

# Oxford English Dictionary News

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## Editorial

In the last issue of *OED News* I mentioned the work of our library researchers as being one area of activity which that issue's survey of 'a day in the life of the *OED*' had not covered. I am happy to be able to remedy that omission with Brigid Allen's account of her work in the Bodleian Library. Jeremy Marshall, by contrast, describes the rather more unusual experience of going to court on behalf of the *OED*.

From time to time this newsletter includes items of news about the *OED* project itself. The sad death on 5 July of Robert Burchfield, editor of the *Supplement to the OED*, truly marks the end of an era, and warranted something more than a brief news item; the publication of a *Supplement* of his own seemed a fitting way to celebrate his life and work.

Finally, this is my last issue of *OED News* as editor. I have greatly enjoyed the last three years; I look forward to enjoying future issues as a reader (and, I hope, occasional contributor). I would like to wish my successor Jemma Best every success.

Peter Gilliver, Newsletter Editor and Associate Editor, *OED*

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## Life as a library researcher

Scanning the list of editorial staff on the *OED* website, you may notice that amongst the Assistant Editors may be found a small, solid concentration of library researchers. Are we, perhaps, nostalgic recent graduates, still haunting academic libraries because still stuck in the rhythm of preparing for a weekly essay?

Are we filling in time, as my mother used to say about girls who took token employment before getting married? Not so. Junior though we may be in terms of job title, we are of all ages up to late fifties (me). We all have higher degrees, wider than average linguistic knowledge, and experience of jobs or careers in the outside world. Other library researchers, mostly similarly mature and well-qualified, work as freelancers in the Bodleian, the British Library, the Library of Congress, and major libraries in Toronto, New York, Boston, New Haven, and Riverside, California. We

are all responsible to our manager in Oxford, Melinda Babcock, who keeps in touch with us by e-mail or through weekly or intermittent meetings, distributes our work, and generally mediates between us and the rest of the editorial staff and management.

How do we spend our time? Is our work purely ancillary to that of the many editors? Do we simply check the spelling and punctuation of quotations to be used in *OED* entries, convert those that require it to their form in the earliest available



edition, and provide the page numbers or wordings that do not appear in electronic databases? (Literature Online, a much-used literary database, gives page numbers but not the folio or signature numbers that occur in early printed books. Nexis, a newspaper database, includes some paraphrases of newspaper stories, which then have to be checked against the originals.)

So far, so mechanical. We do a large amount of this work, usually in answer to individual requests, but sometimes in the form of pre-arranged batches of quotations taken from a single source. Even in the ideal surroundings of the Bodleian Library, too much of this kind of thing can induce the feeling that 'research' is a euphemism for what we do. Luckily, this is not all. An apparently rudimentary task can make unexpected demands, as when (for example) a researcher realizes that a previously misunderstood quotation has led to the misdefinition of a word; or when a quotation already published in the *OED* simply cannot be found in the source to which it is attributed; or when it is found after a search, in a place quite different from the location given.

Often, too, an editor asks a researcher to clarify the sense of a word by looking at it in a wider context than that of the minimal or obscure quotation that he (or she) has to hand. Or he may need help with dating an item, or may ask for new, antedating or postdating examples of the use of a word, either in general or in a particular sense. This involves finding quotations from any English-language source, dated earlier or later than any of those already published in the *OED*, those found on the databases consulted by editors, or those gathered from material sent in by readers. Equally, he may ask us to interdate two quotations dating from (say) 1630 and 1880. Using our background knowledge, initiative, and capacity for lateral thinking, we then become creatively involved in the editorial process. Sometimes, to spare us too much time or exertion, an editor may point us towards a specific secondary source found in an on-line library catalogue. This may be a start, or it may be a dead end. Often we are on our own, refining our own database searches; scanning through bibliographies and indexes; remembering books used for similar, previous requests; or, if we work in the Bodleian (where we are privileged to have stack access), browsing in the section or sections of the stack devoted to a particular subject.

As for concrete examples of the kind of word-finding that we do: dealing with up to thirty-five separate

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requests a week, one forgets individual instances fairly rapidly until, for some reason, they re-surface in a later bundle of requests. However, I will give a couple from the 'O' range which have come my way recently.

'*Oyster cellar* n.: please antedate.' I'm always happy to be given food-related requests, and this was an unexpectedly easy one. There is, as yet, no comprehensive electronic

database of diaries or letters, the kind of source in which this seemed most likely to occur. To judge from the few quotations already given in *OED2*, oyster cellars were mainly Scottish or (later) American. I unsuccessfully tried Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor* (1851), and skimmed a handful of oyster-related books in the Bodleian, before trying the index to James Boswell's *Journal*. This revealed, indeed, that, in eighteenth-century Edinburgh, Boswell visited an oyster cellar, substantially antedating the existing nineteenth-century examples.

