



WORLD WIDE WORDS

Investigating the English language across the globe

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Feedback, notes and comments

Several medical experts commented that the definitions I quoted from dictionaries for the word *chalazion* last time were incorrect. I've modified the piece, which you will find [on the website](#).

The piece on *Boxing Day* below is a revision of one I wrote in December 2002.

Because of the Christmas break and other matters I cannot say when the next issue will appear.

Not my pigeon

Q. From Helen Mosback: I have just read a serialised version of John Rowland's *Calamity in Kent*. It includes this: "In fact, it's your pigeon, as they say in the civil service." I was wondering if you could shed any light on the expression *it's your pigeon*? I have to admit to being quite taken by the Polish expression *not my circus, not my monkeys* to indicate that something is not one's problem, and would be very happy should I have found an equally enchanting English expression!

A. Readers may not be familiar with John Rowland, a little-known and neglected British detective-story writer who published *Calamity in Kent* in 1950. The British Library has republished it this year in its Crime Classics series.

The date of his book is significant, since at that time the expression was more familiar to people in the countries of what is now the Commonwealth than it is now. It had come into the language around the end of the nineteenth century.

The idiom suggests something is the speaker's interest, concern, area of expertise or responsibility. This is a recent British example:

If posh people aren't your pigeon, the correspondence on display in this book will be a massive bore and irritation.

The Times, 8 Oct. 2016.

It also turns up in the negative in phrases such as "that's not my pigeon", denying involvement or responsibility in some matter.

Despite your analogy with the Polish expression, the pigeon here isn't the animal. It's a variant form of *pidgin*. The name is said to derive from a Chinese attempt to say the word *business*; the original pidgin, Pidgin English, was a trade jargon that arose from the seventeenth century onwards between British and Chinese merchants in

ports such as Canton. The word *pidgin* is recorded from the 1840s and has become the usual linguistic term for any simplified contact language that allows groups that don't have a language in common to communicate.



English traders selling goods in Guangzhou (Canton) in 1858.

This is an early example of *pidgin* being used in the figurative sense:

We agreed that if anything went wrong with the pony after, it was not to be my “pidgin.”

The North-China Herald (Shanghai), 1 Aug. 1890.

Most early examples in English writing were spelled that way, though by the 1920s the *pigeon* form was being used by people who didn't make the connection with the trade language.

Subnivean

Classical scholars will spot the wintry associations of this word; it derives from Latin *nix* for snow, which becomes *niv-* in compounds such as *nivālis*, meaning snowy or snow-covered. Etymologists point out that the English *snow* and the Latin *nix* both ultimately derive from the same ancient Indo-European root. But then humans in Europe have long had plenty of experience of the white stuff.

About four centuries ago, English scholars borrowed *nivālis* to make the adjective *nival* to add to our *snowy* (though French got there first, at least a century earlier). We also have the more recent technical term *nivation*, not — as you might guess — meaning snowfall but the erosion of ground around and beneath a snow bank that is seasonally melting.

Subnivean is another member of the group, nearly two centuries old. This refers to something that happens underneath snow and especially refers to some plant or animal that survives winter beneath it.

Very recently that word has been joined by the linked noun *subnivium* for the area between soil surface and snowpack that provides a winter refuge for various species. It was coined by a group led by Jonathan Pauli of the University of Wisconsin-Madison. They wrote in a paper in *Frontiers in Ecology and the Environment* in June 2013: “For many terrestrial organisms in the Northern Hemisphere, winter is a period of resource scarcity and energy deficits, survivable only because a seasonal refugium — the ‘subnivium’ — exists beneath the snow.”

Black as Newgate knocker

Q. From Jim Mitchell: As a child in South London, when I came in from playing and was a bit grubby my mother would say I looked *as black as nookers nocker*. My mother was born in 1917. I wonder if she might have heard this expression from her mother?

A. It’s very probable. But not perhaps in that form. Your mother’s version is a mishearing of a Londoners’ expression that dates back in written records to 1881: *black as Newgate knocker*. It has also turned up in the forms *black as Newker’s knocker*, *black as Nook’s knocker* and *black as Nugent’s knocker*.

