A DELIGHTFUL DICTIONARY OF DERIVATIONS

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JULIA CRESSWELL

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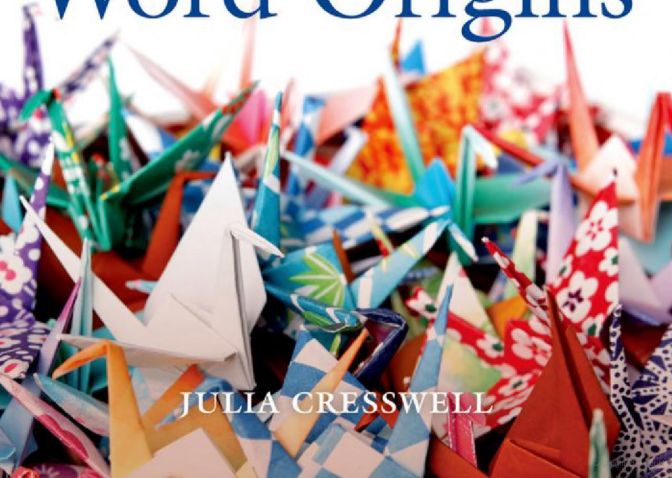

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Abbreviations

To save space the following abbreviations have been used to show the periods in which words are used.

OE stands for Old English, used up to *c.*1149
ME stands for Middle English used *c.*1150–*c.*1350
LME stands for Late Middle English used *c.*1350–1500

Thereafter, date ranges are given by century, proceeded by E, M, or L standing for Early (up to the 29th year) Middle (30–69) and Late (70–99), so that a word labelled [E17th] would have come into use between 1600 and 1629; one labelled [M18th] between 1730 and 1769; and one labelled [L19th] between 1870 and 1899.

Introduction

It is well established that English has an unusually large vocabulary. This is partly because its history has exposed the language to an unusually large number of influences, and partly because it has never been slow to borrow from any language it meets. Although there are borrowings from many exotic languages, the majority of words in English have come from one of the large number of languages that belong to the Indo-European group, as English itself does. This is the dominant family of languages in Europe and Western Asia, all of which are descended from a hypothetical language called Proto-Indo-European. Who the original Indo-Europeans were we do not know. The majority of scholars would probably say that they were a people living somewhere in the region of the Black Sea approximately 6000 years ago, but views vary widely both as to when and where they lived. What we do know is that their language spread, changing all the while. How and why it spread are again hotly debated, but speakers of the language group spread as far east as western China, south into India, and west as far as Ireland, before the languages were exported to other continents at a later date.

It may seem impossible that Irish, English, Greek, Persian, and Hindi are all related, but they are indeed all descended from Proto-Indo-European. The secret behind discovering the links lies in the study of early forms of the languages and of the way in which sounds change in language, combined with careful comparison of the languages. Of these, the most important for our purposes is sound change. The way that a language is pronounced is constantly changing, although we may not be aware of it. Today we are lucky, because we have sound recordings stretching back over 100 years, and can hear for ourselves how odd someone speaking only 50 years ago sounds today. We are so used to the idea of a standard written language that it is easy to forget how much variation there is in the sounds of the spoken English we hear today. Those who want to check this out for themselves will find the British Library website has an excellent collection of recordings.

The brain has an extraordinary ability to recognize the same words in the widely different sounds of English spoken, say, in Mumbai, Melbourne, Alabama, and Glasgow. Over time which of these varying sounds becomes the generally accepted one varies. This is the key to one of the ways sounds in speech change—there is constant variety all around us, but we can usually ignore it. If what we think of as the standard form changes, it can eventually lead to a change in the written form. Speakers of English English can hear for themselves how this process works. One of the changes that is taking place in English at the moment is a change in the sound written 'th'. 'Th' is actually the symbol for two closely related sounds—that in *think* and that in *bothered*. More and more people are pronouncing the first of these as *fink* and the second as *bovvered*. This is not a sudden change. It was recorded in London in the 19th century, spread slowly through the 20th, but became much more common in the last

quarter of that century. It is possible that in the future it will become the dominant form (although not inevitable) and then a sound change will have happened. Although on paper the change from 'th' to 'v' or 'f' may seem great, in fact, if you say the sounds you will find that the only significant difference is the position of the lower lip, and the resulting slight change in the position of the tongue. This is an important point; sound changes are not arbitrary, but go to a sound made in a neighbouring part of the mouth.

By comparing old written forms of the language we are able to reconstruct what changes have taken place in the past and so establish the relationships between Indo-European languages. This enables us to show, for instance, that Germanic languages (including English) and Latin once shared a common ancestor, and that our word 'tooth' and the Latin word behind 'dentist' were once the same. By comparing all the available vocabulary it was possible to establish the rules of how different sounds correspond in the two languages, and it was found that 'd' regularly appears as 't' in English, and Latin 't' regularly appears as th. Thus Latin ***d**en**t**em* (which gives us dentist) corresponds to **t**oo**th** in English. Likewise, since Latin 'p' regularly appears as 'f', ***ped**em*, Latin for foot, and source of pedestrian, appears as **f**oo**t** in English. Working in this way, it has been possible to establish the relationships between the surviving languages, and go some way towards reconstructing lost ones.

Modern English emerges from this history with a vastly enriched vocabulary because it is a blend of more than one branch of the Indo-European family. The basic structure and the vocabulary of the language belongs to the Germanic branch, the family of languages spoken throughout north-west Europe. This was introduced to the British Isles when the Anglo-Saxons became the dominant group after the Romans left in the 5th century AD. Even then, the Anglo-Saxon language, known as Old English, was already a mixture of different dialects as different tribes settled different areas leading to regional variations, which can still be traced in the language today. From the end of the 8th century the British Isles were subject to increasingly frequent Viking raids, which led to large tracts of the country being settled by Scandinavian speakers of Old Norse, and eventually, with Canute (*d.*1035), to a Scandinavian ruler. These invasions had a profound influence on the language, adding to the vocabulary providing both basic words such as 'she' and enriching the stock of words by duplicating vocabulary. For instance, shirt and skirt are basically the same Germanic word, but because they are both available they can be used much more precisely than the original one word, which seems to have been a catch-all term for a long garment.

After the Scandinavians, their relatives who had settled in France invaded in 1066. Norman is simply a form of 'North man' or Viking, but the Scandinavians who had settled in Normandy had largely abandoned their Germanic language and adopted the local form of French. This belonged to a different branch of the Indo-European family, the Romance languages that developed from the language of Rome, Latin. With the Norman conquest, Old English, which had had a flourishing and sophisticated literature, largely disappeared from the written record for a couple of generations, to be replaced by Latin and French, and

became the language of the uneducated, a situation that tends to lead to rapid change. When the language re-emerged, it had changed into Middle English and acquired large elements of French and Latin vocabulary. Most of the Old English words were still there, although often in much more restricted senses, but people were able to express themselves much more precisely. Throughout the Middle Ages the vocabulary continued to expand, mainly with Latin-based words, for Latin was the language of learning well into the 17th and 18th centuries, but also with words adopted from classical Greek and from trade relationships, particularly with the Dutch. By about 1500 the language had become Early Modern English, but since these changes are largely to do with the structure of the language rather than vocabulary, they need not concern us. Much the same process has continued up until modern times. Latin and Greek continued to be important sources of new words, particularly in the sciences, and changing and expanding trade had brought words into the language from an ever-widening pool of other languages.

The importance of Latin as a source means that it is necessary to consider some of the peculiarities of the language. Latin is an inflected language—that is to say, the relationship between words is mainly indicated by the endings. Old English had been inflected, but in modern English most of the inflections have been lost, although we still put an 's' on the end of words to show they are plural, and in verbs the 's' that distinguishes 'he eats' from 'I eat' still survives. Instead we rely on word order: 'Man bites dog' is very different from 'Dog bites man'. In Latin the three words could be in any order, but the ending of the words would show who was the biter and who bitten. Another peculiarity of Latin is that the middle of the word often adds or changes sounds from the basic form (the stem) in the inflected form. Thus 'the king' is *rex*, but 'of the king' is *regis*. This makes the language hard work for those learning it at school, but gave little trouble to the native speakers, any more than we have problems recognizing that 'won't' is the same as 'will not'. There are always good historical reasons for these sound changes, if you know where to look. In the case of *rex* and *regis* the difference is mainly one of spelling. If you spell *rex regs*, you can tell that the 'x' rather than 'g' is simply a running together of the two final sounds. This affects us in that words in other languages tend to be taken from the inflected forms of the Latin. In the case of the *rex*, we use the word 'regal' for kingly, incorporating the 'g' of the inflected form. In the earlier example above of the relationship between the Latin and English words for 'foot' it was necessary to cheat, for the basic form of foot in Latin is *pes*, the 'd' only appears in the inflected forms. As a result, in this book in entries for words from Latin it may not always be obvious where some of the sounds incorporated have come from. However, rather than fill the space with material explaining the Latin forms it has been decided to ask the reader to take the Latin inflected forms on trust. They can always be checked in one of the larger Oxford dictionaries of current English which include them in the etymologies. Another small point worth mentioning about Latin is that the letters 'i' and 'j' and the letters 'u' and 'v' were interchangeable in written forms, their pronunciation varying in time and in different areas. This explains some rather strange-looking spellings in the source words (similarly the development

of Old English words is easier to understand if you know that the letters 'ge' were pronounced as if the 'g' was a 'y').

This is not the only way that considerations of space have affected the contents of the book. With such a vast vocabulary to choose from, only a small proportion could be included. Priority has gone to words with interesting history, rather than choosing to use the core vocabulary of the language. This is because the history of many Old English words is frankly rather dull; a word like 'hand' has changed its spelling from *hond* to hand, but otherwise all you can say about it is that it is a Germanic word and has relatives in other Germanic languages. Similarly some Latin roots have hardly changed in English either in form or sense. 'Placid' comes from Latin *placidus* and there is little more to say about it. Hand has been left out of the book, placid is mentioned in passing as one of a group of more interesting words that descend from the same root word.

The dates given in this book are based on those of the *Oxford English Dictionary* and its files. They are the first recorded dates, but it must be remembered that we are dependent on what has survived, and someone having spotted it and reported it. The record is full of gaps; for instance the word 'marzipan' is recorded once in 1542, again in 1583, and 1657 and then disappears until the 19th century, although there is no reason to think that the product does. 'Mend' is thought to be a shortening of 'amend', but is actually recorded slightly earlier than the longer form. Similarly, 'journalist' is recorded earlier than the 'journal' from which the job description comes. The study of word histories is very much dependent on what chance has handed down to us. This is why the majority of dates given for words are expressed only in terms of date ranges rather than exact dates.

Julia Cresswell

Wordbuilding

Many of the words in this book, particularly those from Greek and Latin, are made up of elements, known as combining forms or prefixes and suffixes, that alter the basic sense of the root word. Some of the more common are listed below with their usual meanings.

a- 1. With Greek roots (an- in front of a vowel) from Greek for 'not' means: not (atheist); without (anaemic) 2. With Old English roots means: to(wards) (aback); in a state of (aflutter); on (afoot); in (nowadays)

ab- From Latin for 'from, by, with' means: from (abduct)

ad- In Latin means 'to', used for motion (advance); change (adulterate); addition (adjunct)

be- In words from Old English, from 'by', means: all over (bespatter); thoroughly (bewilder); covered with (bejewelled); turns adjectives and nouns into verbs (befriend)

com- From Latin *cum*, 'with', sometimes appears as co-, col, cor or con depending on the sound following it, means: with (combine); together (compact); altogether (commemorate)

de- 1. From Latin for 'off, from', used for: down, away (descend); completely (denude) 2. From Latin *dis-* used for 'not, un-, apart', changed to de- in French, used for: removal (de-ice); undoing the action of something (deactivate)

di- 1. From Greek *dis* 'twice' means: twice, two, double mainly in technical words (dichromatic); in chemistry etc. with two atoms (dioxide) 2. From Latin: an alternative to *dis-* (*see below*)

dia- From the Greek for 'through', means: through (diaphanous); across (diameter); apart (dialysis)

dis- From Latin *dis-* used for 'not, un-, apart' means: not, un- (disadvantaged); used to reverse an action (disown); to remove or deprive of something (dismember); to separate or expel (disbar)

dys- Greek equivalent of *dis-*, means: bad (dysentery); difficult (dyspepia)

en-, em- 1. French form of Latin *in-*, means: put into (embed); in, into (ensnare); make, bring into a state (encrust); make more so (enliven) 2. From Greek equivalent of Latin *in-* means: within (empathy)

-en Old English, makes nouns and adjectives into verbs (deepen); makes adjectives from nouns (woollen)

ex- 1. From Latin *ex* 'out of', means: out (exclude); thoroughly (exterminate); cause to be in a state (exasperate); indicates a former state (ex-husband); removes from a state (excommunicate) 2. The Greek equivalent of the Latin, means: out (exodus)

for- From Old English, used to modify the sense of a word in the following ways: to make it more intense (forlorn); to prohibit (forbid); to show neglect (forget); to show renunciation or abstention (forgo, forgive)

fore- From Old English, means: in front of (foreshorten); before in time (forebode, forefathers); in front (forecourt, forebrain)

hyper- From Greek *huper* 'over, beyond' means: over, above, beyond (hypersonic); exceedingly, more than normal (hypersensitive); in electronic media used for complex structure as in hypertext

in- 1. From Latin *in* 'in', or English in, can also appear as il- im- ir- depending on sound following, used for: in, towards, within (inborn, influx) 2. From Latin *in* 'not', can also appear as il- im- ir- depending on sound following, used for: not (infertile), without (inequality)

non- From Latin *non* 'not', means: not involved in (non-aggression); not of the kind or way described (non-conformist); not of the importance implied (non-issue); not needing or causing (non-iron, non-skid); not having or being (non-human)

para- 1. From Greek *para* 'beside, alteration from' meaning: beside, alongside (parallel); beyond, different but with similarities (paramilitary) 2. From French and Italian, meaning: protecting (against) (parachute, parasol)

pen- From Latin *paene* 'almost' used in this sense (peninsula, penultimate)

per- From Latin *per-* 'through, by means of', means: through, all over (perforate); completely (perfect)

poly- From Greek *polus* 'much, many', means: much, many (polygon, polychrome)

pro- 1. From Latin *pro* 'in front of, on behalf of, for, instead of, because of', means: supporting (pro-choice); moving to, out or away (proceed) 2. From Greek *pro* 'before', meaning: before in time or place (proactive)

re- From Latin *re-* 'back, again', means: again, once more (reactivate); in response (react); against (resist); behind, after (remain); back, away, down (recede); more, again (refine)

semi- From Latin *semi-* 'half' meaning: half (semi-circular); almost (semi-darkness); partly (semi-detached)

sub- From Latin *sub* 'under, close to', changing to suc-, suf-, sug-, sup-, or sus- when influenced by a following sound, means: at a lower level (subalpine); lower or smaller (subordinate, subaltern); secondary (sublet, subdivision)

trans- From Latin *trans* 'across', means: across, to the other side of (transatlantic); through (transparent); to another state (transform)

un- 1. Old English, meaning: not (unrepeatable); the reverse of (unhappy); a lack of (unrest) 2. Old English, having much the same sense as 1. but from a different source, meaning: reversal (untie); separation, reduction (unmask, unman); release (unhand).

Aa

aardvaark *see* SOUTH AFRICAN WORD PANEL

abacus [LME] The abacus that we know today, with rows of wires along which slide beads, is an ancient object used by the Babylonians, Greeks, and Romans and is still found in many parts of the world. The earliest abacus was probably a board covered with sand, on which a clerk could draw figures and then rub them out again, and this was the original meaning in English. The word was borrowed from Latin, but came from Greek *abax* 'board, slab, plate', and probably ultimately from Hebrew *ābāq* 'dust'.

abandon *see* BAN

abase *see* BASE

abate, abattoir *see* BATED

abbot [OE] This comes from Aramaic 'abbā 'father' introduced through its use in the Bible.

abbreviate *see* BRIEF

abdicate [M16th] This is from Latin *abdicare* 'to renounce' from *ab-* 'away, from' and *dicare* 'declare'. Examples of the sense 'give up sovereignty' date from the early 18th century.

abduct *see* DUCT

aberrant *see* ERRANT

abet [LME] If you abet someone these days you are very likely to be up to no good, but this was not always the case. Since the late 18th century the word has mainly been found as **aid and abet**, 'to help and encourage someone in some wrongdoing', but in its early use to abet someone was simply to urge them to do something, not necessarily bad. It comes from the Old French word *abeter*, which could also mean 'to encourage a hound to bite'. BAIT [ME] has a similar root.

abhor [LME] Abhor literally means something that makes you shudder. It comes from Latin *ab-* 'away from' and *horrere* 'to shudder with fright', also the basis of *HORROR. In Shakespeare's day abhor could also mean 'to cause horror': 'It does abhor me now I speak the word' (*Othello*).

abject *see* JET

able [LME] In the past able had the senses 'easy to use' and 'suitable' as well as the more familiar sense 'having the qualifications or means' to do something. It comes from Latin *habilis* 'handy' from *habere* 'to hold'. The jargon term **abled**, as in *differently abled* was formed in the 1980s from **disabled** [L16th], from able with the negative *dis-* in front.

abominable [ME] People used to think that abominable came from Latin *ab-* 'away from' and *homo* 'human being', and so literally meant 'inhuman or beastly'. Consequently, until the 17th century it was frequently spelt *abhominable*, a spelling found in Shakespeare. In fact, the word comes from Latin *abominari*, meaning 'to regard something as a bad omen', and is related to **omen** [L16th] and **ominous** [L16th]. **Abominable Snowman** is another name for the Himalayan Yeti. The name was brought back by the Royal Geographical Society expedition mounted in 1921 to Mount Everest, which found mysterious footprints in the snow. Abominable Snowman is a translation of Tibetan *Meetoh Gangmi*, the name the Sherpa porters gave to the animal responsible for the tracks. **Yeti** is from Tibetan *yeh-the* 'little man-like animal'.

aborigine [M19th] This is a shortening of the 16th-century plural *aborigines* 'original inhabitants', which in classical times referred to the early people of Italy and Greece. The word comes from the Latin phrase *ab origine* 'from the beginning'. Now both Aborigines and **Aboriginals** are standard plural forms when referring to Australian Aboriginal people, a specialized use which dates from the 1820s.

abortive [ME] The early use of abortive, from Latin *aboriri* 'to miscarry' from *oriri* 'be born', was for a stillborn child or animal. **Abortion** is also mid 16th century.

abound *see* WATER

abracadabra [L17th] These days abracadabra is just a fun word said by magicians as they do a trick, but formerly it was much more serious—a magic word that was supposed to be a charm against fever and was often engraved on an amulet worn around the neck. Abracadabra was written so that it formed a triangle, beginning with 'A' on the first line, 'AB' on the second, and so on. It ultimately goes back to ancient times, first recorded in a Latin poem of the 2nd century AD. *See also* **presto** at PRESTIGE

abrupt [M16th] The Latin source of this word was *abrumpere* 'broken off, steep', from *rumpere* 'to break'. In the past, abrupt could be used as a noun meaning 'abyss' (Milton *Paradise Lost*: 'Upborn with indefatigable wings Over the vast abrupt').

abscess *see* CEDE

abseil [1930s] This is from the German verb *abseilen*, from *ab* 'down' and *seil* 'rope'.

absolve *see* SOLVE

abstract [ME] The Latin source of abstract, meant literally 'drawn away' and is from *abstrahere*, from the elements *ab-* 'from' and *trahere* 'draw off'. The use in art dates from the mid 19th century. *Trahere* is found in many English words including: **attract** [LME] with *ad* 'to'; **portrait** [M16th], something drawn; **protract** [M16th] with *pro* 'out'; **retract** [LME] and **retreat** [LME] both drawing back; and words listed at *TRAIN.

absurd [M16th] One sense of the Latin word *absurdus* was 'out of tune', and in the past absurd was occasionally used with this meaning. From this Latin sense it developed the meaning 'out of harmony with reason, irrational'. The term **Theatre of the Absurd**, describing drama by writers such as Samuel Beckett (1906–1989), Eugène Ionesco (1904–1994), and Harold Pinter (1930–2008), was coined by the critic Martin Esslin (1918–2002) in 1961.