*Orion's hound* n. An editor had found the phrase on an Internet site, which quoted it from a recent, slightly off-beat book about astronomy and the *Iliad*. Would I please (she asked) check the phrase in the book to provide a recent example of its use. Fair enough, except that in the book it comes in an extract from a Victorian prose translation of the *Iliad*. Was the editor aware, I wondered, that this name for Sirius was a direct translation of the Greek? *Orion's hound* was already in *OED*, with a single quotation from Spenser; I supplied an additional quotation for *Orion's hound* from Chapman's translation of Homer, together with quotations for *Orion's dog* (an alternative name, not given in *OED2*) from other versions of the *Iliad* by Hobbes (1676) and Pope (1720).

Library research is culturally enriching, even addictive; and its constant variety and interconnectedness can compensate for what some might regard as lack of depth. It also requires a fairly flexible, intuitive approach, despite the strict guidelines laid down for researchers. (Follow instructions exactly; do not deviate from the point.) As editorial requests are issued without discussion, it sometimes helps if a researcher can anticipate the next step or two. Does the editor, for example, want only a simple conversion when with minimal extra effort one can give a general antedating or postdating? Sometimes antedatings happen unbidden, as when the requested conversion of a quotation to an earlier source reveals the existence of a still earlier one, allowing the intermediate source to be bypassed.

# The newsletter of the *Oxford English Dictionary*

I also like to send in odd voluntary slips with new quotations which have caught my eye in the course of work, especially for *OED* entries in the current or imminent ranges. A distraction from the task in hand? Yes; but a marginal, fleeting one, from which something valuable can usually be learnt. And so much better than the annoyance of endlessly

remembering the sentence that you might have written down, if you could only remember the name and chapter of the book in which you had once skimmed over it.

Brigid Allen, Assistant Editor, *OED*

## Court in controversy: a lexicographer's brush with the law

**Among the tasks which a lexicographer is very occasionally called upon to perform, one of the more peculiar is to give evidence in court as an expert witness. My own adventure of this kind took place (some years ago) when the *OED* was contacted by a firm of lawyers involved in a trade description case.**



If an enquirer writes to the *OED* in connection with a legal argument, our most typical response is a regretful refusal to comment, on the grounds that we claim no authority in matters of law or legal interpretation. The courts do use our dictionaries in support of arguments about the commonly accepted meanings of words, but the legal authority comes from the court's decision, not from the dictionary's definition. Nevertheless, it is sometimes necessary to explain what the complete *OED* does and does not contain, and how long ago some parts of it were written. On this occasion, unfortunately, a letter of explanation was insufficient, and I found myself in the position of having to give testimony in person to a magistrates' court in Croydon, to explain why the *OED* entry for *foil* (published in 1897) might not be adequate in seeking to resolve a late 20th-century argument about 'foil-wrapped' tea bags, and to present some of the sources of information which a modern dictionary editor might use in revising such an entry.

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nature to the lexicographer. Of course, I had to steel myself for the grim and gruelling realities of the trip: the drive to Croydon in a hired car (rather more comfortable than my old Morris, actually), the unfamiliar surroundings of the hotel swimming pool and jacuzzi (well, maybe I could get used to this), the long four-course dinner in the company of an entertaining barrister... and the case went to appeal, so I had to do it all over again a few months later!

The most interesting aspect of the whole trip, from the lexicographer's point of view, was the opportunity to stay in the Selsdon Park Hotel, an institution whose name is immortalized in the pages of the *OED* as the source of 'Selsdon Man'. This hypothetical hominid was not dug in fragments out of the geological deposits on the hotel's extensive grounds, but sprang fully-formed from the lips of Labour prime minister Harold Wilson. He used the term (in some scorn) with reference to a conference of the

But perhaps it was not unfortunate. The day was a fascinating introduction to the civil court system: the interplay of solicitor, barrister, magistrate, and clerk; the mental dexterity of the barristers in fashioning and refashioning their arguments; the attention to the meanings of words in the kind of detail that is second

Conservative Party leadership at the hotel in early 1970. A picture of the conference participants is prominently displayed in the hotel: in retrospect, the one who was to become most notable in later British politics was perhaps the solitary 'Selsdon Woman', the upwardly-mobile Margaret Thatcher. But that is another story...

Jeremy Marshall, Associate Editor, *OED*

Words and phrases covered in the September 2004 *OED Online* update could help you to...

...**order orthogonal origami ostriches**... ...**orchestrate osmosis** through an **ornate Ottoman**...

...**ornament an ostracized organist** with an **original orb**... ...**orbit an orchard** with **organic orchids**...