Curiously, though it has been in existence for more than a century and is currently not widely known, in writing it is now more often found than it has ever been, perhaps because it’s such an evocative item of historical Cockney slang. These days it almost always has an added apostrophe-s:

Her eyes really are black as Newgate’s knocker.

Sunday Times, 19 Jun. 1994.



Newgate Prison.

Newgate here refers to the notorious prison, originally created in medieval times in one of the turrets of Newgate, a main entrance through the walls into the City of London. Down the centuries the prison was rebuilt five times; it closed in 1902 and

was demolished in 1904. The Central Criminal Court, better known as the Old Bailey, now stands on the site.

Newgate was a place of fear and loathing to many Londoners, not only criminals but also debtors, who were imprisoned there until they found a way to repay what they owed. After 1783, it was also the place where executions took place, initially on a public platform in front of the building, later inside. For most of its existence it was a noisome, dank, dark and unhealthy place to be incarcerated.

It's not surprising that it should have been commemorated in expressions. But why not just *black as Newgate*? Why should its door knocker be selected as the source of the simile?

The phrase *Newgate knocker* itself is older. It was applied to a hairstyle fashionable among lower-class male Londoners such as costermongers. Though it became widely known from the 1840s, I've found a reference to it in the *Kentish Gazette* in 1781. It referred to a lock of hair twisted from the temple on each side of the head back towards the ear in the shape of a figure 6.

In 1851, Henry Mayhew wrote in his *London Labour and the London Poor* that a lad of about fourteen had told him that to be "flash" (stylish) hair "ought to be long in front, and done in 'figure-six' curls, or twisted back to the ear 'Newgate knocker style'." Eight years later, John Camden Hotten explained in his *Dictionary of Modern Slang, Cant, and Vulgar Words* that "The shape is supposed to resemble the knocker on the prisoners' door at Newgate — a resemblance that carries a rather unpleasant suggestion to the wearer." Another description came a couple of years later from another investigative social journalist, James Greenwood:

All, or nearly all, [were] bull-necked, heavy-jawed, and with the hair dressed after a fashion known among its patrons as the "Newgate knocker" style — that is, parted in masses on each side of the head and turned under unnaturally.

Illustrated Times (London), 16 Feb. 1861.

There's no obvious connection with the colour black. We may guess, however, that Londoners would have imagined the prison's knocker to be large and made of black iron as well as figuratively black because of its evil associations. We may also guess from the dates at which the two expressions were first current that Londoners took over the hairstyle phrase as a new way to describe the colour, as people have done for centuries with similes such as *black as your hat*, *black as death*, *black as the ace of spades*, *black as thunder*, and *black as the Earl of Hell's waistcoat*.

As a postscript, I also found this, in a story from 60-odd years ago about the search by a journalist named Bernard O'Donnell for the original Newgate knocker:

His spasmodic search came to an end recently when he was in the office of the Keeper of the Old Bailey, Mr A W Burt. "Where is Newgate's knocker?" he asked Mr Burt. Promptly it was shown to him. It was on the keeper's desk. After years spent as a symbol which came to inspire dread among the poor of London, it had found a more useful rôle. It now makes an ideal paper weight.

The Scotsman, 24 April 1950.

Make of that what you will. I wonder if it still exists?

In the news

Oxford Dictionaries announced its Word of the Year 2016 on 16 November: *post-truth*. Its editors defined this as “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.” One example came in a report in *The Times* on 31 October of comments by the president of the European Council on the signing of a trade deal with Canada: “Mr Tusk also denounced the ‘post-truth politics ... on both sides of the Atlantic’ which nearly scuppered the deal because ‘facts and figures won’t stand up for themselves’ against an emotional opposition campaign.” Though it has been very much a word of this year, connected both with the Brexit referendum in the UK and the US presidential election, Oxford Dictionaries noted that “*post-truth* seems to have been first used in this meaning in a 1992 essay by the late Serbian-American playwright Steve Tesich in *The Nation* magazine.”

