.

# CALLING NAMES

14

Our population today comes from all ends of the earth.  
This is often clear from looking at people's names.

Old English family names come from four main sources:  
father's names: Johnson, Peterson.  
place names: Bedford, Field.  
occupations: Smith, Cooper, Baker.  
nicknames: Redhead, Longstaff.

- \* Look at the surnames of people in your class or in the phone book.  
How many can be traced to Old English origins?
- \* What can you discover about surnames that do not come from these origins?

People's names have often come to be used as ordinary words.  
Sometimes this is because they invented things,  
sometimes because they were famous or notorious in some way -  
they made a name for themselves.

- \* What can you discover about the people who gave us these words:  
bloomers, boycott, cardigan, doily, mackintosh, pasteur,  
sandwich, saxophone, shrapnel, wellington, wistaria?
- \* Can you find scientists or inventors whose names are now part of our language?

Some words come from place names:  
an alsatian dog is named after the Alsace region of France.

- \* Find out what places these words come from:  
bedlam, balaclava, canter, limousine.

Other words start as tradenames: e.g. hoover or coke.

- \* Can you think of any more?

# SCIENTIFIC EXPLOSIONS

15

New ideas and experiences need new words.

The dramatic expansion in science, medicine and technology in the last 150 years has led to an expansion of our vocabulary.

As in the Renaissance, new words have come from Greek and Latin.

So in biology we have: genes, chromosomes, DNA.

Physics and chemistry give us:

electron, ionisation, formaldehyde, ozone, radium, etc.

Psychology: id, ego, introvert, psychoanalysis, etc.

Medicine: bronchitis, anaesthetic, vaccinate, etc.

\* Look up the Greek and Latin origins of these terms.

As means of travel have multiplied, so have words to describe them:

bus, car, tube, aeroplane, helicopter, airport,  
space ship, shuttle, astronaut. etc.

Britain's first motorway was opened in 1958.

Many new words and expressions have come into use,  
from contraflow to road rage.

20th century conflicts have added to the language:

World War I tank, camouflage, gas mask;

World War II blackout, blitz, paratroop, roadblock,  
nuclear bombs and fallout ushered in the post-war age.

\* How many road traffic terms can you find in a modern dictionary?

\* How many transport words no longer in current use can you find?

\* Make a list of expressions originating in modern conflicts,  
e.g. South Africa, Northern Ireland or the Middle East.

# STREETWISE

16

Many words come from informal sources - slang, jokes and word play.

Victorian scholars enjoyed Latin puns, inventing words such as tandem (a Latin word meaning at length).

Some words are abbreviations, once regarded as slang:  
bus, cab, fan, mac, mob, pram.

\* What was the original form of these words?

Special types of slang have given us some expressions:  
from back slang we get yob (from boy) and yobbo;  
from rhyming slang  
let's have a butcher's (hook, rhyming with look).  
use your loaf (bread, rhymes with head).

\* What other rhyming slang can you find?

Some slang is restricted to particular groups of people:  
forces' slang used during the war,  
slang expressions used in particular jobs, etc,

Much of this quickly goes out of fashion:  
1990s teenagers are likely to show their approval by saying wicked rather than smashing.

\* Look at some school stories from earlier this century:  
books by writers such as Richmal Crompton, Anthony Buckeridge,  
Angela Brazil or Enid Blyton.

\* How does the slang in such books compare to current school slang?

Some slang words have become respectable:  
crank, fad, joke, hoax, sham, slump, snob.

\* Find the origins of these words.

Telecommunications began with the telephone and radio.  
Some of these, like telegrams, are now out of date,  
as is the word wireless.

In time both the technology and the language may become obsolete.

\* List other words used by your grandparents but not by you.

Just as printing helped standardise the written language,  
so broadcasting has led to greater standardisation of speech.

Educated South-East pronunciation (BBC English) became the norm,  
leading to some decline in regional accents and dialect.

In recent years the balance has been redressed to some extent.

There has also been a strong transatlantic influence from U.S. TV and films.

\* How many different accents can you spot on one day's TV or radio?

Broadcasting has brought new words: chatshow, DJ, teletext, etc.

\* Look up the origins of video and soap. Can you add to the list?

Other mass media, the press and advertising, affect our language.

They experiment with words, often taking them from one context to use in another.

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They have also given us new words: telesales, consumerism, freebies, etc.

Helped by the media, politicians influence our language.

We have catch phrases and in-words;  
and new words like quangos, wets, Eurosceptics.  
Some of these last; others soon vanish.

\* Look at several newspapers. List any in-words and catch-phrases.  
What other interesting uses of language do you notice?

Many words change their meanings over time.

In Old English to starve meant to die, not necessarily of hunger.

The original meaning still survives in dialect use:

Lancastrians say they are starving with cold.

\* Find the original meanings of:

meat, fowl, deer, nice, sensible, science.

Sometimes euphemisms change a word's meaning:

gay can no longer be used in its original sense, which survives in gaily.

\* List other words that have changed their meanings in recent years.

Attitudes of political correctness affect the use of language.

Words like black may be regarded as having racist overtones.

Many expressions use this word in a negative way:

to blacken someone's character, etc.

Even in a neutral context such words may be unacceptable.

Some people prefer chalk board to blackboard.

Similarly, many people object to words which sound sexist.

Feminine nouns like conductress, poetess, authoress

are less likely to be used today than they were a decade ago.

Legislation on equal opportunities has led to the replacement of

chairman by chair or chairperson,

salesman by sales assistant.

English lacks a personal pronoun that is not tied to gender.

Many people feel that to say he or she or write s/he is clumsy.

The alternative, they, is still often seen as ungrammatical.

\* Make a list of expressions that avoid racist or sexist language.

The modern micro-chip revolution has changed our ways of writing and communicating. It is also changing our language.

Computers and word-processors have given us many new words:  
interface, internet, laptop, megabytes, modem, etc.  
and new phrases:

dot-matrix, surfing the net,  
user-friendly, virtual reality, etc.

Some of these are now being used in contexts other than computing.

Old words have taken on totally new meanings:  
mouse, windows, virus, etc.

\* Can you add words to the lists given?

More nouns are being used as verbs:  
We access data, action suggestions, etc.

We use many more acronyms:  
PCW, CD-Rom, E-mail, WYSIWYG.

\* What do these acronyms stand for? Can you think of any others?

Some computer expressions have taken on the status of proverbs:  
Garbage in, garbage out.

\* Look for more examples of the influence of computer terminology on our everyday uses of language.

English is the result of an intermix of languages and cultures.

Often the influence has come from outside:  
from invaders, traders, immigrants,  
religious and cultural factors.

The English language has also spread outwards:  
through trade, colonial and imperial conquest,  
emigration, cultural links, etc

Today English is the official language in 45 different countries.  
In each of these, local variants will occur in vocabulary, pronunciation and grammar.  
Written English in Asia, for example, is often far more formal and ornate  
in expression and grammar than it is at home.

Sometimes English is the only common language in a country.  
In India, for example, English is the only means of communication  
between some people from different regions or ethnic groups.

English speakers overseas use local words for local things:  
kangaroo, boomerang, koala, outback, kiwi.  
kraal, trek, veldt.

Some of these words have become part of our general vocabulary.

\* Make a list of English words that have originated  
in different parts of the commonwealth.

English is also used as an international language in such things as air traffic control, etc.

Many British citizens are descended from immigrants  
who spoke a different form of English,  
such as the Irish or people from India or the Caribbean.

Some of these forms of English have entered our standard vocabulary;  
others remain in dialect use only.

\* Find examples of English usage from some of the groups mentioned.

