

English Revealed

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Historical Thesaurus of the Oxford English Dictionary

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“Surely one of the most extraordinary books of reference ever compiled.”

- Sir Roy Strong

Oxford University Press is proud to announce the publication of a unique work of scholarship which will open up completely new perspectives on the English language.

Publishing on 22 October 2009, the *Historical Thesaurus of the Oxford English Dictionary (HTOED)* is the first historical thesaurus to be written for any of the world's languages. Conceived and compiled by the English Language Department of the University of Glasgow, and based on the *Oxford English Dictionary*, it is the result of 44 years of scholarly labour. The *HTOED* is a groundbreaking analysis of the historical inventory of English, allowing users to find words connected in meaning throughout the history of the language in a way that has never before been possible.

A magnificent resource for the historical study of English

The English language is constantly evolving, and as the *Historical Thesaurus* charts nearly all words from Old English to the present day, it gives a unique view of how different terms for the same concept have developed over the course of time. At the following section for a *contemptible person*, the colourful terms give an indication of just how inventive people can be when it comes to insulting others. Here is a selection of those included in the *Historical Thesaurus*:

earming OE · wyrmlic OE · hinderling OE-1387 · worm<wurm OE- · wretch<wræcca OE- · harlot a1225–1659 · mix c1275–c1400 · bismar a1300–1535 · villain 1303– · whelp c1330; c1460– · vile c1400–1530 · beast c1400– · fouling c1450 · dogbolt 1465–1690; 1823 (*arch.*) · drivell 1475–1597 · marmoset c1500–1825 · poid 1501 (*Scots*) · shit 1508– · slave 1537–1607; 1780– (*arch.*) · slim 1548–1611 · skitbrains 1553 · grasshopper 1561– · scavenger 1562–1767 · old boss 1566 (*Scots*) · shrub 1566–1690 · rag 1566– · shake-rag 1571–1815 · ketterel a1572 (*Scots*); a1585 (*Scots*) · skybald a1572– (*Scots & northern dial.*) · retract 1575 · mumpsimus 1575–1815 · smatchart c1582–1583; 1846– (*Scots*) · nod c1586 · squib 1586– a1653; 1898– · cittern-head 1588– a1625 · nit 1588–1632; 1941– (*colloq.*) · scabship 1589 · vassal 1589–1820 · gibraltar 1592 · mushroom 1594–1769 (*fig.*) · stock-fish 1596 · rabbit 1597; 1932– · wormling 1598– · viliaco 1599–1630 · dish-wash 1599; c1640 · brock a1600– (*chiefly dial.*) · mustard-token 1600 · stump

1601–1829 · sprat 1601– · cargo 1602 · snotty-nose 1602– · finch-egg 1606 · thrum 1610–1727 · thing 1610– · shack-rag 1611 · shag-rag 1611–1719; 1829– (*dial.*) · fitchcock a1615 · unworthy 1616–1893 · baseling 1618 · shag 1620–1801 · glow-worm 1624–1652 · pilgarlic a1625–1699; 1843– (*dial.*) · snip 1625 · grouse 1633 · son of a worm 1633; 1872 · muckworm a1635–1751 · shab 1637–1851 (*slang*) · polecat a1640–1790 · pettitoes 1644/7–1648 · wormship 1648–1775 · whiffler 1659–1896 · prig 1679–1749 (*slang & colloq.*) · hang-dog 1687– · prigster 1688–1714 · smatchet a1700– (*Scots*) · squinny 1716; 1840 · snool 1718– (*Scots & northern dial.*) · ramscallion 1733; 1855/6 (*dial.*) · reptile 1749– · footer 1753–1825 · hallion/hallyon 1786– (*Scots & northern dial.*) · wonner 1786– (*Scots*) · skite 1790–1850 (*dial.*) · snot 1809– (*dial. & slang*) · mud(-)worm a1814– (*now rare*) · spalpeen 1815– (*Irish*) · stirrah 1816 (*Scots*); 1818 (*Scots*) · jackass 1823; 1870 · beggar 1833– · despicability 1837 · skunk 1841– (*colloq.*) · shake 1846; 1859 (*dial.*) · squirt a1848– (*colloq., orig. US*) · tiger 1849 · white mouse 1850– · sweep 1853– (*slang & dial.*) · scurf 1854 (*slang*) · slob 1861– (*slang*) · shuck 1862– (*chiefly dial. & US*) · trash-bag 1886 (*dial.*) · tinhorn 1887– · whelping 1889 · schmuck 1892– (*slang*) · gutter-bird 1896 · perisher 1896 (*slang*) · skate 1898– · ullage 1901 (*Nautical slang*); 1904 (*Nautical slang*) · tinhorn sport 1906– · streeler 1907 (*Irish*) · zob 1911– (*US slang, rare*)