Last time I mentioned the Danish word *hygge*, a quality of cosiness and comfortable conviviality that engenders a feeling of contentment or well-being. This has become widely popular in Britain this year, and was one of Oxford Dictionaries’ runners-up as Word of the Year. For the background and the story of its rise in British English, I can’t do better than point you to an article by Charlotte Higgins in [The Guardian](#) on 22 November.

The newest British buzzword is *jam*. Not as in the “jam tomorrow and jam yesterday, but never jam today” meaning of the Red Queen in *Through the Looking-Glass* — though the quip has been made several times by pundits — but as an acronym for “Just About Managing”. This refers to the estimated six million working-age British households on low to middle incomes who are struggling to stave off poverty from day to day. The term derives from a speech given by the new prime minister, Theresa May, just after she was chosen by MPs in July. She said of the members of this group, “You have a job but you don’t always have job security. You have your own home, but you worry about paying a mortgage. You can just about manage but you worry about the cost of living and getting your kids into a good school.” Her words became a catchphrase among commentators which has now been shortened.

Boxing Day

Q. From Burt Rubin; a related question came from Keith Denham: As an American, I’ve always wondered about the origin of the term *Boxing Day*.

A. Boxing Day is a public holiday in Britain and most Commonwealth countries.

There’s some minor confusion these days, in Britain at least, over which day it actually is. The reference books a century ago were adamant that it was the first working day after Christmas Day. However, the name is now frequently attached specifically to 26 December, even if it falls at the weekend, which makes it equivalent to the Christian saint’s day of St Stephen.

We have to go back to the early seventeenth century to find the basis for the name. The term *Christmas box* appeared about then for an earthenware box, something like a piggy bank, which apprentices and other workers took around immediately after Christmas to collect money. When the round was complete, the box was broken and the money distributed among the company. The first known example:

Tirelire, a Christmas box; a box having a cleft on the lid, or in the side, for money to enter it; used in France by begging Fryers, and here by Butlers, and Prentices, etc.

A Dictionarie of the French and English Tongues, by Randle Cotgrave, 1611.

By the eighteenth century, *Christmas box* had become a figurative term for any seasonal gratuity. By the nineteenth century their collection seems to have become a scourge in our big cities. When James Murray compiled an entry for *Christmas box* in the first edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary* in 1889, his splendidly acerbic description suggests that the practice had become a personal bugbear:

A present or gratuity given at Christmas: in Great Britain, usually confined to gratuities given to those who are supposed to have a vague claim upon the donor for services rendered to him as one of the general public by whom they are employed and paid, or as a customer of their legal employer; the undefined theory being that as they have done offices for this person, for which he has not directly paid them, some direct acknowledgement is becoming at Christmas.



These panels satirise the grudging response of moneyed individuals on being asked for a seasonal gratuity. Drawing by Richard Newton, first published on 25 December 1795.

Though the term *Boxing Day* for the day on which such Christmas boxes were requested didn't become widespread until early in the nineteenth century, a few examples are recorded from the previous century. The earliest I know of is this:

Tuesday in Christmas Week, about Eight in the Evening, I was coming over this broad Place, and saw a Man come up to this lame Man, and knock him down — It was the Day after Boxing Day.

Transcript of a trial at the Old Bailey (London), 14 Jan. 1743.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, the term seems to have become as closely associated with importuning individuals as Christmas Box itself:

“Boxing Day,” — the day consecrated to baksheesh, when nobody, it would almost seem, is too proud to beg, and when everybody who does not beg is expected to play the almoner. “Tie up the knocker — say you’re sick, you are dead,” is the best advice perhaps that could be given in such cases to any man who has a street-door and a knocker upon it.

Curiosities of London Life, by Charles Manby Smith, 1853.

The custom has died out, seasonal visitors to Britain may be assured, though small gifts are still sometimes given to tradesmen and suppliers of services. The favourite occupation of the day is attending football matches or rushing to the post-Christmas sales.

Useful information

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