abuse *see* USUAL

abut [LME] Abut 'have a common boundary' is from Anglo-Latin *abuttare*, from *a-* (from Latin *ad* 'to, at') and Old French *but* 'end'.

abysmal [M17th] The original literal sense of abysmal was 'very deep', and people did not start using it to describe something utterly appalling, 'the pits', until the beginning of the early 19th century. The word shares a source with **abyss** [LME] Greek *abussos* 'bottomless'.

academy [LME] An academy today is a place of learning or culture. It is fitting, then, that the word originated with one of the most influential scholars who ever lived, the Greek philosopher Plato. During the 4th century BC he taught in a garden in Athens called the *Akadēmeia*, which was named after an ancient hero called Akadēmos. It gave its name to the school Plato founded, the Academy. *See also* OSCAR

a cappella *see* CHAPEL

acceleration [LME] This comes from Latin *accelerare* 'hasten', which was formed from *celer* 'quick'.

accent [LME] English distinguishes the different parts or syllables of a word by stressing one of them, but the ancient Greeks pronounced them with a distinct difference in musical pitch. Syllables

marked with a **grave accent** (for example *à*, from Latin *gravis* 'heavy, serious') were spoken at a comparatively low pitch, those with an **acute** (*á*, from Latin *acutus* 'sharp, high') at a higher pitch, and those with a **circumflex** (*â*, from Latin *circumflexus*, 'bent around') began at the higher pitch and descended during the pronunciation of the syllable. This gives some explanation of why the root of accent is Latin *cantus* 'song', which was a direct translation of the Greek word *prosōidia* (source of **prosody** [LME] 'versification'). Quite a few languages (technically known as 'tonal' languages) still have this musical way of speaking, among them Chinese and Swedish.

accept *see* CAPABLE

access *see* CEDE

accident [LME] An accident was originally 'an event, something that happens', not necessarily a mishap. It came into English via Old French, ultimately from Latin *cadere*, meaning 'to fall', which also gave us words such as **cadaver** [LME] 'someone fallen', *CHANCE, **decay** [LME] 'fall away', **incident** [LME] 'fall upon' so 'happen'; and **occasion** [LME]. The idea of an event 'falling' remains in the English word **befall** [OE]. Later the meaning of accident evolved into 'something that happens by chance', as in the phrase **a happy accident**. By the 17th century the modern meaning had become established in the language. The full form of the proverb **accidents will happen**, which dates from the early 19th century, is **accidents will happen in the best-regulated families**. According to Mr Micawber in Charles Dickens's *David Copperfield* (1850): 'Accidents will occur in the best-regulated families; and in families not regulated by… the influence of Woman, in the lofty character of Wife, they must be expected with confidence, and must be borne with philosophy.' *See also* ADVENTURE

acclaim *see* CLAIM

accolade [E17th] The Provençal word *acolada* is the source of accolade. This literally meant an embrace or a clasping around the neck, and described the gesture of a friendly hug that was sometimes made when knighting someone, as an early alternative to a stroke on the shoulder with the flat of a sword. The ultimate root of the Provençal word is Latin *collum* 'neck', from which we also get **collar** [ME].

accommodate [M16th] The source of accommodate is Latin *accommodare* 'make fitting, fit one thing to another', formed from *commodus* 'fit'. It came into English with the basic Latin sense, and through the idea of finding something that fitted someone's needs, had developed the sense of 'provide lodgings for' by the early 18th century. Latin *commodus* is also the base of **commode** [M18th] something 'fit, convenient', and originally used of a chest of drawers before becoming a seat containing a chamber pot in the early 19th century and of **commodity** [LME] originally something useful.

accompany *see* COMPANION

accord, accordion *see* CHORD

account *see* COUNT

accrue *see* CRESCENT

accumulate *see* CLOUD

accurate *see* CURATE

ace [ME] An ace was originally the side of a dice marked with one spot. The word comes from Latin *as*, meaning 'unit'. Since an ace is the card with the highest value in many card games, the word often suggests excellence. This gave us the ace as a wartime fighter pilot who brought down many enemy aircraft, extended to anyone who excels at something. An **ace up your sleeve** (or in American English **an ace in the hole**) is a secret resource ready to use when you need it. A cheating card player might well hide an ace up their sleeve to use at an opportune moment. To **hold all the aces** is to have all

the advantages, from a winning hand in a card game. To be **within an ace** of doing something is to be on the verge of doing it. This is from the ace as one and thus a tiny amount.

acerbic [M19th] This is from Latin *acerbus* 'sour-tasting'.

ache [OE] The word ache is a good example of the way that English spelling and pronunciation have developed and in many cases have diverged from each other. The noun comes from Old English and used to be pronounced 'aitch' (like the letter H), whereas the verb was originally spelled *ake* and pronounced the way ache is today. Around 1700, people started pronouncing the noun like the verb. The spelling of the noun has survived, but the word is said in the way the verb (*ake*) used to be. The modern spelling is largely due to Dr Johnson, who mistakenly assumed that the word came from Greek *akhos* 'pain'. Other pairs of words that have survived into modern English with *k*-for-the-verb and *ch*-for-the-noun spellings include **speak** and **speech** and **break** and **breach**.

achieve [ME] The early sense was 'complete successfully', from Old French *achever* 'come or bring to a head', from the phrase *a chief* 'to a head'.

acid [E17th] Acid originally meant 'sour-tasting' and came from Latin *acidus*. The term seems to have been introduced by the scientist Francis Bacon, who in 1626 described sorrel as 'a cold and acid herb'. The chemical sense developed at the end of that century because most common acids taste sour. The **acid test** was originally a method of testing for gold using nitric acid. An object made of gold will show no sign of corrosion if immersed in nitric acid, unlike one made of another metal. By the late 19th century the expression had come to mean any situation that proves a person's or thing's quality. The Australian expression **put the acid on**, meaning 'to extract a loan or favour from', comes from acid test—the would-be borrower is seen as 'testing' their victim for resistance or weakness. **Acrid** [E18th] is from the related Latin *acer* 'sharp, pungent' with spelling influenced by acid.

acme [L16th] In Greek *akmē* meant 'point' or 'pinnacle, highest point'. Its use in English dates from the late 15th century, although for the next hundred years or so it was consciously used as a Greek word and written in Greek letters. For many people their first exposure to the word comes from the 'Looney Tunes' cartoons featuring the Roadrunner and Wile E. Coyote, where the characters buy products from the Acme company. 'Acme' was a real brand name for various US firms in the last two decades of the 19th century, chosen in part because the word comes near the top of any alphabetical list of suppliers. **Acne** [M19th] the skin condition, has a similar root. The idea is that all those red pimples are little points sticking up from someone's face.

acne *see* ACME

acolyte [ME] English acolyte is from ecclesiastical Latin *acolytus*, from Greek *akolouthos* 'follower'.

acorn [OE] An Old English word, related to **acre** [OE] and meaning 'fruit of the open land or forest'. It was later applied to any fruit, then subsequently restricted to the most important fruit produced by the forest, the acorn. The spelling of the word, originally *aecern*, evolved into its modern form because people thought the word must have something to do with OAK and CORN.

acquaint *see* QUAINT

acquiesce [E17th] There is a notion of peacefully leaving an argument unspoken in *acquiesce* which comes from Latin *acquiescere*, from *ad-* 'at' and *quiescere* 'to rest'.

acquire [LME] This is from Latin *acquirere* 'get in addition' from *ad-* 'to' and *quaerere* 'seek'. The late Middle English spelling was *acquere*, the change is an example of the many words which

developed new spellings around 1600 to make them look more like their Latin originals, evidence of early, if misplaced, interest in word histories.

acquit *see* QUIT

acre *see* ACORN

acrid *see* ACID

acrobat [E19th] The earliest acrobats were tightrope walkers, which explains why the word derives from Greek *akrobatos*, meaning 'walking on tiptoe'. The *akro-* part of *akrobatos* meant 'tip, end, or summit' and is found in several other English words. The **acropolis** [M17th] of a Greek city, most famously Athens, was the fortified part, which was usually built on a hill. **Acrophobia** [L19th] is fear of heights. An **acronym** [M20th] is a word such as *laser* or *Aids* formed from the initial letters of other words, and an **acrostic** [L16th] is a poem or puzzle in which the first letters in each line form a word or words.

acronym, acrophobia *see* ACROBAT

acropolis *see* ACROBAT, POLICE

across [ME] Early use was as an adverb meaning 'in the form of a *CROSS'; the word comes from Old French *a croix*, *en croix* 'in or on a cross'.

acrostic *see* ACROBAT

actor [LME] An actor was originally simply 'a doer', usually an agent or an administrator; the theatrical sense dates from the 16th century. Like **act** [LME] it comes from Latin *actus* 'thing done', which comes from *agere* 'to do, drive'. This is the basis of other English words such as **agenda** [E17th] 'things to be done'; **agent** [LME] 'someone or thing who does things'; **agile** [LME] 'able to do things'; **agitate** [LME] originally meaning 'drive away'; **ambiguous** [E16th] 'drive in both ways', a word, which appears to have been coined by the English scholar and statesman Sir Thomas More (1478–1535), originally in the sense 'indistinct, obscure'; **transaction** [LME] 'something driven across or through' and many more. **Actuality** [LME] originally had the sense 'activity'; from Old French *actualite* from *actualis* 'active, practical'. The modern French word **actualité** (usually meaning 'news') is sometimes used in English to mean 'truth', a sense not found in French as in: 'When asked why the company had not been advised to include the potential military use, he [Alan Clark] said it was our old friend economical . . . with the *actualité*' (*Independent* 10 November 1992).

actualité, actuality *see* ACTOR

actuary [M16th] An actuary started out as the name for a clerk or registrar of a court; the source is Latin *actuarius* 'bookkeeper', from *actus* 'event' (*see* *ACTOR). The current use in insurance contexts dates from the mid 19th century.

acumen [L16th] Acumen is an adoption of a Latin word meaning 'sharpness, point', from *acuere* 'sharpen'.

acute *see* ACCENT

adamant [OE] The Greek word *adamas*, originally meaning 'invincible or untameable', came to be applied to the hardest metal or stone and to diamond, the hardest naturally occurring substance. Via Latin it was the source not only of adamant but also of *DIAMOND. In Old English adamant was the name given to a legendary rock so hard that it was believed to be impenetrable. Early medieval Latin writers mistakenly explained the word as coming from *adamare* 'take a liking to' and associated *adamant* with the lodestone or magnet which 'takes a liking' to iron, and the word passed into modern languages with this confusion of meaning. The modern use, with its notion of unyielding conviction, is much more recent, probably dating from the 1930s.

adder [OE] One of the words Anglo-Saxons used for a snake was *naedre*, which became *nadder* in medieval times. At some point during the 14th or 15th century the

word managed to lose its initial *n*, as people heard 'a nadder' and misinterpreted this as 'an adder'. A northern dialect form *nedder* still exists. A similar process of 'wrong division' took place with words such as *APRON and umpire (*see* *PAIR), and the opposite can happen too, as with, for example, *NEWT and *NICKNAME. In time adder became the term for a specific poisonous snake, also known as the *VIPER. The same change nearly happened to the word **aunt** [ME] (which comes from Latin *amitia* 'aunt'), for between the 13th and 17th centuries 'mine aunt' can appear as 'my naunt'. In France this change has happened: the word was *ante* in Old French, but is now *tante* through the running together of *ta* 'your' and *ante*. *See also* DEAF.

addict *see* VERDICT

addle [ME] An addled egg is rotten and produces no chick, whereas if your brain is addled you are confused. Originally a rotten egg was described as an *addle egg* from Old English *addle*, liquid mud or dung, the sort of stuff you might come across in a farmyard, and which came to describe rotten eggs because of their smell.

address [ME] This was first used in the senses 'set upright' and 'guide, direct', which developed into 'write directions for delivery on' and 'direct spoken words to'. The source is Latin *ad-* 'towards' and *directus* 'put straight'. **Direction** [E16th] shares the same source.

adequate *see* EQUAL

adjacent *see* EASY

adjourn [ME] Now adjourn suggests 'break off (until a later time)', but the early sense was 'summon someone to appear on a particular day'. It comes from Old French *ajorner*, from the phrase *a jorn* (*nome*) 'to an (appointed) day'.

adjust [E17th] The notion of 'bringing in close proximity' is present in adjust. The source was the obsolete French verb *adjuster*, from Old French *ajoster* 'to approximate', based on Latin *ad-* 'to' and *juxta* 'near', source of words such as **joust** [ME] originally to 'bring near to join battle' and **juxtapose** [M19th] 'place near'.

adjutant [E17th] An *adjutant* was originally an 'assistant, helper'; the origin is Latin *adjutant-* 'being of service to', from *adjuvare* 'assist'. The term now usually describes an officer assisting a senior officer with administrative matters.

admiral [ME] The first recorded meaning of admiral refers to an emir or Muslim commander, and the word ultimately comes from Arabic *amir* 'commander'. The Arabic word was used in various titles of rank, such as *amir-al-bahr* ('commander of the sea') and *amir-al-ma* ('commander of the water'). Christian scholars, not realizing that *-al-* simply meant 'of the', thought that *amir-al* was a single word meaning 'commander', and accordingly anglicized it as admiral. The modern maritime use comes from the office of 'Ameer of the Sea', created by the Arabs in Spain and Sicily and later adopted by the Genoese, the French and, in the form 'Amyrel of the Se' or 'admyrall of the navy', by the English under Edward III. From around 1500 the word admiral on its own has been used as the naval term.

admiration *see* MIRACLE

admit *see* PERMIT

admonish *see* MONITOR

ado *see* AFFAIR

adolescent [LME] Both adolescent and **adult** [M16th] come from Latin *adolescere*, 'to grow to maturity'. The root of the Latin word is *alescere* 'to grow up', which in turn derives from *alere* 'to nourish or give food to', so the idea of coming to maturity is closely related to the idea of feeding yourself up. *See also* ALIMONY

adopt *see* OPTION

adore [LME] The semantic strands of 'worship' and 'spoken prayer' are interwoven in adore, which came from Latin

adorare 'to worship'. The **adorable** came into use in the early 17th century meaning 'worthy of divine worship'; the current meaning 'lovable, inspiring great affection' dates from the early 18th century.

adroit [M17th] This is an adoption from French, from the phrase *à droit* 'according to right', 'properly'.

adult *see* ADOLESCENT

advent *see* ADVENTURE

adventure [ME] The meaning of adventure has changed over the centuries. In the Middle Ages it meant 'anything that happens by chance' or 'chance, fortune, or luck', and came from Latin *advenire* 'to arrive'. Gradually the idea of 'risk or danger' became a stronger element and later evolved into 'a dangerous or hazardous undertaking', and still later into 'an exciting incident that happens to someone'. *Compare* ACCIDENT. Related words are **advent** [OE] 'coming, arrival' and **adventitious** [E17th] originally describing something happening by chance. *See also* REVENUE

adverse *see* VERSE

advertisement [LME] Latin *advertere* 'turn towards' is the base of **advertise** [LME] and advertisement. Advertisement was originally 'a statement calling attention to something'; it started to be abbreviated to **advert** in the mid 19th century. If you do something **inadvertently** [M17th] then you have not turned your mind towards it. *VERSE is related.

advice [ME] Advice is from Old French *avis*, based on Latin *videre* 'to see'. The original sense was 'a way of looking at something', 'a judgement', which led later to 'an opinion given'. **Supervise** [LME] 'to over see' and words at *VISION are from the same root.

advocaat [1930s] This word for a liqueur made of eggs, sugar, and brandy, is an adoption of the Dutch word for 'advocate': it was originally considered 'a lawyer's drink', and this was the meaning of the full form in Dutch: *advocatenborrel*. **Advocate** [ME] comes from Latin *advocare* 'to call to one's aid'.

aegis [E17th] An aegis was originally a piece of armour or a shield, especially that of a god. The word came into English via Latin from Greek *aigis* 'shield of Zeus'. It is now often used in the phrase **under the aegis of** meaning 'under the protection of'.

aeon [M17th] This entered English via ecclesiastical Latin from Greek *aiōn* 'age' and is usually used in the plural in phrases such as **aeons ago**.

aerial *see* AIR

aerobic *see* AIR

aeronaut *see* ASTERISK, NAUSEA

aeroplane [L19th] An aeroplane is literally an 'air wanderer'. Coined in the late 19th century, the word is from French *aéro-* 'air' and Greek *-planos* 'wandering', and so the short form **plane** has the less-than-reassuring meaning of 'wanderer'. *See also* PLAIN, PLANET

aesthetic [L18th] The early sense was 'relating to perception by the senses'; the source is Greek *aisthētikos*, from *aisthēta* 'material things'. This was opposed to things that were thinkable, in other words, immaterial things. The sense 'concerned with beauty' was coined in German in the mid 18th century, and adopted into English in the early 19th century, but its use was controversial until much later in the century. **Aesthete** was formed on the pattern of pairs such as *athlete, athletic*.

affair [ME] This is from Old French *à faire* 'to do'. The history of the English word **ado** is parallel to that of affair. It comes from Old Norse *at* and *do*. This parallel between *at do* and *to do* can be seen in the sense that 'fuss' is apparent in the phrases **without more ado** and **what a to do!**

affidavit [M16th] A legal term from medieval Latin, *affidavit* means literally 'he has stated on oath'.

affiliate [E17th] We talk about parent companies, so why not child companies? This is literally what an affiliated company is. The first meaning of affiliate was 'to adopt as a son', and the word ultimately came from Latin *filius* 'son', from which we also get **filial** [LME]. By the mid 18th century affiliate was being used to mean 'to adopt as a subordinate member of a society or company'.

affinity *see* PARAFFIN

afflict [LME] The early senses of afflict were 'deject' and 'humiliate'; the word comes from Latin *afflictare* 'knock about, harass'. **Inflict** [M16th] originally had the same meaning and comes from Latin *infligere* 'to strike against'.

affluent [LME] From Latin *affluere* 'flow towards', affluent was originally used to describe water either flowing towards a place or flowing freely without any restriction. It later came to mean 'abundant' and then 'wealthy', a meaning which dates from the mid 18th century. Related words, all based on Latin *fluere* 'to flow' are **fluent** [L16th] and **fluid** [LME]; **flume** [ME] originally a stream; **flux** [LME] a state of flowing; **effluent** [LME] something that flows out; and **superfluous** [LME] 'overflowing'.

afford [OE] Old English *forthian* 'to further' lies behind afford. The original sense was 'accomplish', later coming to mean 'be in a position to do'. The association with wealth is recorded from late Middle English.

affray [ME] Although an affray is now a disturbance of the peace caused by fighting in a public place, its first meaning was 'alarm, fright or terror' or 'frighten'. Its root is the old Norman French word *afrayer*, which also gives us **afraid** [ME].

affront *see* CONFRONT

aficionado [M19th] This started out as a term for a devotee of bullfighting. It is a Spanish word meaning 'amateur', now used to describe any ardent follower of an activity. Examples of this extended usage date from the 1880s. *Compare* AMATEUR

afraid *see* AFFRAY

aftermath [LME] The aftermath was originally the crop of new grass that springs up after a field has been mown in early summer. John Buchan (1874–1940), the Scottish writer of adventure stories such as *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, wrote about 'Meadowland from which an aftermath of hay had lately been taken'. *Math* was an old word meaning 'a mowing'. The modern meaning of **aftermath** developed in the 19th century.

aga *see* SAGA

agenda, agent *see* ACTOR

agglomerate [L17th] Latin *glomus* 'ball' is at the core of agglomerate which comes from the Latin verb *agglomerare* 'add to'.

