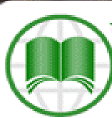

WORLD WIDE WORDS
Investigating the English language across the globe

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Feedback, notes and comments

But and ben. "The term is not one I am familiar with," John Jefferies emailed, "but it does bring to mind a well-established Irish (Gaelic) word *bothán* which is a small hut, shed or cabin and would neatly match your description of a small two-roomed house."

Barbara Roden wrote, "Your explanation of the phrase was especially interesting, as I'm familiar with it from a children's skipping rhyme that was in circulation after the crimes of anatomists Burke and Hare in early 19th century Edinburgh were exposed:

> Up the close and doun the stair,
> But and ben wi' Burke and Hare.
> Burke's the butcher, Hare's the thief,
> Knox the boy that buys the beef.

Dutch speakers noted the close associations between the Scots words and ones in their language. Alexander Bocast commented, "The expressions *binnen en buiten* and *buiten en binnen* are not uncommon in Dutch, although they generally contrast the interior of a building to its exterior. For example, a restaurant might advertise *buiten and binnen* to inform customers that they can eat either inside or outside on, say, a terrace or patio."

Several British readers complained at my seeming to have adopted the US spelling *story* instead of *storey* in this piece for one level of a building. It was, of course, a typing error.

Logomaniac. Medical practitioners pointed out that a person who exhibits what I described as "pathologically excessive (and often incoherent) talking", is usually said to be suffering from *logorrhoea* rather than *logomania*.

Type lice. Rob Graham wrote, "I would like to think that by the end of the first paragraph I was suspicious of this lovely bit of writing. My father sent me to the local shop for *elbow grease* when I joined the school army cadets and had brass buttons to polish." David Pearson recalls, "I, too, was the object of many such a prank when in the 1960s I was a fairly gullible teenager working in a factory and later on a building site. Among other things, I was told to fetch a *skyhook* (before the term became more common, notably in sci-fi) and was sent once for a *long stand*, at which point the storeman disappeared for 10 minutes and was presumably sitting out of sight reading a newspaper while I stood waiting at the counter."

By hook or by crook

Q. *From Alice Winsome*: I know that *by hook or by crook* means to do something by any means possible, but why those two words? What's the story behind it?

A. This curious phrase has bothered many people down the years, the result being a succession of well-meant stories, often fervently argued, that don't stand up for a moment on careful examination.

As good a place to start as any is the lighthouse at the tip of the Hook peninsula in south-eastern Ireland, said to be the world's oldest working lighthouse. It is at the east side of the entrance to Waterford harbour, on the other side of which is a little place called Crook (or so it is said: no map I've consulted shows it). One tale claims that Oliver Cromwell proposed to invade Ireland during the English Civil War by way of Waterford and that he asserted he would land there "by Hook or by Crook". In another version the invasion of Ireland was the one of 1172 by Richard de Clare, 2nd Earl of Pembroke, also known as Strongbow.

Two other stories associate the phrase with gentlemen called Hook and Crook. Both appeared in early issues of the scholarly research publication *Notes and Queries*. One linked it with the difficulties of establishing the exact locations of plots of land after the great fire of London in 1666. The anonymous writer explained:

> The surveyors appointed to determine the rights of the various claimants were Mr. Hook and Mr. Crook, who by the justice of their decisions gave general satisfaction to the interested parties, and by their speedy determination of the different claims, permitted the rebuilding of the city to proceed without the least delay. Hence arose the saying above quoted, usually applied to the extrication of persons or things from a difficulty. The above anecdote was told the other evening by an old citizen upwards of eighty, by no means of an imaginative temperament.
>
> *Notes and Queries*, 15 Feb. 1851.

The other supposed derivation was equally poorly substantiated:

> I have met with it somewhere, but have lost my note, that Hooke and Crooke were two judges, who in their day decided most unconscientiously whenever the interests of the crown were affected, and it used to be said that the king could get anything by Hooke or by Crooke.
>
> *Notes and Queries*, 26 Jan. 1850.