## Project news

### University Challenge: The Professionals

It says something about the kind of people who are attracted to work on the *OED* that when Oxford University Press entered a team for the 2004 series of *University Challenge: The Professionals* (an adaptation of the long-running BBC TV quiz, for members of professions and institutions rather than students), it decided that the strongest team consisted of four people who work on the Dictionary: Katrina Campbell, Peter Gilliver, Jeremy Marshall, and Bill Trumble. After trouncing a team from the House of Lords, the OUP team went on to face stiffer competition in the semi-final; but even the Foreign Office were no match for us — we recorded the highest score of the series, beating them by 250 points to 145. In a closely fought final, we were finally beaten by the team from the British Library.

Speaking impromptu after the final, Jeremy Paxman declared that he was delighted that it should have been fought between ‘two of the greatest intellectual institutions in the country. And unsung institutions at that.’ After praising the BL as ‘certainly one of the best libraries in the world, maybe the best of all’, he went on: ‘And as for the OUP? Well, I used to think there were



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four works which anyone who wanted to build their own library ought to have: the *OED*, the *DNB*, the *Oxford History of England* and the eleventh edition of *Britannica*... I have the *OED* on disc, as well as in printed form, and I use it every day. One of my secret vices is to come across a delightful word I’ve never heard of (*nonage* was a recent one), and then to use it in a script or interview with a cabinet minister on *Newsnight* as if it’s in everyday use down at the Dog and Duck. It’s remarkable how infrequently anyone says “yer what?”

‘I’ve always been slightly in awe of the OUP. Their team on *University Challenge* rather proved my instincts right. It was one of the most formidable we have ever seen on the programme. I think they did the organization proud.’

### Gillian Walker

Gillian Walker, *OED*’s Editorial Project Manager, left us at the end of July, after 15 years at OUP. Quiet, unassuming, serene, and thoroughly conscientious, Gill managed the Project Office, dealing with a plethora of tasks which help to make the work of *OED* editors possible, and their lives more enjoyable. These included the day-to-day management of the *OED* finances; budget and planning work; overseeing the batching of editorial ranges and the tracking of progress; ensuring that the filing of editorial materials was managed systematically; and organizing *OED*

events — such as in-house *University Challenge* practice matches, and parties to celebrate important *OED* anniversaries, or the completion of a letter of the alphabet. All of it was done beautifully, with characteristic attention to detail. We will miss Gill a great deal. Her calm, steady presence, competence, and unshakeably pleasant demeanour made working with her a very happy experience. We thank her for all that she has contributed, and wish her well.

Penny Silva, Director, *OED*

## Appeals

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

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

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

**arsey** (a.: irritable, arrogant) antedate 1989  
**bawheid** (n.: (Scottish) a person with a round face, a fool) antedate 1985  
**fabbo** (a.) antedate 1984  
**fabby** (a.) antedate 1971  
**patten-sandal** (n.) postdate 1874  
**piecing lead** (n.: (printing) a lead used to separate lines when a wide measure of type is used) postdate 1888  
**pink** (v.: apply rouge to the face, cheeks, etc.) interdate 1792-1998  
**pink-faced** (a.) antedate 1812  
**pinnaclet** (n.: a small pinnacle) antedate 1905  
**pinkie** (n.: a conical woollen nightcap) postdate 1910  
**pitchable** (a.) interdate 1486-1939  
**pivot shears** (n.) interdate 1398-2004  
**planetography** (n.) interdate 1735-1960  
**throw one's rattle out of the pram/cot** (v.: lose one's temper, throw a tantrum) antedate 1988  
**throw one's toys out of the pram/cot** (v.: lose one's temper, throw a tantrum) antedate 1989

Please send submissions to [oed3@oup.com](mailto:oed3@oup.com)

## Interesting antedatings

Revision of the entries in the September 2004 *OED Online* update has revealed an earlier origin than previously known for many words, including:

**orbit** (noun; antedated to ?a1425 from 1548)  
**orchestral** (a1779 from 1811)

**ordinary** (adjective; a1402 from c1460)  
**organizationally** (1868 from 1933)  
**originally** (a1398 from 1490)  
**ornamental** (1595 from 1646)  
**ostentatious** (1590 from 1658)

## Quotable quotes

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

### *domestic bliss...*


1926 R. Macaulay *Lett. to Sister*, No longer..does the husband have to sit in the evenings and listen to inanities from his wife..; he and she can now both sit in silence, with the phones on their ears.

### *...an invitation to temperance...*

1868 *Sci. Amer.*, Wines called 'champagnes' are, to our certain knowledge, prepared of honey, chalk, pigeon dung, and even worse materials.

### *...and the weaker (or lazier?) sex...*

1863 V. Penny *Employments of Women*, The young man said a paper marbler in Philadelphia used to employ some women to assist him, but he had to mix their paints.



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