agglutinate *see* GLUE

aggregate *see* CONGREGATE

aggression *see* PROGRESS

aghast [LME] **Gast** (originally *gaestan*) was an Old English word meaning 'frighten or terrify'. It was still being used in this sense in Shakespeare's day: 'Or whether gasted by the noise I made, Full suddenly he fled' (*King Lear*). This gave rise to *agast*, which had the same meaning. The spelling **aghast** (probably influenced by the spelling of *GHOST) was originally Scottish but became generally used after 1700. **Ghastly** [ME] comes from the same word. The sense 'objectionable' dates from the mid 19th century.

agile, agitate *see* ACTOR

agnostic [M19th] This word was actually invented by a specific person and then

successfully entered the language. It was coined by the Victorian biologist Thomas Huxley (1825–95) to describe his own beliefs: he did not believe in God but did not think one could say for sure that God did not exist. Before Huxley devised agnostic there was no word for such a religious position. He is said to have first used it in 1869 at a party held in Clapham, London, prior to the formation of the Metaphysical Society. Huxley formed the word from the Greek *a-* 'not' and *gnostos* 'known'.

agog [M16th] If you are agog you are now very eager to hear or see something, but originally you were having fun. The word comes from Old French *en gogues,* 'in mirth, in a merry mood'. The French-coined 1960s phrase **a gogo**, meaning 'galore', comes from the same root.

a gogo *see* AGOG

agony [LME] Agony referred originally only to mental anguish. It came into English via late Latin from Greek *agōnia,* from *agōn* 'contest' (the base, too, of **agonize** [L16th]). The Greek sense development moved from struggle for victory in the games, to any struggle, to mental struggle specifically (such as the torment of Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane). The extension in English to an idea of 'physical' suffering dates from the early 17th century. Greek *agōn* is also the source of the dramatic **protagonist** [L17th] from Greek *proto-* 'first' and *a agōnistes* 'actor, contestant' and at the root of **antagonist** [L16th] from *anti-* 'against' and *agōnízesthai* 'struggle'.

agoraphobia [E19th] Agoraphobia is literally 'fear of the market place', from Greek *agora* 'a market place' and the English suffix *-phobia* (from Greek *phobos* 'fear'). In ancient Greece an *agora* was a public open space used for markets and assemblies.

agree [LME] When we agree to something, there is a core notion of trying to please; the word is from Old French *agreer,* based on Latin *ad-* 'to' and *gratus* 'pleasing'. It took over a hundred years after the phrase 'to agree' first appeared in the writings of Chaucer for its opposite, **disagree**, to appear in writing during the 1490s.

agriculture *see* AIR

aid [LME] This comes via Old French from Latin *adjuvare,* from *ad-* 'towards' and *juvare* 'to help'.

aikido *see* JAPANESE WORD PANEL

aim [ME] Aim has the basic notion of evaluation before a direction is taken. It comes via French from the Latin verb *aestimare* meaning 'assess, estimate'.

air [ME] **1** The main modern sense of air, 'the invisible gaseous substance surrounding the earth' entered English via Old French and Latin from Greek *aër.* **Aerial** [L16th], meaning 'a rod or wire by which signals are transmitted or received' and 'existing or happening in the air', comes from the same source, along with the Italian word **aria** [E18th]. **Aerobic** [L19th] is from *aër* combined with Greek *bios* 'live'.
2 The senses of air 'an impression or manner' and 'a condescending manner' (as in *she gave herself airs*) are probably from a completely different word, Old French *aire* 'site, disposition', which derives from Latin *ager* 'field', the root of English words such as **agriculture** [LME]. **Airy-fairy** [M19th] 'impractical and foolishly idealistic', was originally used to mean 'delicate or light as a fairy'. The English poet Alfred, Lord Tennyson (1809–1892), in his poem 'Lilian' (1830), described the subject as 'Airy, fairy Lilian, Flitting, fairy Lilian'. *See also* GAS

aisle [LME] The early spellings *ele, ile* are from Old French *ele,* from Latin *ala* 'wing'. The spelling change in the 17th century was due to confusion with isle (*see* ISLAND); the word was also influenced by French *aile* 'wing'.

ajar [L17th] In this strange word *a-* 'on' is prefixed to obsolete *char,* which in Old English was *cerr,* meaning 'a turn, return'.

akimbo [LME] You might think that the odd-looking word akimbo, 'with hands on the hips and elbows turned outwards',

derives from some exotic language. In fact it appeared in medieval English in the form *in kenebowe* or *a kembow* and was probably an alteration of an Old Norse phrase meaning 'bent in a curve, like a horseshoe'.

à la carte *see* FRENCH WORD PANEL

alack *see* ALAS

alarm [LME] Alarm started out as an exclamation meaning 'to arms!'; it stems from Old French *alarme*, from the Italian phrase *all' arme!* 'to arms!'. The spelling **alarum** existed in English in early times because of the way the 'r' was rolled when pronouncing the word; this form became restricted specifically to the peal of a warning bell or clock. The original exclamation as a call to arms, is seen in the phrase **alarums and excursions**, a stage direction found in Shakespeare's *Henry VI* and *Richard III*.

alas [ME] This expression of dismay is from Old French *a las*, *a lasse*, from *a* 'ah' and *las(se)*, from Latin *lassus* 'weary'. Late Middle English **alack** is a comparable exclamation, from *a* 'ah!' and *lak* 'lack'. It originally expressed dissatisfaction and the notion 'shame that it should be the case'; this came to convey regret or surprise, as in **alack-a-day**.

albatross [L17th] The spelling of albatross was influenced by Latin *albus*, 'white'. The large white seabird was originally called the *alcatras*, a name which was also applied to other water birds such as the pelican (who gave their name to the prison-island of Alcatraz in San Francisco Bay) and came from Spanish and Portuguese *alcatraz*, from Arabic *al-gattās* 'the diver'. In golf an albatross is a score of three under par at a hole (*see* BIRD). Albatross sometimes carries with it an idea of misfortune and burdensome guilt: this alludes to Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner* (1798), in which an albatross is shot by the mariner, bringing disaster on the rest of the crew and long-lasting guilt to him.

albino *see* ALBUM

Albion [OE] A poetic or literary name for Britain or England which today is particularly associated with the names of soccer teams such as West Bromwich Albion and Brighton and Hove Albion. Albion probably derives from Latin *albus* meaning 'white', and alludes to the white cliffs of Dover. *See also* PERFIDY

album [E17th] The Latin word *albus* 'white' was originally used as a noun meaning 'a white (or rather blank) marble tablet' on which public notices were written. Brought into English as album, the word has subsequently been used to describe various blank books used for compiling a collection of items, such as stamps or photographs, and in the 1950s became applied to a collection of recorded pieces of music. Other *alb-* words with an element of whiteness in their meaning include **albino** [L18th], **albumen** [L16th], the white of the egg, and *ALBION. *See also* AUBURN, CANDID

albumen *see* ALBUM

alchemy *see* CHEMICAL

alcohol [M16th] Arabic *al-kuhl* gave us the modern English word alcohol, but there were several changes in meaning along the way. *Al* in Arabic means 'the', and *al-kuhl* means 'the kohl', referring to a powder used as eye make-up. By extension, the term was applied to a fine powder and then to a liquid essence or spirit obtained by distillation.

alcove [L16th] French *alcôve* is the source of alcove, from Spanish *alcoba*, from Arabic *al-kubba* 'the vault'.

al dente *see* ITALIAN WORD PANEL

ale *see* BEER

alert [L16th] This comes from the Italian military phrase *all' erta*, 'on the lookout' or, more literally, 'to the watchtower'. It was originally a military term in English too, before it acquired its more general meaning. Alert was first used as an adverb, so you could say that the later expression **on the alert** strictly means 'on the on the lookout'.

algebra [LME] Bone-setting does not seem to have much to do with mathematics, but there is a connection in the word algebra. It comes from the Arabic *al-jabr* 'the reunion of broken parts', used specifically to refer to the surgical treatment of fractures and to bone-setting. Algebra was used in this meaning in English in the 16th century. The mathematical sense comes from the title of a 9th-century Arabic book *ilm al-jabr wa'l-mukabala,* 'the science of restoring what is missing and equating like with like', written by the mathematician al-Kwarizmi (*c.*790–*c.*840).

algorithm [L17th] Algorithm initially meant the Arabic or decimal notation of numbers; it is a variant, influenced by Greek *arithmos* 'number', of Middle English *algorism* which came via Old French from medieval Latin *algorismus.* The Arabic source, *al-kwārizmī* 'the man of Kwārizm' (now Khiva), was an alternative name for the 9th-century mathematician Ab Ja'far Muhammad ibn Msa, author of widely translated works on algebra and arithmetic.

alias [LME] A Latin word, alias means literally 'at another time, otherwise'. The term **aliasing** has been taken up in specialist fields such as computing for the use of an alternative name referring to a file etc, and telecommunications for misidentification of a signal frequency, introducing distortion or error.

alibi [ME] Alibi is recorded from the late 17th century, as an adverb in the sense 'elsewhere', and was originally a Latin word with the same meaning and spelling. A typical example of its use comes from John Arbuthnot's *History of John Bull* (1727): 'The prisoner had little to say in his defence; he endeavoured to prove himself Alibi.' The noun use, 'a piece of evidence that a person was somewhere else when a crime was committed', dates from the 18th century. The weakened sense of 'excuse' is early 20th century.

alien [ME] The word came via Old French from Latin *alienus* 'belonging to another', from *alius* 'other'. It was initially used for foreigners, but since the 1950s has mostly been used for beings from another planet. From the same base is early 16th-century **alienate** and **alienation** [LME]. The theatrical phrase **alienation effect** dates from the 1940s and is a translation of German *Verfremdungseffekt*.

alimentary *see* ALIMONY

alimony [E17th] Today alimony means 'provision for a husband or wife after divorce' (what is usually called **maintenance** in Britain). Originally, though, in the early 17th century, it simply meant 'nourishment or means of subsistence'. It comes from Latin *alere* 'nourish', which is the root of words such as *ADOLESCENT, **alimentary** [LME] and **coalesce** [M16th] 'grow up, nourish together'.

alive *see* LIVE

alkali [LME] The chemistry term alkali is from medieval Latin, from Arabic *al-kalī* 'calcined ashes' referring to the plants from which alkalis were made. Early 19th-century **alkaloid** (a class of compounds including morphine, quinine, and strychnine) was coined in German from *alkali*.

all [OE] A little Old English word found in a host of popular phrases. Although associated with the Second World War, **the all-clear** dates from the very beginning of the 20th century. It refers to a signal such as a siren that indicates enemy aircraft have left the area, making it safe to come out into the open from bomb shelters or other places of refuge. **All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others** comes from George Orwell's *Animal Farm* (1945) a satire in which the animals take over the farm, only to find the pigs become even worse masters. **All done with mirrors** means 'achieved by trickery or illusion'. One of the earliest examples of the phrase comes from a 1908 play by G.K. Chesterton (1874–1936) called *Magic*, about a conjuror working out how an effect might be created, but it probably goes back to 19th-century magicians. **All human life is there** was an advertising slogan used by British tabloid

newspaper the *News of the World* in the 1950s. The phrase had been used earlier by the novelist Henry James (1843–1916) in *The Madonna of the Future* (1879). A maker of statuettes says of his wares, 'Cats and monkeys—monkeys and cats—all human life is there!' The first things to be described as **all-singing, all-dancing** were film musicals. Posters for *Broadway Melody* (1929) carried the slogan 'All Talking All Singing All Dancing'. These days something 'all-singing, all-dancing' is generally an advanced computer or other gadget. The proverb **all good things must come to an end** dates back to the 15th century, usually in the form 'All things must come to (or have) an end'. The inclusion of the word 'good' in the proverb appears to be a 20th-century development. The other 'all' proverb, **all's well that ends well**, is even older and was first recorded in the 14th century as 'If the end is well, then is all well'.

allegory [LME] An allegory is basically speaking about one thing in terms of another, and comes from Greek *allos* 'other' and *-agoria* 'speaking'.

allergy [E20th] There is a notion of something 'alien' present in allergy which comes from German *Allergie*, from Greek *allos* 'other'. It was formed on the pattern of German *Energie* 'energy'.

alleviate *see* ELEVATE

alligator [L16th] The English word alligator comes from two Spanish words *el lagarto*, 'the lizard'. The first record of its use is from an account of his travels written by 16th-century English adventurer Job Hortop. He was press-ganged to sail to the Americas on a slaving voyage when he was only a teenager, and wrote vividly of the strange animals he encountered, among them the alligator.

alliteration *see* LETTER

allocation *see* LOCAL

allow [ME] This was originally used to mean 'commend, sanction' and 'assign as a right'. Both meanings were adopted from Old French *alouer* in about 1300. The source was Latin *allaudare* 'to praise', reinforced by medieval Latin *allocare* 'to place'.

alloy *see* ALLY

allude [LME] Allude is from Latin *alludere* 'play with', from *ad-* 'towards' and *ludere* 'to play'.

ally [ME] Latin *alligere* 'combine together', formed from *ad-* 'to(gether)' and *ligare* 'bind' developed into two closely related words in Old French: *alier* which became ally in English, and *aloyer* which became **alloy** [L16th]. *Ligare* is also hidden in **furl** [L16th] which comes from French *ferler*, from *ferm* 'firm' and *lier* 'bind'; **league** [LME] a binding together; and **oblige** [ME] originally meaning 'bind by oath'.

alma mater [M17th] This phrase, used with reference to a university or college once attended, first had the general sense 'someone or something providing nourishment'; in Latin the literal meaning is 'bounteous, nourishing mother'. It was a title given by the Romans to several goddesses but in particular to Ceres and Cybele, both representing fostering mother-figures. **Alumnus** [M17th] is related, being Latin for 'nursling, pupil', from *alere* 'nourish', source of *alma*.

alms [OE] Old English *ælmesse* comes from Christian Latin *eleemosyna*, from Greek *eleēmosunē* 'compassion'; based on *eleos* 'mercy'. The 's' therefore was not originally a plural ending, and people wrote about 'an alms' until the middle of the 16th century.

aloe [OE] Old English *alewe* was used for the fragrant resin or heartwood of certain oriental trees; it came via Latin from Greek *aloē*. The emollient **aloe vera** is a term from the early 20th century and is modern Latin, literally 'true aloe', probably in contrast to the American agave, which closely resembles aloe vera.

aloft [ME] Aloft is from Old Norse *á lopt*, from *á* 'in, on, to' and *lopt* 'air'.

aloof [M16th] Aloof was originally a nautical term for an order to steer a ship as close as possible towards the wind. It literally means 'to windward', *loof* (or **luff** [LME]) being an old term meaning 'windward direction'. The idea was that keeping the bow of the ship close to the wind kept it clear of the shore.

alphabet [E16th] The first two letters of the Greek alphabet are *alpha* and *beta*. In Greek these two letters were combined to make the word *alphabētos*, which was taken as a name for all 24 letters of the Greek alphabet as a whole, just as English-speaking children are taught their **ABC**.

Al-Qaeda *see* ARABIC PANEL

already *see* YIDDISH WORD PANEL

altar *see* ALTITUDE

alter [LME] If you alter something you change it to something else. The word comes via French from Latin *alter* 'other', also found in **alternative** [M16th]. It also lies behind **altruism** [M19th] which is from Italian *altrui* 'somebody else', from Latin *alteri huic* 'to this other'.

altitude [LME] Altitude is from Latin *altitudo*, from *altus* 'high'. The latter is also the source of **altar** [OE], a raised structure for worship, **enhance** [ME], originally 'make higher'; **exalt** [LME], with *ex-* 'out, upwards'; and **haughty** [M16th], from *altus* via French *haut*.

alto *see* ITALIAN WORD PANEL

altruism *see* ALTER

alumnus *see* ALMA MATER

amass *see* MASS

amateur [L18th] An amateur does something for love rather than for money. Borrowed from French in the 18th century, and ultimately from Latin *amator* 'lover', it was originally used to describe a person who loves or is fond of something. Later on it came to be used of a person who practises an art or sport as a hobby, rather than professionally, and also of someone who is inept at a particular activity. *Compare* AFICIONADO

amaze *see* MAZE

Amazon [LME] In Greek legend the Amazons were a race of female warriors who were supposed to exist in the unexplored regions of the north. The word Amazon is Greek for 'without a breast', referring to the story that the women cut off their right breasts in order to draw their bows more easily. Nowadays an Amazon is any tall, strong, or athletic woman. The River Amazon was given its name by European explorers because of stories that a race of female warriors lived on its banks.

ambassador *see* EMBASSY

amber [LME] Amber comes from Arabic *'anbar*, which also meant 'ambergris' a wax-like substance used in the manufacture of perfume that originates as a secretion of the sperm whale. *See also* ELECTRICITY. Much more appealing is **amber nectar**, which was popularized as an advertising slogan for Fosters lager from 1986. It goes back much further than that, though, and has been a slang term for beer since the 1890s, especially in Australia.

ambidextrous [M17th] As anyone left-handed knows, we live in a right-handed world. The bias towards right-handedness is present in the language too. While the positive word *DEXTEROUS or 'skilful, good with the hands' comes from the Latin for 'right-handed', the rather more negative *SINISTER comes from the Latin for 'left-handed'. And if you are ambidextrous, it is as though you have got two right hands: the word is from Latin *ambi* 'both, on both sides' and *dexter* 'right, right-handed'. At one time ambidextrous could also be used to mean 'double-dealing, trying to please both sides', as in 'a little, dirty, pimping, pettifogging, ambidextrous fellow' (Laurence Sterne, 1768).

ambient *see* AMBITION

ambiguous *see* ACTOR

ambition [ME] Ambition comes from Latin *ambire*, literally meaning 'to go round or go about' (also the source of late 16th-century **ambient**), but with the more specific sense of 'to go round canvassing for votes'. From this developed the idea of eagerly seeking honour or advancement.

amble *see* AMBULANCE

ambrosia [M16th] This came into English via Latin from the Greek word which meant 'elixir of life', from *ambrotos* 'immortal'. Ambrosia in classical mythology was the food of the gods.

ambulance [E19th] First used in the Crimean War, an ambulance was originally a mobile temporary hospital—a field hospital—that followed an army from place to place. The term was later applied to a wagon or cart used for carrying wounded soldiers off the battlefield, which in turn led to its modern meaning. Ambulance comes from the French *hôpital ambulant*, literally 'walking hospital': the root is Latin *ambulare*, 'to walk', which gave us words such as **alley** [LME], **amble** [ME], and early 17th-century **ambulate** (a formal way of saying 'walk'). **Ambulance chaser** is a wry nickname for a lawyer. The first example of the term, from 1897, tells us that 'In New York City there is a style of lawyers known to the profession as "ambulance chasers", because they are on hand wherever there is a railway wreck, or a street-car collision . . . with . . . their offers of professional services.'

ambush [ME] Ambush is from Old French *embusche*, based on late Latin *inboscare* from 'in' and *boscus* 'wood' also source of **bush** [ME] and **bosky** [L16th]. It also gave French *bouquet* 'clump of trees', which entered English meaning 'bunch of flowers'. The use of bouquet for the aroma from wine dates from the mid 19th century.

amen [OE] This comes via ecclesiastical Latin, from Hebrew *'āmēn* 'truth, certainty', used to express agreement, and adopted in the Septuagint as a solemn expression of belief or affirmation.

amend *see* MEND

amenity [LME] Amenity goes back to Latin *amoenus* 'pleasant'.

amethyst [ME] It was traditionally believed that putting an amethyst in your drink could prevent you getting drunk, through an association of the colour of the stone and the colour of red wine. The word comes from the Greek *amethustos*, meaning 'not drunken'.

amicable *see* ENEMY

ammunition [L16th] This comes from obsolete French *amunition*, which was formed by misunderstanding where the division came in *la munition* 'the munition' (*compare* words at *ADDER). At first the word referred to stores of all kinds. **Munitions** [LME] show the division in the right place.

amnesty [L16th] This comes via Latin from Greek *amnēstia* 'forgetfulness' (which shares a root with **amnesia** [L18th]), a meaning found in early use in English.

amok [M17th] If someone **runs amok** they rush about behaving uncontrollably and disruptively. The word amok comes via Portuguese from a Malay word *amuk* meaning 'fighting furiously' or 'rushing in a frenzy'. It was first used in English in the 17th century, referring to a Malay person in a murderous frenzy after taking opium.