Most of these stories can be readily dismissed by looking at the linguistic evidence, which tells us that the expression is on record from the end of the fourteenth century, by which time it was already a set phrase with the current meaning.

During this period, local people sometimes had rights by charter or custom known as *fire-bote* to gather firewood from local woodlands. It was acceptable to take dead wood from the ground or to pull down dead branches. The latter action was carried out either with a hook or a crook, the latter implement being a tool like a shepherd's crook or perhaps just a crooked branch.

Little contemporary evidence exists for this practice. Written claims for it dating from the seventeenth century are said to exist for the New Forest in southern England, one of which argued for an immemorial right to go into the king's wood to take the dead branches off the trees "with a cart, a horse, a hook and a crook, and a

sail cloth”. Another version was once claimed to be in the records of Bodmin in Cornwall, whereby locals were permitted by a local prior “to bear and carry away on their backs, and in no other way, the lop, crop, hook, crook, and bagwood in the prior’s wood of Dunmeer.” Richard Polwhele’s *Civil and Military History of Cornwall* of 1806 argued in support of this claim that images of the hook and the crook were carved on the medieval Prior’s Cross in nearby Washaway, though modern writings describe them as fleurs-de-lys.

The examples suggest that this origin for the expression is the correct one, though some doubt must remain. If so, as *hook* and *crook* were effectively synonyms, it was almost inevitable that they were put together to make a reduplicated rhyming phrase.

Loggerhead

This word appeared in the caption to a photo I saw recently in a whaling museum in the Azores. (I spare no effort to bring you interesting words.)

The caption mentioned the groove that had been worn by ropes in the loggerhead on a whaling boat. A *loggerhead*, I have learned, was a round timber block set upright in the stern of the boat. Once a harpooner had struck the whale, he passed the rope attached to the harpoon round the loggerhead a couple of times to hold it fast.

The loggerhead in the photo had been carefully fashioned, so there was nothing log-like about it other than it having been made of timber; however, you might fancifully say that it looked like a wooden head. So it wasn’t an altogether unlikely name for the contrivance. But when I came to look into the history of the word it turns out that the whaling sense was a latecomer.

Loggerhead starts to appear in the historical record near the end of the sixteenth century. An early example:

> Ah you whoreson loggerhead! You were born to do me shame.
>
> *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, by William Shakespeare, *c*1596.

At that time it meant a stupid person, the closely similar *blockhead* suggesting the idea behind it. Though presumably derived from *log*, what a *logger* was at the time is unclear, because it doesn’t appear in print until much later. The usual view among dictionary makers is that it was a heavy block of wood fastened to the leg of a horse to hobble it, to prevent it straying, an assertion that dates back no further than a dialect dictionary of 1777.

What went through the minds of whalers who applied it to the useful device on their boats is impossible to discover but but we might guess that it was similarly considered to be a dumb block of wood for restraining an animal, although a whale rather than a horse.

We know *loggerhead* these days most commonly in the idiom *to be at loggerheads*, meaning to be in stubborn or irresolvable disagreement or dispute over some issue:

> The school security guards are now at loggerheads with the city’s police department, who they accuse of attempting to hide the true scale of the problem, to improve their crime statistics.
>
> *The Independent*, 16 May 2016.

As *loggerhead* has no clear meaning in current English (its whaling sense being a long obsolete term of art in a specialised and localised activity) the idiom is

meaningless in itself, but its form is expressive and it has lasted surprisingly well in the language. It can be traced to 1671 in the related *go to loggerheads*, to start a fight, though its modern form came into being in the early nineteenth century.

How *loggerhead* began to be used for a fight is similarly lost to history. One image it calls up is of two thick-headed idiots face-to-face in an argument that is likely to end in fisticuffs. That may be enough to explain the origin. However, some writers point to various implements with bulbous ends, of which one was used on board ship:

> They had been sparring, in a spirit of fun, with loggerheads, those massy iron balls with long handles to be carried red-hot from the fire and plunged into buckets of tar or pitch so that the substance might be melted with no risk of flame.
>
> *The Commodore,* by Patrick O'Brian, 1994.