amount *see* MOUNTAIN

ampersand [M19th] A corruption of 'and *per se* and', an old phrase that used to be chanted by schoolchildren as a way of learning the character &. *Per se* is Latin for 'by itself', so the phrase can be translated '& by itself is *and*'. The word is recorded from the mid 19th century, while the symbol itself is based on a Roman shorthand symbol for Latin *et* 'and'.

amphibian [M17th] Amphibians live both in water and on land, and it is the idea

of 'living in both' that gives us the word, which comes from Greek *amphi* 'both' (also found in **amphitheatre** [LME] from *amphi* 'on both sides' and *theatron* 'place for beholding') and *bios* 'life', source of words such as **biology** [E19th] and **antibiotic** [M19th]. Before it was applied specifically to frogs, toads, and newts, amphibian simply meant 'having two modes of existence, of doubtful nature'.

amphitheatre *see* AMPHIBIAN

ample [LME] This is an adoption of a French word, from Latin *amplus* 'large, capacious, abundant'.

amputate [M16th] This is from the Latin verb *amputare* 'lop off', based on *putare* 'to prune'.

amuse [LME] In its early senses amuse had more to do with deception than entertainment or humour. Dating from the late 15th century and coming from an Old French word meaning 'to stare stupidly' (also the source of to *MUSE), it originally meant 'to delude or deceive'. In the 17th and 18th centuries to amuse someone usually meant to divert their attention in order to mislead them. In military use it meant to divert the attention of the enemy away from what you really intend to do, so Lord Nelson, wrote in 1796: 'It is natural to suppose their Fleet was to amuse ours whilst they cross from Leghorn.' **We are not amused** is associated with Queen Victoria (1819–1901). It is first recorded in *Notebooks of a Spinster Lady* (1919) by Caroline Holland—Victoria is supposed to have made the stern put-down in 1900 to a man who had made an inappropriate joke. There is no firm evidence that she said it, though, and her biographer Stanley Weintraub (*b.* 1929) claimed that 'she was often amused'.

anachronism [M17th] An anachronism, something which is wrongly placed in a particular period, comes from Greek *anakhronismos*, from *ana-* 'backwards or against' and *khronos* 'time'. The latter is the source of other time-related words such as **chronicle** [ME], **chronometer** [M18th] a 'time measurer', **chronological** [M16th], and **synchronize** [E17th] 'to make the same time'. *See also* CHRONIC

anagram [L16th] A word or phrase formed by rearranging the letters of another, anagram goes back to Greek *ana-* 'back, anew' and *gramma* 'letter'.

analgesia *see* NOSTALGIA

analysis *see* PARALYSIS

anarchy *see* ARC

anathema [E16th] An ecclesiastical Latin word for an 'excommunicated person, excommunication', anathema comes from the Greek word meaning 'thing dedicated', later coming to mean 'thing devoted to evil, accursed thing'.

anatomy [LME] At first anatomy was not just the study of the structure of the human body, it was specifically the practice of cutting up human bodies to learn about them. The word came into English from Greek *anatomia*, from *ana-* 'up' and *tomia* 'cutting'. Anatomy used also to be applied to a skeleton, and in this meaning it was commonly found in the contracted form **atomy**, as in 'His sides . . . looked just like an atomy, ribs and all' (J. Fenimore Cooper, 1863).

ancestor *see* CEDE

ancillary [M17th] Now meaning 'supporting' or 'subordinate', ancillary comes from Latin *ancilla* 'maidservant'.

Andalusia *see* VANDAL

anecdote [L17th] This is from Greek *anekdota* 'things unpublished'. The word came to be used for any short story as a result of its use by Byzantine historian Procopius (*c.*500–*c.*562) for his *Anekdota* or 'Unpublished Memoirs' (also known as *The Secret History*) of the Emperor Justinian, which were tales of the private life of the court.

angel [OE] Angels are to be found in the traditions of Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and other religions. They are messengers from God, and the word angel comes ultimately from Greek *angelos* 'messenger'. An angel was also the name given to an old English gold coin (known in full as the **angel-noble**) minted between the reigns of Edward IV and Charles I and stamped with the image of the Archangel Michael slaying a dragon. To be **on the side of the angels** is to be on the side of what is right. In a speech given at Oxford in 1864 the British statesman Benjamin Disraeli (1804–1881) referred to the controversy that was then raging about Charles Darwin's book *On the Origin of Species*, saying: 'Is man an ape or an angel? . . . I am on the side of the angels.' The plant **angelica** [E16th] is the 'angelic herb' because it was believed to work against poison and disease. *See also* ANGLE

anger [ME] Anger is from Old Norse *angr* 'grief', *angra* 'to vex'. Original use was in the Old Norse senses; current senses date from late Middle English.

angina [M16th] The Latin word *angere*, 'to choke, squeeze, or strangle', is the source of a number of English words. The most obvious is perhaps angina, which originally meant quinsy (an inflammation of the throat) and later referred to **angina pectoris**, a heart condition characterized by a feeling of suffocation and severe pain. Nervous tension can produce feelings of tightness in the throat and chest, which explains why *angere* is indirectly the root of **anguish** [ME] and **anxiety** [E16th].

angle [OE] The angle meaning 'the space between two intersecting lines' and the one meaning 'to fish with a rod and line', or 'to prompt someone to offer something' are different words. The first comes from Latin *angulus* 'corner' and the second is an Old English word from ancient Germanic roots. The **Angles** were a people who migrated to England from Germany during the 5th century and founded kingdoms in the Midlands and East Anglia, eventually giving their name to England and the English. They came from the district of *Angul*, on the long, curved peninsula that is now called Schleswig-Holstein, and are thought to have got their name because the area was shaped like a fish hook—angle is also an old name for a hook. The **ankle** [OE], the bend in the leg, goes back to the same Indo-European root as angle.

anglophile *see* PHILATELY

angst *see* GERMAN WORD PANEL

anguish *see* ANGINA

animal [ME] Animals are so called simply because they breathe. The word, used as an adjective in English before the noun became established, originally described any living being, as opposed to something inanimate. Its source is the Latin word *animalis*, 'having the breath of life', from *anima* 'air, breath, life'. As a noun, the word was hardly used in England before the end of the 16th century—the older **beast** [ME] from Latin *besta* was the usual term—and does not appear in the King James Bible of 1611. **Animate** [LME] is also from *anima*. *See also* MESMERIZE

anime *see* JAPANESE WORD PANEL

ankle *see* ANGLE

annals *see* ANNUAL

annex [LME] This is from Latin *annectere* 'connect', made up of the elements *ad-* 'to' and *nectere* 'tie, fasten'.

annihilate [LME] Hidden in the middle of annihilate is the Latin word *nihil*, meaning 'nothing', which is at the heart of the English word's meaning. Deriving in the 14th century from the Latin *annihilatus* 'reduced to nothing', it was first used as an adjective with the meaning 'destroyed or annulled'. *Nihil* is also the source of **nil** [M16th].

anniversary *see* ANNUAL

announce [LME] The base of announce is Latin *nuntius* 'messenger' (also the base of **nuncio** [E16th] a papal ambassador).

From the same root come **annunciation** [ME] 'act of announcing'; **denounce** [ME] with *de-* having a negative sense; **pronounce** [LME] from *pro-* 'out, forth'; **renounce** [LME] from *re-* (expressing reversal); and **enunciate** [M16th] 'announce clearly' from *e-* (a variant of *ex-*) 'out'.

annoy [ME] Annoy originally has a much stronger sense than the modern one. It came into English from Old French *anoier*, but was based on Latin *in odio*, from the phrase *mihi in odio est*, 'it is hateful to me'.

annual [LME] This comes via Old French from late Latin *annualis*, based on Latin *annus* 'year'. The notion of a 'yearbook' recording events of the past year, arose in the late 17th century. From the same word we get **annals** [M16th] from Latin *annales* (*libri*) 'yearly (books)' giving a historical record of the events throughout each year; **anniversary** [ME] 'returning yearly'; **annuity** [LME] something paid 'yearly'; **perennial** [M17th] '[lasting] through the year'; and the Latin phrases **annus horribilis** 'year of disasters' and **annus mirabilis** 'wonderful year'.

annul [LME] Introduced into English via Old French from late Latin *annullare*, annul is based on the Latin elements *ad-* 'to' and *nullum* 'nothing', the source also of **null** [LME].

annunciation *see* ANNOUNCE

anodyne [M16th] Introduced via Latin from Greek *anōdunos* 'painless', the base elements of anodyne are *an-* 'without' and *odunē* 'pain'.

anoint *see* UNCTION

anorak [1920s] The anorak comes from Greenland, where the Inupiaq language of the Inuit gave us the word for a hooded waterproof jacket. The shabby anoraks traditionally worn by trainspotters and others with unfashionable preoccupations led to such people being known as anoraks from the early 1980s.

anorexia [L16th] This is based on Greek *an-* 'without' and *orexis* 'appetite'.

answer *see* SWEAR

ant [OE] The dialect word **emmet** for an ant, used since the 1970s as a Cornish term for a tourist, is like *ant*, from Old English *æmete*. **Antsy**, dating from the mid 19th century, is probably from the phrase **have ants in one's pants;** it means 'agitated', 'restless'.

antagonist *see* AGONY

ante The expression **up the ante**, meaning 'to increase what is at stake', comes from the world of card games and gambling. *Ante* is a Latin word meaning 'before' and is a component of English words such as **anteroom** [M18th] and **antenatal** [E19th]. **Ante** was first used in English by American players of card games in the early 19th century for a stake put up by a player to start the betting before drawing the cards. 'Upping' (or 'raising') the ante is putting up a higher stake than your opponent in order to put more pressure on them.

antecedent *see* CEDE

antediluvian *see* DELUGE

antelope [LME] Before 17th-century zoologists gave the name to a fast-running horned animal, an **antelope** was a fierce mythical creature with long serrated horns that was believed to live on the banks of the River Euphrates and was often depicted in heraldic designs. It was said to be able to use its saw-like horns to cut down trees. Although the word came into English via Old French and medieval Latin from Greek *anthalops*, the origin and meaning of the Greek word is a mystery.

antenatal *see* ANTE

antenna [M17th] On old Mediterranean sailing ships certain types of triangular sail, called lateen sails, were supported by long yards or poles at an angle of 45 degrees to the mast, which reminded the ancients of an insect's antennae. The Latin word

antenna was an alteration of *antemna* 'sailyard', and was used by writers to translate the Greek *keraioi* 'horns of insects'. When Marconi and others developed radio in the 1890s the word was quickly taken up, along with aerial (*see* *AIR), to refer to a rod or wire by which signals were received.

ante-room *see* ANTE

anthology [M17th] An anthology is literally a collection of flowers. The Greek word *anthologia* (from *anthos* 'flower', source also of the botanical **anther** [E18th], and *logia* 'collection') was applied to a collection of the 'flowers' of verse, poems by various authors that had been chosen as being especially fine. Writing in 1580, the French essayist Montaigne uses the same metaphor: 'It could be said of me that in this book I have only made up a bunch of other men's flowers, providing of my own only the string that ties them together.' *See also* POSY

anthracite [L16th] Originally an anthracite was a gem described by Pliny as resembling coals. The word is from Greek *anthrakitēs*, from *anthrax*, *anthrak-* 'coal' or 'carbuncle' (meaning both a red gem like a glowing coal, and a swelling that looks like one). The same word is the source of the disease **anthrax** [LME] which causes black lesions in humans. **Carbuncle** [ME] itself keeps the same image, coming from Latin *carbunculus* 'small coal' from *carbo* 'coal, charcoal', the source of words such as **carbon** [L18th].

anthrax *see* ANTHRACITE

anthropology *see* PHILATELY

antibiotic *see* AMPHIBIAN

anticipation *see* CAPABLE

antics *see* ANTIQUITY

antidote [LME] An antidote is 'something given against' the effects of a poison; it has come via Latin from Greek *antidoton* 'given against'.

antipodes [LME] Think of a person standing on the other side of the world, exactly opposite the point on the Earth's surface where you are standing. The soles of their feet are facing the soles of your feet. This is the idea behind the word **Antipodes**, which came via French or Latin from the Greek word *antipous*, meaning 'having the feet opposite'. Writing in 1398, John de Trevisa described the Antipodes who lived in Ethiopia as 'men that have their feet against our feet'.

antiquity [ME] This word comes from Latin *antiquitas*, from *antiquus* 'old, former' developed from *ante* 'before' (*see* *ANTE). **Antics** [E16th] is from the same source by way of Italian *antico* 'antique', used to mean *GROTESQUE, and as a term for the grinning faces carved on architecture fashionable at the time. From this it came to be used for grotesque behaviour.

antirrhinum *see* RHINOCEROS

anvil [OE] An anvil is something to strike on. In Old English the spelling was *anfilte*, from the Germanic base of *on* and a verb meaning 'beat'.

anxiety *see* ANGINA

aorta *see* ARTERY

apart, apartment *see* PART

apathy *see* PATHETIC

ape [OE] Until *MONKEY came into the language in the 16th century, the Old English word **ape** applied also to monkeys. The verb use 'to imitate unthinkingly' was formed when 'ape' still meant 'monkey', and was suggested by the way that monkeys sometimes mimic human actions. The expression **go ape** is often thought to be a reference to the 1933 film *King Kong*, in which a giant ape-like monster goes on the rampage through New York, but the phrase is not recorded until quite a bit later: US newspaper reports from 1954 and 1955 both say that 'go ape' is current teen slang. The cruder version **go ape shit** is recorded from 1951.

aperture [LME] This is from Latin *apertura* from *aperire* 'to open'.

apex [E17th] Apex is Latin for 'peak, tip'.

aphrodisiac [E18th] The name Aphrodite for the goddess of beauty, fertility, and sexual love in Greek mythology lies behind aphrodisiac.

aplomb *see* PLUMB

apology [M16th] Used in legal contexts at first, an apology was a formal defence against an accusation; it goes back to Greek *apologia* 'a speech in one's own defence'.

apostle [OE] Old English *apostol* comes via ecclesiastical Latin from Greek *apostolos* 'messenger' (*compare* *ANGEL). The bird known as an **apostlebird** is named from the supposed habit of these birds of going about in flocks of twelve, drawing on an association with the twelve chief disciples of Christ.

apostrophe [M16th] Now a punctuation mark, apostrophe originally referred to the omission of one or more letters; it comes via late Latin from Greek *apostrophos* 'accent of elision', from *apostrephein* 'turn away'.

apothecary *see* BOUTIQUE

appal [ME] Like *ABHOR, appal has its origin in the physical effect of being horrified. Old French *apalir* meant both 'to grow pale' and 'to make pale', and these senses were carried over into the English word in the 14th century. As shock or disgust can make the colour drain from your face, appal soon acquired its current meaning.

apparatus [E17th] This is a Latin word, from *apparare* 'make ready for', from *parare* 'make ready'. Other words going back to *parare* include **disparate** [LME], 'prepared apart'; **pare** [ME]; **prepare** [LME] 'prepare in advance'; and **separate** [LME] from *se-* 'apart' and *parare*.

appeal [ME] Recorded first in legal contexts, appeal comes via Old French from Latin *appellare* 'to address, accost, call upon'. **Peal** [LME] is a shortening of appeal, perhaps from the call to prayers of a ringing bell. The base of appeal is Latin *pellere* 'to drive', found also in **compel** 'drive together'; **dispel** 'drive apart'; **expel** 'drive out'; **impel** 'drive towards'; and **impulsive**; **propel** 'drive forwards'; **repel** 'drive back', all Late Middle English. It is also the source of the **pulse** [ME] that you can feel on your wrist and is related to **push** [ME]. The other kind of **pulse**, an edible seed, is a different word, which comes via Old French from Latin *puls* 'porridge of meal or pulse', related to the sources of both *POLLEN and *POWDER.

appease *see* PEACE

appendage *see* PENTHOUSE

appendix [M16th] The appendix is a tube-shaped sac attached to the lower end of the large intestine. The word comes directly from Latin and is based on *appendere* 'to hang on', the source of other English words such as **append** [LME], and **appendage** [M17th]. It is first recorded in the sense 'section of extra matter at the end of a book or document', the anatomy term appears early in the 17th century.

appetite [ME] 'Seeking' and 'desire' are involved in appetite, which comes via Old French from Latin *appetitus* 'desire for', from *appetere* 'seek after'.

applaud *see* PLAUDIT

apple [OE] Originally the Old English word apple could be used to describe any fruit. The **forbidden fruit** eaten by Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden is generally thought of as an apple, and pictured as such, but the 1611 King James Version of the Bible simply calls it a fruit. The apple is the predominant fruit of northern Europe, and many common phrases involve it. A **rotten apple** (or a **bad apple**) is someone who is a bad influence on the rest of a group, from the idea of a rotten apple spoiling other fruit. The idea can be traced back at least as far as the days of the early printer William Caxton in the 15th century. The **apple of**

your eye was once a term for the pupil, which people used to think of as a solid ball. They later applied the expression to anything considered to be similarly delicate and precious. The proverb **an apple a day keeps the doctor away** dates from the 19th century, as does the alternative form 'eat an apple on going to bed, and you'll keep the doctor from earning his bread'. The Australian expression **it's** (*or* **she's**) **apples** means 'everything is fine, there is nothing to worry about'. This derives from *apples and rice* (or *apples and spice*), rhyming slang for 'nice'. Another example of rhyming slang is **apples and pears** for 'stairs'. The city of New York has been known as **the Big Apple** since the 1920s, possibly from the idea that there are many apples on the tree but New York is the biggest. **Applet** [1990s] is an unconnected word, being computer jargon formed from 'application' and the ending for 'little' -let.

appliance [M16th] Until the manufacturer Zanussi introduced its slogan 'The appliance of science' in the 1970s the use of **appliance** to mean 'the application of something' had become rare if not obsolete. This sense was the original one, but had fallen out of use, and appliance generally meant 'a device designed to perform a specific task'. Appliance entered the language much later than **apply** [LME], which is formed from Latin elements *ad-* 'to' and *plicare* 'to fold'.

appraise, appreciate *see* PRICE

apprehend *see* PRISON

apprize *see* PRICE

approach [ME] 'Bringing near' is involved in approach, which is from Old French *aprochier*, *aprocher*, from ecclesiastical Latin *appropiare* 'draw near'.

appropriate *see* PROPER

apricot [M16th] The Romans called the apricot the *malum praecocum* or 'the apple that ripens early'. The second part of the Latin name, meaning 'early-ripening', is also the root of the word **precocious** [M17th], now used of children but originally used to describe flowers or fruit that blossomed or ripened early. Over the centuries *praecocum* gradually mutated in a multilingual version of Chinese whispers. It passed into Byzantine Greek as *perikokkon*, to Arabic as *al-birquq*, to Spanish *albaricoque*, and to Portuguese *albricoque*. In the 16th century the word was adopted into English from Portuguese in the form *albrecock*. The modern spelling was probably influenced by French *abricot*, and perhaps by Latin *apricus* 'ripe'.

apron [ME] What we now call an apron was known in the Middle Ages as a *naperon*, from Old French *nape* or *nappe* 'tablecloth' (also the source of **napkin** [LME] and its shortening **nappy** [E20th]). Somewhere along the line the initial 'n' got lost, as people heard 'a naperon' and misinterpreted this as 'an apron'. A similar process of 'wrong division' took place with words such as *ADDER.

apt [LME] Originally apt meant 'suited, appropriate'; the source is Latin *aptus* 'fitted', the past participle of *apere* 'fasten'. **Inept** [M16th] is its opposite, the change in the vowel sound having already happened in Latin *ineptus*.

aquamarine [E18th] In Latin *aqua* means 'water' and *marina* means 'of the sea, marine'. Put them together and you get **aquamarine**, a precious stone the blue-green colour of sea water. Other words from *aqua* include **aquarium** [M19th], **aquatic** [LME], and **aqueduct** [M16th], which is combined with Latin *ducere* 'to lead'.

aquiline *see* EAGLE

arc [LME] A number of English words comes from Latin *arcus* 'a bow, arch, or curve', among them arc, **arcade** [L17th], and **arch** [ME]. Arc was originally a term for the path of the sun or other celestial objects from horizon to horizon. Given the shape of a bow for shooting arrows, it

Who put the sugar in your coffee?

While much of the Western world was in the Dark Ages, ***Arabic*** *culture was making enormous contributions to art, philosophy, science, and medicine. From medieval times merchants brought Arabic words to the West along with new goods and materials, including those household staples coffee and sugar.*

COFFEE derives from Arabic *qahwa*, although the word entered English in the late 16th century via Turkish *kahveh*. Muslims had taken wild plants from Ethiopia and cultivated them in Arabia, from where the drink spread throughout the Arabic world and Turkey, becoming particularly popular in the international metropolis of Constantinople. The word **sugar** has been in English much longer than coffee, coming in the 13th century by way of Old French and Italian from Arabic *sukkar*. **Candy**, the North American term for 'sweets', is another Arabic word, from *qandī* 'candied', or clarified and crystallised by repeated boiling.

Another important commodity was **cotton**, or in Arabic *qutn*, known in Britain by the 14th century. More exotic were **mohair**, which in Arabic was *mukayyar*, literally 'choice, select', and **saffron**, or *za'faran*. A **sequin** was originally a Venetian gold coin whose name came from Arabic *sikka*, 'a die for making coins'. Trade often involves customs and tariffs, so it is no surprise that the word **tariff** itself is from Arabic.

In Arabic *al-* means 'the', which is reflected in the spellings of *ALBATROSS, *ALCOHOL, **alcove**, and *ALGEBRA, and also in many proper names. **Al-Qaeda** means literally 'the base'—a reference to the training camp or base in Afghanistan used by the **mujahideen**, or guerrillas fighting the Russian occupiers, from which the terrorist group developed.

Islam and **Muslim** are both from the same word, *aslama*, meaning 'to submit, surrender', or 'to submit to Allah or God', and both were first recorded in English in the early 17th century. An **ayatollah** is a Shiite religious leader in Iran. The word has been used since around 1950 in English, and many people only became aware of it when Ayatollah Khomeini (1900–1989) led the Iranian revolution in 1979. A much more established word in English is **imam**, the leader of prayers in a mosque, known since the 17th century. The word's root is *amma* 'to lead the way'.

Fatwa was in use in English as early as the 17th century, but it was an obscure and unfamiliar word until 1989, when it suddenly gained new and widespread currency. In this year Ayatollah Khomeini issued a fatwa sentencing the British writer Salman Rushdie (*b.*1947) to death for publishing *The Satanic Verses*, a novel regarded by many Muslims as blasphemous. **Fatwa** is a generic term for any legal decision made by an Islamic religious authority, but, because of the particular way in which the

English-speaking world became familiar with it, the term is sometimes wrongly thought to refer to a death sentence.

Another word often misunderstood by non-Muslims in the West is **jihad**. It is generally taken to mean 'war by Muslims against non-believers', yet this is only a small part of the word's meaning. In Arabic *jihād* literally means 'effort', and expresses the idea of struggle on behalf of God and Islam, of which war is but one small part. The concept is sometimes divided into **lesser jihad**, or struggle against unbelievers or oppressors, and **greater jihad**, a person's spiritual struggle against sin.

See also ELIXIR, GIRAFFE, LEMON, ORANGE, SOFA, ZERO

should not be surprising that **archer** [ME] has the same Latin source. Another meaning of arch, 'chief or principal' (as in **archbishop** [OE] or **arch-enemy** [M16th]), has a different origin, coming from Greek *arkhos* 'a chief or ruler'. This Greek word can also be seen in **anarchy** [M16th], which literally means 'the state of having no ruler', in **architect** [M16th] from *archi* and *tektōn* 'builder', and **archipelago** [E16th] from *archi* and *pelagos* 'sea'. This was originally used as a proper name for the Aegean Sea; the general sense 'group of islands' arose because the Aegean Sea is remarkable for its large numbers of islands.

arcane *see* ARK

arch, archbishop, arch-enemy, archer, archipelago, architect *see* ARC

arctic [LME] Arctic ultimately comes from Greek *arktos* 'bear', but not because of the polar bears that live in the northern polar regions. The bear in question is the Great Bear, the constellation Ursa Major, which can always be seen in the north.

area [M16th] Originally a 'space allocated for a specific purpose', area is from Latin, literally 'a vacant piece of level ground'. The historical unit of measurement, the **are**, dating from the late 18th century, came via French from Latin *area*.

arena [E17th] Roman amphitheatres, used for staging gladiatorial combats and other violent spectacles, were strewn with sand to soak up the blood spilled by the wounded and dead combatants. The word for 'sand' in Latin was *harena* or *arena*, and after a time this came to be applied to the whole amphitheatre.

aria *see* AIR

aristocracy [LME] The term originally meant the government of a state by its best citizens, later by the rich and well born, which led, in the mid 17th century, to the sense 'nobility', regardless of the form of government. The origin is Old French *aristocratie*, from Greek *aristokratia*, from *aristos* 'best' and *-kratia* 'power'.

ark [OE] *Aerc* was the Old English word for a chest, from Latin *arca* 'a chest or box'. This developed into ark, as in the **Ark of the Covenant**, the wooden chest in which the tablets of the laws of the ancient Israelites were kept, and the **Holy Ark** in a synagogue, a chest, or cupboard which contained the scrolls of the Torah or Hebrew scriptures. A ship may be thought of as a floating container, hence **Noah's Ark**, the vessel built by Noah to escape the Flood. The Latin word is also the source of **arcane** [M16th], which describes something hidden, concealed, or secret, as if it were shut up in a box, which only a few people can open.

arm [OE] Although they may seem connected, arm meaning 'part of the body' and arm meaning 'a weapon' are different

words. The former is Old English, while the latter came into medieval English from French and ultimately Latin. It is also found in **armadillo** [L16th], from the Spanish for 'little armed man'; in **armistice** [E18th] from Latin *arma* and *stitium* 'stoppage'; **armour** [ME] and **armature** [M16th], both from Latin *armatura* and both originally meaning armour. **The long arm of the law** is the police force. The phrase was first recorded in *Rob Roy* by Sir Walter Scott (1817) as 'the arm of the law', but the more usual form was 'the strong arm of the law'. The first example of the 'long' form is in Charles Dickens's *The Old Curiosity Shop* of 1841. If something **costs an arm and a leg** it is extremely expensive. The traditional story connects the expression with portrait painting. A pose in which the sitter's arms and legs were all visible might be more difficult to paint, making the portrait more expensive. More likely is that the phrase originates in the idea that a person's arms and legs are very precious to them. It may be an insensitive punning reference to 'lost an arm and a leg', a phrase which was all too common in reports of wartime casualties. There is a similar thought behind the much older expression **give your right arm for** something, meaning 'to want something very much and be willing to pay a high price for it'.

armpit *see* PIT

aroma [ME] A walk past any Indian restaurant will confirm that spices have a definite aroma, and it is 'spice' that was the original meaning of **aroma**. From the 13th century, when the word entered English via Latin from Greek *arōma*, 'spice' was the only meaning, and the modern sense 'a distinctive pleasant smell' did not appear until the beginning of the 19th century.

arrant *see* ERRANT

arrest *see* REST

arrive [ME] Until about 1550 the main meaning of arrive was 'to come ashore or into port after a voyage'. You could also talk about 'arriving' a ship or a group of passengers, meaning to bring them to shore. Only later did the more general sense of 'to reach a destination, come to the end of a journey' develop. Arrive comes from the Old French word *ariver*, ultimately from Latin *ad-* 'to' and *ripa* 'shore' also the source of *RIVER.

arrogant [LME] This comes, via French, from Latin *arrogare* 'to claim for oneself'.

arrow [OE] This is from Old Norse, but is only indirectly the source of the plant called **arrowroot** [L17th]. The tubers of this Caribbean plant were used to absorb poison from arrow wounds. The word is an alteration of Arawak *aru-aru* (literally 'meal of meals') to conform with the more familiar words *arrow* and *root*.

arse [OE] Like *BUM, arse was not originally a rude slang word. It dates back to before 1000 in English, and is connected to various old German and Scandinavian forms that were probably linked to Greek *orros* 'the rump or bottom'. Arse was perfectly respectable until the 17th century. To **go arse over tip** (the original form, rather than **tit**) and **not know your arse from your elbow** are first found in the early 20th century. **My arse!** as a derisive comment is first recorded in the 1920s, though all these expressions are probably older. The American spelling is **ass**, which is nothing to do with **ass** meaning 'donkey'. The latter is from an Old English word that is related to *EASEL and goes back to Latin *asinus*, as in **asinine** [LME] or stupid.
See also WHEAT

arsenic [LME] The chemical element arsenic is a brittle steel-grey substance with many highly poisonous compounds, but its root word means 'gold'. In English the word first referred to a compound of arsenic called arsenic sulphide or yellow orpiment, which was used as a dye and artist's pigment. The word comes from Greek *arsenikon*, from Arabic *az-zarnīk*, the root of which was Persian *zar* 'gold'.

arson [L17th] This was an Anglo-Norman legal term which came from Latin *ardere* 'to burn'.

arsy-versy *see* TOPSY-TURVY

art [ME] Originally art was simply 'skill at doing something'. Its use in the modern sense dates from the early 17th century. The word comes from Latin *ars*, from a base which meant 'to put together, join, or fit'. There are many related words which stress the more practical roots of the word. These include **artefact** [E19th] from Latin *arte factum* 'something made by art'; **artifice** [LME] from the same roots; and **artisan** from the Latin for 'instructed in the arts'. The phrase **art for art's sake** conveys the idea that the chief or only aim of a work of art is the self-expression of the artist who creates it. It was the slogan of the Aesthetic Movement, which flourished in England during the 1880s. The Latin version of the phrase, **ars gratia artis**, is the motto of the film company MGM, and appears around the roaring lion in its famous logo. **Art deco**, was shortened from French *art décoratif* 'decorative art', from the 1925 Exhibition title *Exposition des Arts décoratifs* in Paris. Latin *iners* which gives us **inert** [M17th] and **inertia** [E18th] meant 'unskilled, inactive', and was formed as the opposite of *ars*.

artery [LME] This comes via Latin from Greek *artēria*, probably from *aeirein* 'raise'. Arteries were popularly thought by the ancients (who thought the word was from Greek *aēr* 'air') to be air ducts as they do not contain blood after death. Medieval writers thought they contained an ethereal fluid distinct from that of the veins: this was referred to as *spiritual blood* or **vital spirits**. **Aorta** [M16th] also comes from *aeirein*. It was used by Hippocrates for the branches of the windpipe, and by Aristotle for the great artery.

artesian [M19th] This comes from French *artésien* 'from Artois', a region of north-west France where wells of this type were first made in the 18th century.

artifice, artisan *see* ART

Aryan [LME] This is based on Sanskrit *ārya* 'noble'. Aryan is used by some as an equivalent of the term Indo-European for a language family. In the 19th century, the notion of an Aryan race corresponding to a definite Aryan language became current and was taken up by nationalistic historical and romantic writers. One of these was De Gobineau (1816–82), an anthropologist who linked the idea to a notion of inferiority of certain races. Later the term Aryan race was revived and used as propaganda in Nazi Germany.

asbestos [E17th] In Greek asbestos meant 'unquenchable'. In English it originally referred to a mythical stone that once set alight was impossible to extinguish. This was probably a distorted reference to what happens when cold water is poured on quicklime—it reacts with a lot of heat and fizzing. The word was revived in the 17th century to refer to the fibrous mineral used for making fireproof material.

ascend *see* SCALE

ascetic [M17th] Suggestive of severe self-discipline and abstention from indulgence, *ascetic* is from Greek *askētikos*. The base is *askētēs* 'monk'.

ash [OE] The two meanings of ash, the powder and the tree, started out as two completely different words. In Old English *aesce* or *aexe* referred to the powder, and *aesc* referred to the tree. When something **turns to ashes in your mouth** it becomes bitterly disappointing or worthless. The origins of this phrase can be traced back to John de Mandeville's *Travels*, a 14th-century work claiming to be an account of the author's travels in the East, where there is a description of a legendary fruit known as the Dead Sea fruit, sometimes also called the apple of Sodom. Although the fruit was appetizing to look at, it dissolved into smoke and ashes as soon as anyone tried to eat it The name of **the Ashes**, the cricket competition played roughly every other year between England and Australia comes from a mock obituary notice published in the *Sporting Times* newspaper on

2 September 1882, after the Australians had sensationally beaten the English team at the Oval: 'In Affectionate Remembrance of English Cricket Which Died at the Oval on 29th August, 1882. Deeply lamented by a large circle of sorrowing friends and acquaintances. R.I.P. N.B.—The body will be cremated and the ashes taken to Australia.' During the subsequent 1882–3 Test series in Australia the captain of the English team declared that his mission was to recover the Ashes for England. During the tour a group of women presented him with a wooden urn containing the ashes of a bail or stump, which has since been kept at Lord's Cricket Ground.

asinine *see* ARSE

ask [OE] Like many short but vital words, ask is Old English. Variations of the saying **ask a silly question and you get a silly answer** date back to at least the 13th century. It has a biblical source, 'Answer a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own conceit', from the Book of Proverbs. **A big ask** is a difficult demand to make of someone, a lot to ask. The phrase originates in Australia, where it was first recorded in 1987, but has spread quickly into British English, and is a favourite of sports players, commentators, and writers, as in the example 'If we get four wins we will make the play-offs, but it's a big ask' (*Bolton Evening News*).

asparagus [M16th] The vegetable we know as asparagus was originally called *sparagus* (from medieval Latin), which was soon turned into the more English-sounding **sparrow-grass**. This process is called folk etymology, where people modify the form of an unusual word to make it seem to be derived from familiar ones. Sparrow-grass remained the polite name for the vegetable during the 18th century, with only botanists sticking to the spelling asparagus. As the compiler of a pronunciation dictionary wrote in 1791: '*Sparrow-grass* is so general that *asparagus* has an air of stiffness and pedantry.' It wasn't until the 19th century that asparagus returned into literary and polite use, leaving sparrow-grass to survive as an English dialect form.

aspersion [LME] To engage in **casting aspersions** is almost literally mud-slinging. Aspersion originally meant 'sprinkling water or other liquid on someone', especially in baptism, and came from Latin *spargere* 'to sprinkle' (the root of **disperse** [LME] 'scatter widely', and **intersperse** [M16th] 'sprinkle between'). Sprinkling a person with water developed into the idea of spattering them with something less pleasant, such as mud or dung. This in turn led to the notion of soiling a person's reputation by making false and damaging insinuations against them. *See also* SLUR

aspic [L18th] This jelly gets its name from the French word for a snake which appears in English as '**asp**'—a small southern European viper, which gets its name from Greek. There has been much debate why this should be. The best suggestions is that it is from a French expression *froid comme un aspic* 'as cold as an asp', so that the association is the coldness. Other suggestions are that it is something to do with the colour or patterns in the jellies in the 18th century, or with the shape of the moulds used.

aspire *see* SPIRIT

aspirin [L19th] This was coined in German, from *a(cetylierte) Spir(säur)e* 'acetylated spiraeic acid'; spiraeic acid is an old name for alicylic acid, given its name because it was first isolated from the leaves of the plant *Spiraea ulmaria* (meadowsweet).

ass *see* ARSE

assail *see* SALIENT

assassin [M16th] During the Crusades political and religious leaders were targeted for murder by a fanatical sect of Ismaili Muslims led by Hassan-i-Sabbah, known as the 'Old Man of the Mountains'. Members of the sect were said to prepare themselves for these deeds by smoking or chewing hashish or cannabis, and were accordingly known in

Arabic as *hasīsī*, 'hashish-eaters', which was filtered through French and eventually became our word assassin.

assault *see* SALIENT

assay *see* ESSAY

assess *see* SIZE

asset [M16th] An asset is literally something of which you have enough. It was originally a term used in connection with paying out money from a will, and comes from the old form of the French *assez* 'enough'.

assist *see* CONSIST

assize *see* SIZE

associate *see* SOCIAL

assume [LME] The word comes from Latin *assumere* formed from *ad* 'towards' and *sumere* 'take, take up'. *Sumere* also gives us, from the same period **consume** 'take up together'; **presume** 'take before' hence 'take for granted'; and **resume** 'take back'.

assure *see* SURE

asterisk [LME] The Greeks had two words for 'star', *astēr* and *astron*. They go back to an ancient root that is also the source of the Latin word *stella*, which gave us *STAR itself and also **stellar** [M17th]. An asterisk is a little star, the meaning of its source, Greek *asteriskos*. *Asteriskos* is from *astēr*, which is also the root of *asteroeidēs*, 'star-like'. This entered English in the early 19th century as **asteroid** [E19th], a term coined by the astronomer William Herschel. *Astēr* also gave us our name for the plant **aster** [E18th], which has petals rather like an asterisk. Words beginning with *astro-* come from *astron*. In the Middle Ages **astronomy** [ME] covered not only astronomy but astrology too. The Greek word it descends from meant 'star-arranging'. Rather poetically, an **astronaut** [1920s] is literally a 'star sailor'. The word comes from Greek *astron* 'star' and *nautēs* 'sailor'. It was modelled on **aeronaut** [L18th], a word for a traveller in a hot-air balloon or airship. **Cosmonaut** [1950s], the Russian equivalent of astronaut, literally means 'sailor in the cosmos'. *See also* DISASTER

astonish [E16th] The Old French *estoner*, from Latin *ex-* 'out' and *tonare* 'to thunder' is the source of astonish, the shorter form **stun** [ME], and of **astound** [ME].

astringent *see* STRICT

astrology *see* STAR

astronaut, astronomy *see* ASTERISK

astute [E17th] This is from obsolete French *astut* or Latin *astutus*, from *astus* 'craft'.

asylum [LME] At first an asylum was a 'place of refuge, especially for criminals'; it came via Latin from Greek *asulon* 'refuge', from *a-* 'without', and *sulon* 'right of seizure'. Current senses referring to political refuge or to an institution for the mentally ill, date from the 18th century.

atheist *see* ENTHUSIASM

athlete [LME] In Greek *athlon* meant 'prize', and the word *athlētēs*, from which we get athlete, literally meant 'someone who competes for a prize'. It originally referred to one of the competitors in the physical exercises—such as running, leaping, boxing, and wrestling—that formed part of the public games in ancient Greece and Rome.

atlas [L16th] Atlas was a Titan, or giant, in Greek mythology who was punished for taking part in a rebellion against the gods by being made to bear the weight of the world on his shoulders. He gave his name to the Atlas Mountains in Morocco, which are so high that they were imagined to be holding up the sky. A collection of maps is called an atlas because early atlases were published with an illustration of Atlas bearing the world on his back on the title page. The first person to use the word in this way was probably the map-maker Gerardus Mercator in the

late 16th century. The **Atlantic Ocean** also gets its name from Atlas. The word **Atlantic** originally referred to the mountains, then to the sea near the west African coast, and later to the whole ocean.

atmosphere [M17th] This word meaning literally 'ball of vapour' is from modern Latin *atmosphaera*, from Greek *atmos* 'vapour' and *sphaira* 'globe'.

atom [LME] Long before scientists were able to prove the existence of atoms, ancient Greek philosophers believed that matter was made up of tiny particles that could not be broken down into anything smaller. The word the Greeks used for this hypothetical particle was *atomos* 'indivisible, that cannot be cut up'. By way of Latin *atomus*, this came into English in the 15th century as atom. The word was used in the early 19th century by the British chemist John Dalton (1766–1844) when he gathered evidence for the existence of these building blocks of matter. A century later the physicist Ernest Rutherford (1871–1937) disproved the theory that the atom could not be divided when he split the atom for the first time in 1919. The term **atom** *BOMB was first recorded in *The Times* on 7 August 1945, the day after the Hiroshima blast. Japan surrendered on 15 August, the date when **the Bomb** first appeared in a headline in *The Times as* 'Victory and the Bomb'. But the English novelist H.G. Wells (1866–1946) was writing about an **atomic bomb** as early as 1914.