There are records of the devices being used as weapons during close engagements of ships, perhaps contributing to the genesis of the expression.

Another maritime association is with the *loggerhead turtle*; in this case the idea is that of an animal with a big, heavy head. A couple of birds, a Falkland Islands duck and several fish have also had the word applied to them at various times for related reasons. In English dialects a large moth, tadpoles and a species of knapweed have also been called *loggerheads*.

There are three small places in England and Wales with the name. The one in Staffordshire is said to take its name from the local pub, *The Three Loggerheads*. This almost certainly derives from an old visual joke — the inn sign would have pictured only two stupid men, the third being taken to be the onlooker.

Polish off

Q. *From Evan Parry, New Zealand*: In conversation about a culinary celebration, my friend used the expression *polish off*, thus: "I polished off the leftover food next morning". While its meaning in context is generally understood, where and how did the expression originate?

A. It does indeed often appear in connection with food, the key idea being that of consuming it completely and probably quickly:

> I could easily polish off a packet of biscuits throughout the afternoon, before my dinner of cheesy pasta with buttered bread.
>
> *The Sun* (London), 15 May 2016.

though it can be used in a variety of other situations, implying the rapid completion of some activity or the subjugation of some adversary:

> Freshman Matt McFadden returned the opening kickoff 36 yards and senior Kyle Wigley polished off the drive with a two-yard run into the end zone.
>
> *Gettysburg Times* (Pennsylvania), 14 Nov. 2015.
>
> He'll limp to the election; cross the line sadly weakened; and then, in due course, be polished off by another thrusting contender who better understands the political process and can command a majority of the party.
>
> *The Age* (Melbourne), 24 May 2016.

The idiom has been around since at least the early nineteenth century. Its initial examples were all in the more general sense, extending to getting rid of something, or even to destroy or kill. The application to food seems to have come along a little later in the century, sometimes being simplified to *polish* without the *off*. But in his *Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue* of 1785 Francis Grose mentions *to polish a bone*, meaning to eat a meal, so perhaps the food sense really did come first.

The idea here is presumably that of clearing the dish by eating everything on it so thoroughly that it ends up appearing polished. This modern work makes it explicit:

> He knew that it was polite to leave a little something on your plate when you finished, but this evening he decided to throw etiquette aside and polished his plate to a shine.
>
> *Adam*, by Richard Allen Stotts, 2001.

The earliest usages of *polish off*, however, focus on defeating somebody. Some slang dictionaries expressly say that the first context for the idiom was “pugilistic”, that is, linked to bare-knuckle fist fighting:

> Bob had his coat off at once — he stood up to the Banbury man for three minutes, and polished him off in four rounds easy.
>
> *Vanity Fair*, by William Makepeace Thackeray, 1847.

It may be that a slightly different idea is behind this meaning. Since polishing is the last job to be done to complete a piece of work such as making a item of furniture, to polish off an opponent is to finish him, to defeat him utterly.

Sic

Spectral examination? The lead sentence on a *Guardian* article of 26 May confused Emery Fletcher: “Shortly after receiving the news of his death, Steve Hodel found himself sorting through his father’s belongings.”

Mathematics as it isn’t taught, from the *Observer* newspaper of 29 May: “Mandate Now claims that more than four-fifths of five developed nations have some form of mandatory reporting.”

Robert Musgrave wrote, apropos of something completely different: “You may be amused that my first introduction to *Schadenfreude* was via a howling misprint in a cheap paperback dictionary, in which it was defined as the derivation of joy from the misfortune of otters.”

John C Waugh tells us that the *New Zealand Herald* online on 31 May reported that “A person has been struck by a train in Auckland for the second time today.” Not a particularly unfortunate passenger, but two separate incidents.

An online report by the Australian national public television network SBS had the headline, “Americans are being warned of possible terror attacks in Europe over summer by the US State Department.” Thanks to Judith Lowe for spotting that.

Bill Waggoner found this in a report dated 2 June on the website BoigBoing about a man who “has settled a case with people who live near him in DC, who caught him repeatedly stealing the license plates off their nanny's car using a hidden camera.”

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