atrocious [M17th] Whereas nowadays atrocious tends to describe something such as bad weather or poor English, it used to be a stronger word which referred to great savagery, cruelty, or wickedness, as in Charles Darwin's reference to 'Atrocious acts which can only take place in a slave country' (1845). The source of the word was Latin *atrox* 'fierce or cruel', based on *ater* 'black' and literally meaning 'black-looking'. **Atrocity** [M16th] has not had its sense weakened in the same way.

attach *see* ATTACK

attack [E17th] This is from French *attaquer* (from Italian *attaccare* 'join battle'). The base is an element of Germanic origin shared by **attach** [ME]; 'joining' is a key sense.

attempt *see* TEMPT

attest *see* TESTICLE

attic [L17th] Attic originally referred to an arrangement of small columns at the top of a building. It is from French *attique*, from Latin *Atticus* 'relating to Athens or Attica', from the type of architecture found there. The phrase **attic storey**, used from the mid 18th century, described a low space above the main tall façade, which eventually gave attic the sense 'highest storey of a building'.

attire *see* TYRE

attract *see* ABSTRACT

auburn [LME] The root of our word auburn is Latin *albus*, which actually meant 'white'. Based on this, medieval Latin formed the word *alburnus* 'whitish', which in Old French became *alborne* (or *auborne*) 'yellowish white' and was subsequently adopted into English. In the 16th and 17th centuries it was spelt in a number of different ways, including *abron*, *abrune*, and *abroun*, and these spellings must have put into people's minds the idea that auburn was in fact a kind of brown. Its meaning gradually changed from 'yellowish-white' to 'golden-brown or reddish-brown'.
See also ALBUM, BAIZE, BROWN

auction [L16th] The way in which bids increase in an auction is embodied in the word's origin, as it comes from Latin *auctio* 'an increase', from *augere* 'to increase', also the source of **augment** [LME] and *AUTHOR.

audacious [M16th] Today audacious means 'willing to take surprisingly bold risks' and 'showing a lack of

respect, impudent', but it originally had a more direct sense of 'bold, confident, daring'. The root is Latin *audax* 'bold'.

audience [LME] When people go to the theatre they generally talk about going to 'see' a play, but in former times the usual verb was 'hear'. In keeping with this idea, the oldest meaning of audience is 'hearing, attention to what is spoken'. Audience is based on the Latin word *audire* 'to hear' also found in **audible** [LME], 'able to be heard'. An **auditorium** [E17th], originally a Latin word, was a place for hearing something. Before it meant a trial performance of an actor or singer, **audition** [L16th] was the act of hearing or listening. And an **audit** [LME] was originally a hearing, in particular a judicial hearing of some kind—it was later used as the term for the reading out of a set of accounts, hence the modern meaning.

audio *see* VIEW

augment *see* AUCTION

augur *see* AUSPICIOUS

August *see* OCTOPUS

Auld lang syne *see* SCOTTISH WORD PANEL

Auld Reekie *see* REEK

aunt *see* APRON

au pair *see* FRENCH WORD PANEL

aura [LME] Originally a gentle breeze, aura comes via Latin from a Greek word meaning 'breeze, breath'. Current senses 'distinctive atmosphere', 'emanation', date from the 18th century.

aural *see* EAR

aurora borealis *see* EAST

auspicious [L16th] In Roman times people tried to predict future events by watching the behaviour of animals and birds. An *auspex* was a person who observed the flight of birds for omens about what to do in important matters. A related word, *auspicium*, meant 'taking omens from birds'. Like *auspex*, it came from *avis* 'bird' and *specere* 'to look', and is the source of **auspice** [M16th]. It was originally used to translate the Roman concept, but later came to mean 'a premonition or forecast, especially of a happy future'. Auspicious accordingly meant 'fortunate or favourable'. If the *auspex*'s omens were favourable, he was seen as the protector of a particular enterprise, hence the expression **under the auspices of**, 'with the help, support, or protection of'. An *auspex* was also known as an *augur* (again, *avis* 'bird' is the root of this word, together with *garrire* 'to talk'). If something **augurs** [LME] well, it is a sign of a good outcome. *See also* AVIATION, INAUGURAL

Australia [16th] Since the days of the ancient Greeks, travellers speculated on the existence of an 'unknown southern land', or in Latin *terra australis incognita*, from *australis* 'of the south'. At first the continent was known as New Holland, and was not officially named Australia until 1824.

author [ME] In medieval English the author of something was the person who originated, invented, or caused it. God was sometimes described as 'the Author of all'. The word came into English via Old French from Latin *augere* 'to increase or originate'. (*See also* *AUCTION.) In time author came to be applied specifically to the composer of a book or other piece of writing. An **authority** [ME] was thus once the originator of something.

autograph *see* PHOTOGRAPH

autopsy [M17th] In an autopsy someone seeks to find out how a person died by seeing the body with their own eyes. An early sense of the word was 'personal observation', and this is the key to the word's origin. It comes from Greek *autoptēs* 'eyewitness', based on *autos* 'self' and *optos* 'seen', which

Digger dialect

The English of ***Australia*** *and New Zealand is funny, direct, and informal. TV programmes such as* Neighbours *and films like* Crocodile Dundee *have spread it around the rest of the English-speaking world, with the result that everybody is familiar with expressions such as* arvo *(afternoon) and* barbie *(barbecue).*

AUSTRALASIAN English has been enriched by the hundreds of indigenous languages that pre-dated European settlers, although only about 50 continue as first languages today. The 18th-century journals of the explorer Captain James Cook (1728–79) record **kangaroo** as the animal name used by Aboriginals in what is now North Queensland. The later suggestion that the word actually meant 'I don't understand', given as a reply to an enquiry in English, took people's fancy but seems to be an invented story. In Australia one way of suggesting that someone is mad or eccentric is to say that they have **kangaroos in the top paddock**—a zoological contrast with the traditional British 'bats in the belfry'.

When European settlers first came across the Aboriginal word **budgerigar** for the colourful little native bird they had no idea how they should spell it, and early attempts included *betshiregah*, *budgery garr*, and *budgregore*. The Maori word **kiwi** was first used in English in the 1830s. People started using the bird as the emblem of New Zealand at the end of the 1890s, and New Zealanders have been known as Kiwis since shortly after that.

The **larrikin** is one of the Australian stereotypes—the maverick with an apparent disregard for convention or the boisterous young man. The word could have been brought over from England—it is recorded in Cornish dialect in the 1880s—or based on **Larry**, a form of the man's name Lawrence common in Ireland and the Irish-Australian community.

During the First World War, Australian and New Zealand soldiers were referred to as **diggers**, in the sense 'miner', which was used for gold and opal miners in Australasia. In peacetime, **digger** became a friendly form of address for a man, like **cobber**, which probably came from English dialect *cob* 'to like'. One of the things that friends do together is drink, and as a consequence may **chunder**, or vomit, in the **dunny**. The first is probably from rhyming slang *Chunder Loo* = 'spew'. Chunder Loo of Akim Foo was a cartoon character devised by Norman Lindsay (1879–1969) that appeared in advertisements for Cobra boot polish in the early 20th century. **Dunny**, or 'toilet', was originally a **dunnekin**, an English dialect word from **dung** and **ken**, meaning 'house'.

Australians may refer to a Brit as a **Limey** or a **pom**. The former comes from the rations of lime juice given to Royal Navy seamen to ward off scurvy, while the latter term probably derives from *POMEGRANATE, as a near rhyme for 'immigrant'. The red, sunburnt cheeks of new arrivals may also

have reminded people of the fruit. If an Australian or New Zealander tells you to **rattle your dags**, you would be well advised to hurry up. Dags are locks of wool clotted with dung at the rear end of a sheep, which can rattle as they move. The word may be related to **tag**, and goes back to medieval England, when dags were pointed divisions on the edge of a garment that were then fashionable. Today an entertaining or eccentric person can also be called a dag, as can someone who is untidy or dirty-looking, or an awkward adolescent.

Australian bushmen used various women's names for a bundle or 'swag' of personal belongings, but Matilda is the one whose name stuck, especially after 1893 when A.B. 'Banjo' Paterson (1864–1941) wrote his famous song 'Waltzing Matilda'. To **waltz** (or **walk**) **Matilda** is to travel the roads carrying your swag. The other woman's name forever associated with Australia is **Sheila**, an Irish name that has meant 'a girl or woman' since the 1820s.

The **billy** or **billycan** used in the Australian bush was until recently thought to derive from an Aboriginal word for 'water', *billa*, which is also found in **billabong**, a branch of a river forming a backwater. In fact, it is probably from the old Scots word *billy-pot* 'cooking utensil'.

One of Australia's best-loved exports in recent years has been the singer Kylie Minogue. Many of her fans will be unaware that in Western Australia a **kylie** is a boomerang. The word is from the Aboriginal language Nyungar.

See also ANTIPODES, BLUE, DINKUM, LAIRY, MOCKER, PIKE, POSSUM

means that it is related to other English words such as **optic** [LME] and **optician** [L17th].

autumn [LME] We now call the season between summer and winter **autumn**, a word borrowed in the 14th century via Old French from Latin *autumnus*. *HARVEST, an older word, was the usual name for the season until autumn displaced it in the 16th century. Americans call it *FALL, originally a British expression first recorded in 1545 for the season when leaves fall from the trees, which travelled over to the New World with the first colonists.

avalanche [L18th] This word comes from French Alpine dialect word *lavanche* of unknown origin, its current form influenced by the French *avaler* 'to descend'.

avant-garde [LME] This French phrase was originally used in English in its original sense for the vanguard of an army. Use for those in the vanguard of what is new in the arts dates from the early 20th century.

avast [E17th] This nautical term is from Dutch *hou'vast*, *houd vast* 'hold fast!'.

avenge *see* REVENGE

avenue *see* REVENUE

average [LME] Originally a shipping term, meaning either the duty payable by the owner of goods about to be shipped or the financial liability for any goods lost or damaged at sea, average came into English in the 15th century from French *avarie* 'damage to a ship or cargo, customs duty'. The ultimate source was Arabic *awar* 'damage to goods'. All this may seem a long way from the modern meaning of average, but the word came to be applied to the fair splitting of the financial liability between the owners of the vessel and the owners of

the cargo, which in time led to the modern senses.

aviation [M19th] The Latin word for 'bird', *avis*, is the root of a number of English words that relate to birds, such as **aviary** [L16th], and **avian** [L19th]. It is also the source of words connected with the idea of flying, such as **aviation** and **aviator**, both 19th-century borrowings of French words. *See also* AUSPICIOUS

avocado [M17th] The name of the avocado in the Aztec language Nahuatl was *ahuacatl*, also the word for 'testicle' and applied to the fruit because of its shape. In the 16th century the Spanish conquerors of Central America adopted this word but converted it into the form *aguacate* and then to the more familiar-sounding *avocado*, the Spanish word for 'a lawyer' (and related to the English advocate, *see* *ADVOCAAT). The word came into English in the mid 17th century.

avuncular *see* UNCLE

awake *see* WATCH

aware [OE] Old English *gewær* has a West Germanic origin and is related to German *gewahr*. An early meaning was 'vigilant, cautious' as well as 'informed'. **Wary** [LME] is from the same root.

awe [OE] The battle plan for the 2003 invasion of Iraq by US-led forces was dubbed **shock and awe**. The phrase was not invented by President George W. Bush or Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, but came from *Shock and Awe: Achieving Rapid Dominance* (1996), by the US strategic analysts Harlan K. Ullman and James P. Wade. The Old English word awe originally meant 'terror or dread'. Gradually people started to use it to express their feelings for God, thereby introducing the senses of great respect and wonder. Both **awful** [OE] and **awesome** [L16th] have become weaker in meaning over the centuries. Awful was originally used to describe things that caused terror or dread. Other old meanings included 'awe-inspiring' and 'filled with awe'; the modern sense 'extremely bad' dates from the early 19th century. Awesome at first meant 'filled with awe'. It later came to mean 'inspiring awe', and in the 1960s took on the rather weaker meaning of 'overwhelming, remarkable, staggering'. Now it can just mean 'great, excellent', especially in the USA.

awkward [LME] There used to be a word **awk**, based on an Old Norse *afugr*, that meant 'turned the wrong way round'. So awkward meant 'in an awk direction', 'in the wrong direction, in reverse order, upside down'. It could be applied, for instance, to an animal that was on its back and was unable to get up. The meaning 'clumsy or ungainly' developed in the 16th century, followed by other meanings such as 'embarrassing', or 'difficult to deal with'.

axe [OE] Since Anglo-Saxon times an axe has been a tool or weapon, but since the 1950s it has also been a musical instrument. Jazz fans started referring to saxophones as axes, but now an axe is generally an electric guitar. **The axe**, meaning a measure intended to reduce costs, especially by making people redundant, goes back at least to 1922. A person who **has an axe to grind** has a private reason for doing something. The phrase is thought to come from an 18th-century cautionary tale in which a passing stranger takes advantage of a bystander and, by flattering him, tricks him into turning a grindstone to sharpen his axe.

axis [LME] In Latin *axis* means 'axle' or 'pivot'. That is really what an axis is—an imaginary line through a body, around which it rotates, rather like an invisible axle. In the Second World War **the Axis** was the alliance of Germany and Italy, later also including Japan and other countries, which opposed the Allies. The connection with an axis was the idea of the relations between countries forming a 'pivot' around which they revolved. *See also* EVIL.

ayatollah *see* ARABIC WORD PANEL

Bb

babble, babe *see* BABY

Babel [ME] Genesis 11 tells the story of Babel, where God, angered by the arrogance of builders who thought they could reach heaven by erecting a tower, confused their language so that they could no longer understand each other. The word was originally Hebrew for 'Babylon', a name from the Babylonian Akkadian language meaning 'gate of God'. The Bible story led to its use in English in the general sense of 'a confusion of sounds'.

baboon [ME] Baboon was originally used for a carving such as a gargoyle, and probably comes from Old French *baboue* 'muzzle' or 'grimace'. By about 1400 it was being used for the long-snouted monkey.

baby [LME] Both baby and **babe** probably come from the way that the sound *ba* is repeated by very young children. **Babble** [ME] probably came from the same source, along with words such as **mama** [M16th] and **papa** [L17th]. Similar forms are found in many different languages. A person's lover or spouse has been their baby since the middle of the 19th century. The sense 'someone's creation or special concern' dates from later in that century—in 1890 artificial silk was referred to as its inventor's 'new-born baby'. The proverb **don't throw the baby out with the bathwater** is from German. The first known appearance in English is from the Scottish historian and political philosopher Thomas Carlyle (1795–1881), who wrote in 1853 that 'The Germans say, "You must empty out the bathing-tub, but not the baby along with it".' Babe originally just meant 'child', and only later became restricted to a child too young to walk. Inexperienced people in a situation calling for experience are **babes in the wood**, from characters in an old ballad *The Children in the Wood*, whose wicked uncle wanted to steal their inheritance and abandoned them in a wood. The proverbial phrase **out of the mouths of babes** is used when a precocious child says something unexpectedly appropriate. It has biblical origins, being found in Psalms and the Gospel of Matthew. A babe today is generally an attractive young person. The first babes were men. In the 1870s the youngest member of a class of US military cadets was called the babe, rather like 'the baby of the family'. The term was then used as a friendly form of address between men before it came to mean a sexy girl. See also BIMBO

bacchanal [M16th] This word comes from **Bacchus** (in Greek *Bakkhos*), the god of wine. The association with the **Bacchanalia**, the Roman festival in honour of the god, with its renowned free-flowing wine and licentious behaviour, gave the sense 'drunken revelry or orgy'.

bachelor [ME] The word bachelor was adopted from French in the early Middle Ages. The earliest meaning was 'a young knight serving under another's banner', one who was not old or rich enough to have his own band of followers. The sense 'unmarried man' is known from the late Middle Ages—Geoffrey Chaucer (*c.*1343–1400) wrote in *The Canterbury Tales* that 'bachelors have often pain and woe'.

bacillus *see* BACTERIUM

back [OE] Old English back has been prolific in forming compounds, phrases and popular expressions. If you **get someone's back up** you make them annoyed. The image is that of a cat arching its back when angry or threatened. The idea is recorded as early as 1728: a character in *The Provok'd Husband*, a comic play of that year by John Vanbrugh (*c.*1664–1726) and Colley Cibber (1671–1757), remarks, 'How her back will be

up then, when she meets me!' Sir Walter Scott was the first to use **the back of beyond**, in 1816. In Australia the back of beyond is **back o'Bourke**, Bourke being a remote town in New South Wales. In America there have been **backwoods** since the early 18th century. Failure has sent people **back to square one** since the 1950s. This possibly comes from a board game such as Snakes and Ladders, in which the board has some squares that send a player who lands on them back to the beginning or to an earlier position. **Back to the drawing board** does not seem to have been used until the 1940s, though drawing boards themselves have been known by that name from the early 18th century. Andrew Johnson, the 17th president of the USA, gave us the phrase to **take a back seat**. He said in 1868 after the American Civil War that 'in the work of Reconstruction traitors should take back seats'. In the 20th century the car brought with it the **back-seat driver**. By the 1950s the term appears in other contexts: in 1955 *The Times* reported a comment that 'it was contrary to democracy for elected members to consult "pressure groups" and "back-seat drivers" '. *See also* NIMBY

bacon [ME] The word bacon was adopted from French in the 14th century and can be traced back to an ancient German root that links it to *BACK, probably in the sense of the cut of meat. In early use it could mean fresh pork, as well as cured, and could also refer to a pig's carcass. To **bring home the bacon**, 'to supply food or support', first appeared in the USA during the early years of the 20th century. It may have developed from to **save one's bacon** ('to escape danger or difficulty'), an older expression which dates from the mid 17th century.

bacterium [M19th] This modern Latin term is formed from Greek *baktērion* 'little staff'; the first bacteria to be discovered were rod-shaped. The word **bacillus** [L19th], a pathogenic bacterium, also meant 'little rod' in late Latin. *Bacillus* is also behind the French word **debacle**, adopted into English in the early 19th century. It literally means an unbarring and was first used of the breaking of ice or other blockage in a river and its effects, and then transferred to human behaviour.

bad [ME] Homophobia may lie at the root of the meaning of bad. The word appeared in the 13th century, and at that time had two syllables, like **baddy**. This suggests that it may be a shortening of Old English *bǽddel* 'effeminate man, hermaphrodite'. Bad was specifically applied to coins with a reduced content of precious metal. This gives us the **bad penny**, which 'always turns up'. Debased coinage also features in the proverb **bad money drives out good**, also known as Gresham's law, after Queen Elizabeth I's chief financial adviser Sir Thomas Gresham (1519–79). He observed that people tended to hang on to coins of a high intrinsic value, like gold sovereigns, while being happier to spend those of a lower intrinsic worth but equal face value. At the end of the 19th century **bad** underwent a complete reversal of meaning in US black slang, and in the 1920s jazz enthusiasts began to use it as a term of approval—something 'bad' was now 'good'. *Compare with the development of* FUNK, WICKED

badge *see* BADGER

badger [E16th] Badger is probably based on **badge** (a LME word of unknown origin), with reference to the animal's distinctive facial markings. Use as a verb arose in the late 18th century and reflects the popularity at that time of badger-baiting, a pastime where badgers were drawn from their setts by dogs and killed for sport (illegal in the UK since 1830). The alternative name **brock** is a use of the Old English word for badger, one of the few words the Anglo-Saxons adopted from Celtic.

badminton [M19th] The game gets its name from the place in south west England which was the country seat of the Duke of Beaufort. Forms of the game had long existed, and were generally known as **battledore** and **shuttlecock** (the first from the same root at *BAT, the second, originally 'shuttle-cork' from *SHUTTLE and cork). A more competitive version of the old game

was brought back by army officers from India in the 19th century and became a popular game in English country houses.

bag [ME] The origin of bag is uncertain but it may come from an old Scandinavian word. Some phrases in English come from its use to mean a hunter's game bag, such as having something **in the bag**, 'as good as secured'. Another sense, 'a particular interest or distinctive style', as in 'Dance music isn't really my bag', is probably jazz slang of the late 1950s. In the sense 'an unattractive woman', bag or **old bag** was originally American, and was first recorded in the 1890s.

bagel *see* YIDDISH WORD PANEL

bail [ME] The spelling **bail** represents several different words. The one meaning 'temporary release of an accused person' came via French from Latin *bajulare*, 'to bear a burden', and is related to **bailiff** [ME], someone who bears the burden of responsibility. The Latin word is also ultimately the source of **bail** (in Britain also spelled **bale**) meaning 'to scoop water out of a boat'. The **bailey** [ME] or outer wall of a castle has a quite different origin, but it is connected with the third bail, a crosspiece on a cricket stump: originally this bail meant the same as bailey. The ultimate origin of both of these appears to be Latin *baculum*, 'a rod or stick' which developed the sense 'palisade' in French. **Bailing out** from an aircraft may be a development of the 'to scoop water' sense. It was at first spelled **bale out**, though, and could come from the idea of letting a bale of straw though a trapdoor in a barn. The first written record dates from 1930. This sort of bale [ME] has the basic idea of something bundled and is related to *BALL.

bait *see* ABET

baize [L16th] Despite being generally green in colour today, **baize**, a material used for covering billiard tables, is from the French word *bai* 'chestnut-coloured', presumably from the original colour of the cloth. *Bai* is also the root of the English word *BAY [ME], used to describe a brown horse with black mane and tail.

bake [OE] **and batch** [LME] Both words go back to the same Old English root. **Baker's dozen** meaning 'thirteen', arose in the 16th century. It was a traditional bakers' practice to add an extra loaf to every dozen sold to a shopkeeper—this extra, thirteenth loaf was the source of the retailer's profit when the loaves were sold on to customers.

balaclava [L19th] A balaclava was first a type of woollen covering for the head and neck worn by soldiers on active service in the Crimean War (1854), and was named after the village of *Balaclava* in the Crimea.

balance [ME] The original sense of balance was for the sort of scales that statues of Justice are shown holding. The word is based on late Latin *(libra) bilanx* '(balance) with two scale-pans', composed of *bi-* 'twice', 'having two' and *lanx* 'scale-pan'.

balcony [E17th] Balcony is from Italian *balcone*, based on *balco* 'a scaffold' from a Germanic root meaning 'beam'. The English word was pronounced with the stress on the second syllable until about 1825, reflecting the Italian source.

bald [ME] Words related to bald in other northern European languages suggest that its core meaning was 'having a white patch or streak'. This may survive in the phrase **as bald as a coot**. The coot is not actually bald: it has a broad white area on its forehead extending up from the base of its bill. Descriptions of people as being as bald as a coot appear as far back as the 15th century.

balderdash *see* POPPYCOCK

bale *see* BAIL

baleful [OE] This comes from an old Germanic word, bale, meaning 'evil'.

balk *see* BAULK

ball [ME] The spherical ball dates from the early Middle Ages, and comes from an old

Scandinavian word that was the ultimate root of Italian *ballotta*, from which English took **ballot** in the mid 16th century, and also of French *ballon* and Italian *ballone* 'large ball', one of which was the source of *BALLOON. The ball at which people dance is unrelated. It came, in the early 17th century, from French, and goes back to Latin *ballare* 'to dance'. This was also the source of **ballad** [LME] and **ballet** [M17th].

In America a ball game is a baseball match and a ballpark a baseball stadium. These have entered even British English in phrases such as **a whole new ball game**, 'a completely new set of circumstances', **in the** (**right**) **ballpark**, 'a particular area or range', and a **ballpark figure** (an approximate figure).

The dancing sense has notably given us **have a ball**, meaning 'enjoy yourself a lot'. This was originally an American expression of the 1930s, but is now used nearly everywhere that English is spoken.

Testicles have been balls since the Middle Ages, but the slang sense 'nonsense' is Victorian. The meaning 'courage, determination' is more recent still, dating only from the 1950s. People often claim that the phrase **cold enough to freeze the balls off a brass monkey** comes from a former naval custom of storing cannonballs on a brass rack or 'monkey'. When the weather was very cold the rack could contract and eject the cannonballs. There are some severe problems with this explanation, though. First, cannonballs were stored on a wooden rack, not a brass one. Second, it would have to be extremely cold to cause sufficient contraction in the metal for this to happen. And third, the earliest recorded versions of the phrase (dating from the 19th century) feature noses and tails rather than balls, suggesting that the reference is to a brass statue of a monkey, and that the 'balls' are testicles rather than cannonballs.
See also BOLLOCK, COB, EVIL

ballistic [L18th] Two ancient engines of war, a catapult for hurling large stones and a large crossbow firing a spear, were each known as a **ballista**. The Latin source, *ballista*, from Greek *ballein* 'to throw', gave us ballistic. As a technical term this dates from the 18th century, but it only became widely known in the mid 20th century with the development of the **ballistic missile**, a missile which is initially powered and guided but falls under gravity on to its target. In the 1980s to **go ballistic** began to be used meaning 'to fly into a rage'.

balloon [L16th] The balloon that carries passengers in a basket is older than the one used as a children's toy. In 1782 the brothers Joseph and Jacques Montgolfier built a large balloon from linen and paper and successfully lifted a number of animals, and the following year people, whereas the toy version did not appear until the middle of the next century. The word was adopted from French or Italian in the late 16th century, and originally referred to a large inflatable leather ball used in a game of the same name. It goes back to the same root as *BALL.

The phrase **when the balloon goes up**, 'when the action or trouble begins', has been used in Britain since the 1920s. It may refer to the release of a balloon to mark the beginning of a race. By contrast, to **go down like a lead balloon** is American in origin: **lead balloon** appears as a term meaning 'a failure, a flop' in a comic strip of 1924 in which a man who had been sold dud shares discovered they were 'about to go up as fast as a lead balloon'.

ballot *see* BALL

balsa [E17th] A balsa was originally a kind of South American raft or fishing boat and is an adoption of this Spanish word for 'raft'. Because it was used for rafts the word was transferred to the lightweight wood from a tropical American tree.

ban [OE] In Old English this meant 'to summon by popular proclamation'. The word is Germanic and also passed into French where it had the sense 'proclamation, summons, banishment'. This lies behind **abandon** [LME] based on the Old French phrase *a bandon* 'at one's disposal, under one's jurisdiction'; and **banal** [M18th] which originally related to feudal service and meant 'compulsory'.

From this came a notion of 'common to everyone' and so 'ordinary and everyday'. The marriage **banns** [ME] read in church also come from the sense 'proclamation'. **Bandit** [L16th] comes from Italian *bandito* a 'banned person', and **banish** [LME] comes from the same root.

banana [L16th] Africa is the original home of the banana. The word travelled to English through Portuguese and Spanish from Mande, a language group of West Africa, arriving in the 16th century. In the 20th century slang expressions began to appear. American people began to **go bananas** with excitement, anger, or frustration in the 1950s. The **top banana**, 'the most important person in an organization', derives from US theatrical slang. It referred to the comedian with top billing in a show, a use first recorded in 1953 from a US newspaper, which also mentions **second** and **third bananas**. People have been slipping on a **banana skin** since the beginning of the 20th century: the comic writer P.G. Wodehouse (1881–1975) referred in 1934 to 'Treading upon Life's banana skins'. The **banana republic**, a small state, especially in central America, whose economy is almost entirely dependent on its fruit-exporting trade, was referred to as early as 1904.

band [OE] A band in the sense 'a strip of something' comes from the same Germanic root as **bind** [OE] and **bond** [ME]. Bend is a variant found in **bend sinister** [E17th], a broad diagonal stripe from top right to bottom left of a shield, a supposed sign of bastardy. **Bandage** [L16th] and **bandbox** [M17th], now a box for carrying hats, but originally for carrying neckbands, come from this word. In early use a band in the sense 'a group', usually consisted of armed men, robbers, or assassins. The first groups of musicians called a band (in the 17th century) were attached to regiments of the army. **Banner** [ME] is related. A **bandwagon** [M19th] was a wagon used for carrying the band in a parade or procession. The word now occurs more often in phrases such as to **jump on the bandwagon**. This use developed in America in the late 19th century.

bandit *see* BAN

bang [M16th] This is probably a Scandinavian word, which imitates the sound. The American expression **bang for your buck**, 'value for money, return on your investment', was originally used in the early 1950s of military spending, especially on nuclear weapons. The phrase **bang on**, meaning 'exactly right, excellent', originated in air force slang, and referred to dropping a bomb exactly on target. A nuclear explosion was referred to as the **big bang** in John Osborne's 1957 play *Look Back in Anger*: 'If the big bang does come, and we all get killed off . . . '. Nowadays the **Big Bang** is more usually the explosion in which the universe originated. It was originally a term of ridicule, used by the scientist Fred Hoyle (1915–2001) in 1950, but is now the standard term for a respectable theory. In 1986 it was also the name given to the major changes in trading on the Stock Exchange introduced that year.

banger Banger has had several slang senses since the beginning of the 1800s. It was first a gross or blatant lie, what we would now call a 'whopper'. It was also a loud or forceful kiss, or a 'smacker', and in US college slang it was a cane or club. The meaning 'sausage' is originally Australian, and was probably suggested by the tendency of fat sausages to 'pop' if not pricked before cooking. The 'old car' sense is surprisingly recent, not being recorded before the 1960s.

banish *see* BAN

bank [ME] The very different uses of bank are all ultimately related. The bank beside a river was adopted from a Scandinavian word in the early Middle Ages, and is related to **bench** [OE]. The earliest use of the bank for a financial institution referred to a money-dealer's counter or table. This came from French or Italian in the late 15th century, but goes back to the same root as the river bank. A bank of oars or of lights

represents yet another related form. It came into English in the early Middle Ages from French, and originally meant a bench or a platform to speak from. The bench or platform sense is also found in **mountebank** [L16th] for a charlatan, which comes from Italian *monta in banco* 'climb on the bench' referring to the way they attract a crowd, while a **bankrupt** [M16th], originally a *bankrout* takes us back to the 'counter' sense. It is from Italian *banca rotta*, which really means 'a broken bench', referring to the breaking up of the traders business at the counter. The word was altered early on in its history in English, through association with Latin *ruptus* 'broken'. Yet another word from the same source is **banquet** [LME] which comes from the French for 'little bench' and was originally a snack rather than a lavish meal.

banner *see* BAND

banns *see* BAN

banquet *see* BANK

banshee [L17th] A banshee in Irish legend is a female spirit who wails a warning of an imminent death in a house; the word is ultimately from Old Irish *ben síde* 'woman of the fairies'.

banyan [L16th] The Indian fig tree known as a banyan comes via Portuguese, from a Gujarati word for 'a man of the trading caste'. The word originally meant a Hindu merchant, but in the mid 17th century came to be applied by Europeans to one particular tree, the Banyans' Tree, under which traders had built a pagoda.

bar [ME] There are few more functional words than bar. It gives us bars of soap and chocolate, bars serving drinks, bars that we can put criminals behind, and in Britain members of the Bar who can help put them there. The word entered English from French in the early Middle Ages, but beyond that its history is unknown. Its earliest use was for fastening a gate or door. People used it for various kinds of **barrier** [LME], a related word. In a court a bar marked off the area around the judge's seat, where prisoners were brought to be charged, hence **prisoner at the bar**. At the Inns of Court, where lawyers were trained in England, a bar separated students from those qualified, and a student was 'called to the bar' to become a fully fledged **barrister** [LME]. From this **the Bar** came to mean the whole body of barristers, or the barrister's profession, as early as the 16th century. At this time a bar was also a barrier or counter from which drink was served.

From barring doors and barring a person's way, it took a small step for **bar** to mean 'to prohibit', as in **no holds barred** [M20th], and 'except': **bar none** [E18th] means 'without exception'.

barbarian [ME] The ancient Greeks had a high opinion of themselves and a correspondingly low one of other peoples. They called everyone who did not speak Greek *barbaros* or 'foreign', which is where we get barbarian and related words **barbaric** [LME], **barbarity** [L17th], and **barbarous** [E16th]. The word *barbaros* originally imitated the unintelligible language of foreigners, which to the Greeks just sounded like *ba*, *ba*, *ba*.

barbecue [M17th] This word comes from Spanish *barbacoa*, perhaps from Arawak (West Indies) *barbacoa* which was a 'wooden frame on posts'. Barbecue is used in space in the phrases **barbecue mode** and **barbecue manoeuvre** describing the rotation of a spacecraft to allow the heat of the sun to fall on all sides. *See also* AUSTRALIAN WORD PANEL

barber [ME] The word barber goes back to French *barbe*, 'a beard'. In the 16th and 17th centuries barbers provided lute or guitar music for customers waiting their turn. Some would sing along. This **barber's music** was not always pleasant to listen to, and the term was quite insulting. In America standards seem to have been higher: the term **barbershop** for close-harmony singing is first recorded in the early 20th century.

barge [ME] A barge was originally a small seagoing vessel rather than a flat-bottomed boat for carrying freight. The word is French

and probably comes ultimately from Greek *baris*, which referred to a kind of Egyptian boat used on the Nile. The sense 'move forcefully or roughly' [L19th] refers to the way a heavily laden, unwieldy barge might collide with the bank or other traffic. If you **wouldn't touch something with a bargepole** you refuse to have anything to do with it. The equivalent expression in America says that you **wouldn't touch something with a ten-foot pole**.

baritone *see* ITALIAN WORD PANEL

bark [OE] Dogs have always barked, so it is not surprising that bark is a prehistoric word. If **someone's bark is worse than their bite** they are not as ferocious as they appear. To **bark at the moon** meaning 'to make a fuss with no effect', is first recorded in the 17th century. To **bark up the wrong tree** is from 19th-century America. People have been **barking** or **barking mad** since the 1930s. The bark of a tree is possibly related to the name of the **birch** tree [OE]. **Bark** or **barque** [ME] is also an old-fashioned word for a boat from Latin *barca* 'ship's boat', from which we get **embark** [M16th].

barley *see* BARN

barn [OE] A barn was originally a place for storing **barley** [OE], the word coming from Old English from *bere* 'barley' and *ern* 'house'. In the 1940s barn started to be used in particle physics as a unit of areas. It is apparently from the phrase **as big as a barn door**, a long established measure of size.

barnacle [ME] A barnacle was originally what we would now call a **barnacle goose**. The name appeared in English in the early Middle Ages, but its ultimate origin is unknown. The barnacle goose breeds in the Arctic tundra of Greenland and similar places, but for a long time its place of origin was something of a mystery. People thought it hatched from a type of barnacle that attaches itself to objects floating in the water and has long feathery filaments protruding from its shell, which presumably suggested the notion of plumage. The shellfish itself started to be called a **barnacle** in the 16th century.

baroque [M18th] A baroque was originally the name of an irregularly shaped pearl, its shape reminiscent of the elaborate detail of the architectural style. The word came via French from Portuguese *barroco*, Spanish *barrueco*, or Italian *barocco* but the ultimate origin is unknown.

barque *see* BARK

barrel [ME] This word goes back to Latin *barillus* 'small cask'. Before refrigerators made domestic life easier, the barrel used for storage was a more familiar object. Various phrases refer back to those earlier days. To **have someone over a barrel** is to have them in a helpless position, at one's mercy. People rescued from drowning would be laid face down over a barrel to help the water drain out of their lungs, and it is possible that the idea of helplessness developed into one of coercion, although the phrase could derive from the idea of someone forced to lie over a barrel to be flogged. If you **scrape the barrel** (or **the bottom of the barrel**) you are reduced to using things or people of the poorest quality because there is nothing else available. Neither of these is recorded until the early 20th century.

barricade [L16th] To **man the barricades** is to stage a protest of a kind particularly associated with France. The word is indeed French, formed from *barrique* 'cask'; The 'day of the barricades' in Paris on 12 May 1588 during the Huguenot Wars was characterized by the use of barrels to build defences and obstruct access; hence the current sense. The French word came ultimately from Spanish *barrica*, and the form *barricado* was formerly used in English as well as barricade, both from the late 16th century.

barrier, barrister *see* BAR

base [ME] There are two different words spelled as 'base' in English. The old-fashioned one meaning 'low, ignoble' comes

from Latin *bassus* 'short', also the source of to **abase** [LME]. The low musical **bass** [LME] and the **bassoon** [E18th] come from the same source. The other base comes, along with **basis** [L16th] and **basic** [M19th], via Latin from Greek *basis*, which meant 'step' and 'pedestal'. Its first English meaning was 'the pedestal of a statue'. **Basement** [M18th] probably comes via archaic Dutch *basement* 'foundation', from Italian *basamento* 'base of a column', from *basis*.

Although **baseball** is primarily an American game the earliest recorded use of the word is actually from Jane Austen in *Northanger Abbey*: 'It was not very wonderful that Catherine . . . should prefer cricket, base ball . . . to books.' Phrases drawn from the US game are familiar elsewhere. A notable example is to **touch base**, 'to briefly make or renew contact with something or somebody'. Other phrases using **base** include to **get to first base**, 'to achieve the first step towards your objective', and **off base**, 'mistaken', though these are still primarily American. *See also* BAT

basilica [M16th] Basilica is a Latin word, literally 'royal palace', based on Greek *basileus* 'king'. This Greek root has also given rise to: the aromatic herb **basil**, the 'royal' herb for its many qualities—one early source even says that it is 'good for the stryking of a se dragon'; and **basilisk** [ME] which has come via Latin from Greek *basiliskos* with the senses 'little king', 'serpent' (specifying a type distinguished by a crown-like spot), and a 'wren' (with a gold crown-like crest). In English a basilisk is either a mythical reptile hatched by a serpent from a cock's egg, or a zoological term for a Central American lizard.

basis, bass, bassoon *see* BASE

bastard [ME] Bastard probably derives from medieval Latin *bastum* 'packsaddle' (a horse's saddle which was adapted for supporting loads); the French equivalent was *fils de bast* or 'packsaddle son'. The reference was to a loose-living mule driver who used a packsaddle for a pillow and the next morning was off to the next town. *See also* BAT

baste *see* LAMBASTE

bat [OE] The nocturnal flying mammal was originally not a bat but a 'back'. The earliest form, adopted in the early Middle Ages from a Scandinavian word, was altered to bat in the 16th century, perhaps influenced by Latin *batta* or *blacta* 'insect that shuns the light'. The creature has inspired numerous expressions. You could be **as blind as a bat** from the 16th century—before then the standard comparison was with a beetle. From the early 20th century you could **have bats in the belfry**, 'be mad', or, in the same vein, be **bats** or **batty**. The first recorded example of **like a bat out of hell**, 'very fast and wildly', is from the *Atlanta Constitution* of 3 February 1914: 'One day we saw an automobile go down the street like a bat out of hell and a few moments later we heard that it hit the last car of a freight train at the grade crossing.' An old-fashioned name for a bat is **flittermouse** [M16th], meaning literally 'flying mouse'. Dutch *vledermuis* and German *Fledermaus* are matching terms in other languages.

The other bat, for hitting a ball, is a word adopted from French in the Old English period, and is related to *BATTERY. If you do something **off your own bat** you are using a cricketing phrase; it originally referred to the score made by a player's own hits, and so 'at your own instigation'. But if you did something **right off the bat**, 'at the very beginning, straight away', you would be taking a term from baseball.

Batman has been a comic character and superhero since 1939. The less glamorous **batman** [M18th] is a British army officer's personal servant. This bat is unrelated to the other two. It came through French from medieval Latin *bastum* 'a packsaddle' (*see* *BASTARD) and originally referred to a man in charge of a *bat-horse*, which carried the luggage of military officers.

batch *see* BAKE

bated [ME] A shortened form of **abated** [ME], meaning 'reduced, lessened'. The idea behind the phrase **with bated breath** is that the anxiety or excitement you experience while waiting for something to happen is so great that you almost stop breathing. The word is sometimes spelled **baited**, from a mistaken association with a fisherman's bait. It came from the Old French *abattre* 'to fell', from Latin *ad* 'to, at' and *batt(u)ere* 'to beat' which is also the source of **abattoir**, which to some extent replaced the medieval term **slaughterhouse** in the early 19th century.

bath [OE] The city of **Bath** in the west of England derives its name from its hot springs, where people immersed themselves for health reasons. The city gave its name to the **bath chair** [E19th] in which its invalids were transported. The British order of knighthood, the **Order of the Bath,** has this name because recipients took a bath before being installed—it was a special event. If sports players take **an early bath** they have been sent off by the referee.

bathos [M17th] This is a Greek word and was first recorded in English in the literal Greek sense 'depth'. The literary sense was introduced by Alexander Pope in the early 18th century. He published the *Bathos* in the *Miscellanies* (third volume) in 1728, which was a lively satire giving descriptions of bad authors, identified by initials. **Bathyspere** [1930] for a spherical chamber that can be lowered into the depths of the sea, comes from the same source.

baton [M16th] The original baton was a club or cudgel and came from French, ultimately from Latin *bastum* 'stick'. The baton used to direct an orchestra or choir was first mentioned by the music historian Charles Burney (1726–1814) (father of the novelist Fanny Burney) in 1785. The baton passed from hand to hand in a relay race is first mentioned by that name in 1921. This use gives rise to **pass on the baton**, 'to hand over a particular duty or responsibility', and to **take up** (or **pick up**) **the baton**, 'to accept a duty or responsibility'. The French name of **Baton Rouge**, the capital of Louisiana, means 'Red Stick' in English. It comes from a red-stained Indian boundary marker seen by early French explorers of the area.

battalion, batter *see* BATTLE

battery [ME] The root of battery is Latin *battuere* 'to strike, beat', and originally referred to metal articles shaped with a hammer. The military soon adopted the term to mean a succession of heavy blows inflicted upon the walls of a fortress with artillery, and so it came to have the sense 'a number of pieces of artillery combining in action'. It is this idea of combining to produce a result that is behind the use in electrical batteries. The original electrical battery was a series of Leyden jars, glass jars with layers of metal foil on the outside and inside, used to store electric charge. Benjamin Franklin (1706–1790) mentioned the device in a letter of 1748. Sir Humphry Davy (1778–1829) developed the later **galvanic battery** (named after the Italian physicist Luigi Galvani (1737–98)), using chemical action to produce electric current, and described it in 1801. An electrical battery is a container with one or more cells, and this no doubt prompted the use of the word for a series of cages for laying hens.

battle [ME] Along with **battalion** [L16th], **batter** [ME], and *BATTERY, the word **battle** goes back through French to Latin *battuere* 'to strike, beat', also found in **combat** [M16th] 'fight together'. Battle appears in many phrases. We say that we are **fighting a losing battle** when a struggle is bound to end in failure, or that something that contributes to success is **half the battle**. A fiercely contested fight or dispute is a **battle royal**, which was originally a fight with several combatants.

baulk [OE] The verb baulk (US variant balk) is used with a sense of 'refusal' in phrases such as **baulk at an idea**, or **baulk at doing something**. This notion developed, together with the verb senses 'hesitate' and 'hinder' in late Middle English, through a use of the noun as 'obstacle'. The early spelling of the noun was *balc*, from an Old Norse word for 'partition'. The first English usage was 'unploughed ridge', later 'land left

unploughed by mistake', which was then extended to 'blunder, omission'. **Bollards** [ME] originally short posts on a ship's deck or on a quayside, may be related.

bawdy [E16th] Bawdy has gained its sexual overtones, in phrases such as bawdy jokes and bawdy house, from **bawd** [LME] 'a woman in charge of a brothel', a late Middle English word shortened from the now obsolete *bawdstrot*, from Old French *baudestroyt* 'procuress' (from *baude* 'shameless').

bay [ME] Hounds have bayed since the Middle Ages. Like *BARK, the word probably imitates the sound. People can now also **bay for blood**, when they call loudly for someone to be punished. The related phrase **at bay** comes from hunting and means 'cornered, forced to face one's attackers'. It is often used now in **to hold someone at bay**, 'to prevent someone from approaching or having an effect'. The geographical **bay** [LME] can be traced back to Old French *baie*, from Old Spanish *bahia*, but no further. The **bay tree** [LME] came via Old French from Latin *bāca* 'berry', and the type of bay found in a **bay window**, also late Middle English, comes from Old French *baie*, from the verb *baer* 'to gape'. This is also, via *baif* 'open-mouthed' the source of **bevel** [L16th]. *See also* BAIZE

bayonet [L17th] A bayonet first described a kind of short dagger. The origin is based on *Bayonne*, a town in south-west France where these daggers were first made.

bazaar [L16th] A Persian word for 'market' is the ultimate source of bazaar, which came into English from Italian *bazarro* that was in turn borrowed from Turkish.

bead [Old English] The original meaning of bead was 'prayer'. Current meanings of bead come from the use of a rosary, each bead representing a prayer. **Bid** [OE] first found in the sense 'ask, beg' is related.

beam [OE] As well as referring to a piece of wood, beam originally also meant 'a tree', a use that survives in the name of the **hornbeam** [L16th], a member of the birch family. Sailors understood a beam to be one of the timbers stretching from side to side of a ship, supporting the deck and holding the vessel together. From there beam came to mean a ship's greatest breadth. This is why you can call someone **broad in the beam**, 'wide in the hips'. A ship that is **on its beam ends** is heeled over on its side, almost capsized, and so if a person is on their beam ends they are in a very bad situation.

The **beam in your eye**, the fault that is greater in yourself than in the person you are finding fault with, comes from the Bible. Matthew contrasts the large beam unseen in someone's own eye with the mote ('speck') noticed in the eye of another. When someone is **way off beam** they are mistaken, on the wrong track. Here they are being likened to an aircraft that has gone astray from the radio beam or signal used to guide it.

'**Beam me up, Scotty'** will forever be associated with the American television series *Star Trek*, as the words with which Captain Kirk asked Lieutenant Commander Scott to 'beam' or transport him from a planet back to the starship USS *Enterprise*. The exact words, however, do not occur in any of the television scripts, although it was later used in the films.

bean [OE] Beans have long been a basic foodstuff. To **spill the beans**, 'to reveal a secret' is an American expression from the early 20th century. **Full of beans**, 'lively, in high spirits', first recorded in the mid 19th century, originally referred to horses. Beans were one of their staple foods and a well-fed horse would be full of energy and vitality. As an insulting term for an accountant, **bean-counter** is another US term, originating in the 1970s. The rather dated bean meaning 'the head' is also originally from the US. It lives on in the close-fitting hat, the **beanie** [1940].

bear [OE] The verb bear comes from Indo-European. Related forms are found in Sanskrit, the ancient language of India, as well as in Latin and Greek. The core meaning is 'to carry'. In English it is related to **bier** [OE], the frame carrying a coffin or

corpse. From early times bear has also been used of mental burdens, of suffering, or toleration. Wise people have encouraged us to **bear and forbear**, 'be patient and endure', since the 16th century, and from the mid 19th century others have told us more briskly to **grin and bear it**.

Bear, the large animal, is a different Old English word that also goes back to ancient times. In Stock Exchange terminology a bear is a person who sells shares hoping to buy them back later at a lower price (the opposite of a *BULL). The use is said to be from a proverb warning against 'selling the bear's skin before one has caught the bear'.

beard [OE] As well as referring to a man's facial hair, beard, which is related to Latin *barba* 'beard', is used of the chin tuft of certain animals, such as a lion and a goat. These uses come together in the phrase to **beard the lion in his den** or **lair**, 'to confront or challenge someone on their own ground'. To invade someone's personal space enough to be able to touch or pull their beard was always an aggressive or provocative act—in 1587 the English sailor and explorer Francis Drake (*c.*1540–96) described his expedition to Cadiz as 'the singeing of the King of Spain's Beard'. In the Middle Ages to **run in someone's beard** was to defy him, and by the 16th century you could simply 'beard someone'. Clearly this stopped being fearsome enough, and lions were introduced in the 18th century.

beast *see* ANIMAL

beat [OE] An Old English word related to *BEETLE in the sense 'heavy mallet'. The **beat generation** was a group of unconventional artists and writers of the 1950s and early 1960s, who valued free self-expression and liked modern jazz. Here the beat probably originally meant 'worn out, exhausted' rather than referring to a musical rhythm. The first people to **beat about the bush** were the 'beaters' who tried to disturb game birds so that they would fly up to be shot at. Beaters beat bushes, but soldiers beat drums. This is the origin of the phrase to **beat a hasty retreat**. To 'beat a retreat' was to sound the drums in a way that signalled to soldiers that they should withdraw from the battle. The drumming also helped them to retreat in an orderly manner.

beatnik *see* YIDDISH WORD PANEL

beauty [ME] The Latin word *bellus*, 'beautiful', is the root of **beauty**, and also of a **beau** [L17th], and **belle** [E17th]. The idea that **beauty is in the eye of the beholder** is very old indeed, appearing in the works of the ancient Greek poet Theocritus (*fl.*3rd century BC). In English the proverb as we know it today is recorded from the 18th century. The warning that **beauty is only skin-deep** is known from the early 17th century. **The beautiful game** is soccer. The phrase is from the title of the 1973 autobiography by the Brazilian star Pelé, *My Life and the Beautiful Game*.

beck [ME] If you are **at someone's beck and call** you have to be ready to obey their orders immediately. The phrase is known from the 19th century, but **beck** itself is much older, being a Middle English shortening of **beckon**. The northern English word **beck** [ME], meaning a stream or brook, is unconnected, and comes from Old Norse.

bed [OE] The core idea of this Old English word may be 'digging', as if the very first beds were dug-out lairs or hollows. Medieval uses of **to make a bed** refer to the preparation of a sleeping place on the floor of an open hall, one which would not have existed until 'made'. The term **bed and breakfast** first appeared in the late 19th century—in 1910 a 'residential hotel' is recorded offering 'Bed and breakfast from 4/-' (4 shillings or, in modern British currency, 20 pence). In the 1970s the phrase began to describe the financial practice of **bed-and-breakfasting**, in which dealers sell shares late in the day and buy them back early the next morning to gain a tax advantage.

bedlam [LME] The word is a corruption of *Bethlehem*, from the Hospital of St Mary of Bethlehem, also known as Bethlem Royal Hospital, in London—what used to be

known as an *ASYLUM. In the 17th century **bedlam** became a term for any mental hospital, and from that for any scene of mad confusion.

bee [OE] A form of the word bee is found in almost all the languages that are closely related to English, and the familiar insect has inspired numerous familiar phrases. A worker is **as busy as a bee**, a comparison made from at least the 16th century. People used to describe an obsessive person as having **a head full of bees**, whereas we now say that you **have a bee in your bonnet**. Before close studies of insect behaviour, people believed that bees instinctively take a straight line when returning to the hive. This is the origin of **beeline** [M19th]. If you **make a beeline for** a place, you hurry directly to it. A **spelling bee** is a spelling contest, and a **sewing bee** a gathering for people to do their sewing together. This use, to mean 'a meeting for communal work or amusement', was suggested by the insect's social nature, and is first recorded in the USA in the 1760s.

beech *see* BOOK

beef [ME] We often find that after the Norman Conquest people used French words for an animal's meat and the English word for the animal itself. **Beef** is from French, and *COW and **ox** are native English words, whereas *BULL was adopted from Scandinavian. Beef, meaning 'a complaint' or 'to complain', was originally American, from the mid 19th century. The first person to write of the kind of beef possessed by a muscular man was American writer Herman Melville (1819–91), author of *Moby-Dick*. The British are so well known for eating beef that a French insult for an Englishman is *un rosbif* ('a roast beef'). In English too, **beefeater** [E17th] was originally a term of contempt for a well-fed domestic servant. Now a Beefeater is a Yeoman Warder or Yeoman of the Guard at the Tower of London, a nickname first used in 1671.

beefburger *see* US WORD PANEL

Beelzebub *see* LORD

beer [OE] The ancestor of beer came from a Latin term used in monasteries. Classical Latin *bibere* 'to drink', is also behind **beverage** [ME], **bibulous** [L17th], and **imbibe** [LME]. Although beer appears in Old English, it was not common before the 16th century, the usual word in earlier times being **ale,** which now refers to a drink made without hops. The late 16th-century proverb 'Turkey, heresy, hops, and beer came into England all in one year' reflects the difference. Ale continues to be applied to paler kinds of liquors for which the malt has not been roasted. Some areas still use beer and ale interchangeably. *See also* BIB

beetle [OE] The meaning of the source word for this creature is 'biter', and it is closely related to *BITE. The other word beetle, 'a heavy mallet', is unrelated. It comes ultimately from the ancestor of BEAT, 'to strike'. The Beetle is an affectionate name for a type of small Volkswagen car that was first produced in 1938. The term started as a nickname, and was not officially adopted by the company until the 1960s. A review of the car in *Motor* magazine during 1946 said: 'It has the civilian saloon body on the military chassis with the higher ground clearance, and it looks rather like a beetle on stilts.' **Beetle-browed** means 'having bushy eyebrows'. In Middle English *brow* was always an eyebrow and not the forehead; it has been suggested that the comparison is with the tufted antennae of certain beetles, which may have been called eyebrows in both English and French.

befall *see* ACCIDENT, FALL

behave [LME] Behave is from *be-* 'thoroughly' and *have* in the sense 'have or bear (oneself) in a particular way'; this corresponds to modern German *sich behaben*.

beige [M19th] Beige was first used for a woollen fabric which was usually undyed and unbleached, and then used for things of a similar colour. The immediate source is French, but earlier details are unknown. The colour **greige**—halfway between beige and grey appears in the 1920s.

bee beech beef beefburger Beelzebub beer

belfrey [ME] Although you will find bells (as well as *BATS) in a belfry, the Old English word **bell** is not related to **belfry**. A belfry was originally a movable wooden tower used in the Middle Ages by armies besieging a fortification. The word originally had an 'r' not an 'l' in the middle, and came from Old French *berfrei*. The first part probably meant 'to protect' and the second 'peace, protection'. The first belfry associated with a church was a separate bell tower: the word began to be used for a room or storey where the bells were hung in the middle of the 16th century. **Bell** [OE] is a Germanic word. **Saved by the bell** comes from the bell marking the end of a boxing round. **Bells and whistles** for attractive but unnecessary extras, particularly on computers, is an allusion to the bells and whistles of old fairground organs.

belle *see* BEAUTY

bellicose *see* REBEL

belt [OE] An Old English word that can be traced back to Latin *balteus*, 'girdle'. It is unlawful for a boxer to land a punch below his opponent's belt, and people often use the phrase **below the belt** about a critical or unkind remark. Margot Asquith (1864–1945), wife of the Liberal Prime Minister Herbert Asquith (1852–1928), once remarked of another Liberal prime minister, Lloyd George (1863–1945): 'He can't see a belt without hitting below it'. If you take a **belt and braces** approach to something you make doubly sure that nothing will go wrong. The reference is to someone so anxious that their trousers will fall down that they wear both. **Belting** or hitting someone with a belt, is behind the verb sense 'to strike, hit', and probably also the meaning 'to move very fast'. **Belt up**, or 'be quiet', seems to have started life as RAF slang, in the 1930s.

bench *see* BANK

bend [OE] In Old English *bendan* (of Germanic origin) was 'put in bonds' or 'make a bow taut by means of a string', leading to an association with the curved shape of the bow.

bend sinister *see* BAND

benefit [LME] The source of benefit is Latin *benefactum*, 'a good deed', and that was the original meaning in English, in the late Middle Ages. The ordinary modern sense is recorded from the early 16th century. To **give someone the benefit of the doubt** originally meant to give a verdict of not guilty when the evidence was not conclusive.

benevolent [LME] This comes, via Old French, from Latin *bene volent-* 'well wishing'.

bequeath [OE] The Old English form *becwethan* is composed of *be-* 'about' and *cwethan* 'say'; the related **bequest** is Middle English, both reflecting a time when wills were often spoken rather than written. **Quoth**, an old term for 'he/she said' also comes from *cwethan*.

bereave, bereft *see* ROB

berk [E20th] This British slang term for a stupid person is generally regarded as fairly acceptable in polite society, but it has a rude origin. It is an abbreviation of *Berkeley* or *Berkshire Hunt*, rhyming slang for what has increasingly been called, since the 1970s **the C word**. The first written example dates from the late 1920s.

berserk [E19th] A **berserker** was an ancient Norse warrior who fought with wild, uncontrolled ferocity—he went **berserk**. The name came from an old Scandinavian word, *berserkr*, which probably meant 'bear coat' or 'bearskin', a suitably rugged garment for a terrifyingly unhinged Viking. An alternative possibility is that the first element is the equivalent of 'bare', referring to fighting without armour. The phrase to **go berserk** is first recorded in 1896.

berth [E17th] When we **give someone a wide berth**, or stay away from them, we are using a nautical expression. **Berth** shares a root with *BEAR, 'to carry'. Originally, in the early 17th century, it meant 'sea room', or space to turn or manoeuvre. It developed the sense 'a ship's allotted place at a wharf or

dock', and could also mean the place where seamen stowed their chests, then later the space where the sailors themselves slept.

bête noir *see* FRENCH WORD PANEL

betide *see* WOE

betroth *see* PLIGHT

bevel *see* BAY

beverage *see* BEER

bib [L16th] A bib for a baby is recorded from the late 16th century. It probably came from the old word *bib* from Latin *bibere*, meaning 'to drink'. Towards the end of the 17th century adults too were wearing bibs, often as part of an apron. Women could decorate this with a **tucker**, a piece of lace worn round the top of the bodice—'The countrywoman . . . minds nothing on Sundays so much as her best bib and tucker' (1747). Soon men, too, were described as wearing their **best bib and tucker**, their smartest clothes.
See also BEER

Bible [Middle English] *Bible* has come via Old French from ecclesiastical Latin *biblia*, from Greek *(ta) biblia* '(the) books'. The signular *biblion* was originally a diminutive of *biblos* 'papyrus, scroll', of Semitic origin. There is a link with the Eastern Mediterranean port of Byblos, which was a major exporter of papyrus to Greece. Words like **bibliography** [E19th] come from the same source.

bibulous *see* BEER

biceps [M17th] This Latin word means literally 'two-headed', from *bi-* 'two' and *-ceps* (from *caput* 'head'), from the fact that the muscle has two points of attachment. Examples of bicep have been found since the 1970s, suggesting that people are beginning to see the word as a plural (*compare* PEA).

bicycle [M19th] The **velocipede** (literally 'rapid foot') was the early form of bicycle, which is formed from *bi-* 'two' and Greek *kuklos* 'wheel'. The abbreviation **bike** was not long to follow, in the late 19th century. A **tricycle** as a name for a three-wheeled coach drawn by two horses, dates from the 1820s, with the abbreviation **trike** appearing in the 1880s. **Unicycle,** from *uni-* 'one', was first recorded in the US in the 1860s.

bid *see* BEAD

biddy [E17th] **Old biddy** suggests an interfering or annoying elderly woman, but a biddy was originally 'a chicken'; the origin is unknown. The word was probably influenced by the use of biddy in the US for an Irish maidservant, which arose from the pet form of Bridget, and extended as a general derogatory word for a 'woman' in slang use.

bidet [M17th] Originally in both French and English bidet meant 'pony, small horse'—the link was the way that people sat astride both.

bier *see* BEAR

biff *see* FLIRT

big [ME] Like many small words, big appeared from nowhere. It is first recorded in the early Middle Ages meaning 'strong, powerful', and clear examples referring just to size do not emerge until the 16th century. The sense 'elder' as in **big brother** or **big sister** is first found in the 19th century. In George Orwell's novel *Nineteen Eighty-four* the head of state is called Big Brother, and 'Big Brother is watching you' is the caption on posters showing his face. The novel was published in 1949, and very quickly people started using **Big Brother** to refer to any person or organization exercising total control over people's lives. Various other phrases involving big refer to an important or influential person, such as **big cheese**, which first came into use in American slang during the early 1900s. It almost certainly has no connection with food—the word **cheese** here probably comes from Urdu and Persian *cīz*, which just means 'thing'.

bigot [L16th] A bigot first denoted a superstitious religious hypocrite; the