The *Historical Thesaurus* shows the range of words available to Chaucer (c.1343-1400) would have included **bismer**, **hinderling**, **mix**, and **vile**. Shakespeare (1564-1616) could have chosen from an array of wonderful insults, such as **marmoset**, **snake-rag**, **snotty-nose**, **dishwash**, **nit**, **mushroom** and **cittern-head**. Rabbin Burns could have had a number of Scots words to use in his writings: **skybald**; **snool**; **wonner**; **smatchet**; **hellion**, while Oscar Wilde could have selected, for example, **tinhorn**, **whelping**, **gutter-bird**, **schmuck**, and **perisher**.

We can also see the words which were used only during a certain period in history and which are no longer used in this sense:

wyrmlic	Only found in Old English
earming	Only found in Old English
hinderling	Recorded from Old English to the Middle Ages (1387)
mix	Recorded c1275-c1400
bismer	Recorded a1300-1535
marmoset	Recorded c1500-1825
mumpsimus	Recorded 1575-1815
viliaco	Recorded 1599-1630
thrum	Recorded 1610-1727
muckworm	Recorded a1635-1751
shab	Recorded 1637-1851
whiffler	Recorded 1659-1896

The *Historical Thesaurus* also includes terms from across the globe. Here, in the example of *contemptible person*, we have **lug**; **roach**; **jughead**; **schmendrik**; **schlub**; **schmegeggy**; **lint-head**; **dweeb**; **sleazeball**; **zob**; **shuck**; and **squirt**, all of which originated in the US or North America.

Words lost and gained: measuring the huge impact of social change on our language

The influence of trade and exploration can be seen in many areas of the language. At *root vegetables* we can see that Chaucer would not have known about the **potato** as the vegetable had yet to reach these shores, but he would have been familiar with **beet, radish, neep**, etc. (all Old English in origin and well established by the time he was writing in the Middle Ages). Also, *HTOED* shows that the word **carrot** wasn't known in Chaucer's day – **carrot** comes from French *carotte* and is not recorded until 1533. An earlier name for the carrot was **tank**, which, if you look it up in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, is a word for a wild (rather than cultivated) carrot or wild parsnip, first recorded before 1400, so quite possibly a word Chaucer would have known.

We can also see how certain terms, such as these words for types of *sellers of specific things*, have disappeared from our language: **sutlers** (*sellers of provisions*); **tripe-wives** (listed under *sellers of meat*); **pepsoners** (the Anglo-Norman for *fishmongers*); **pike-mongers, palingmen** (from the Middle Dutch for *dealers of eels*), **floundermen**, and **musselmongers** (*sellers of fish/seafood*); **crockmen** and **disheresses** (*sellers of pots*) are all no longer in use, and yet the *Historical Thesaurus* provides for posterity a fascinating record of our cultural history.

A treasure trove of fascinating insights

- Shakespeare would not have used the word **pink** to describe the colour as this word only entered the language in 1828. Instead he would have used **carnation**.
- Neither the terms **education** nor **democracy** were available to Chaucer.
- Shakespeare missed out on many foods that were introduced into Britain from abroad after his death: **chocolate, pineapple, coffee** and **tea**.
- Under the section for *stupid*, many of the terms show a distinctly negative view of the intelligence of the animal kingdom, with people being compared to everything from insects to birds: **beetle-headed; buzzard-like; puppy-headed; beef-witted; squirrel-headed; steerish; sheepish; asinine; donkeyish; like a stunned mullet**.

How did they say that?

Using the *Historical Thesaurus* we can also see how, at any point in history, people may have used the language. So, for example, how did people call each other *stupid* in a particular era?

In King Alfred's day: **(ge)dwæs; dwæslīc; læthydig; medwis; modigleas; samwis; ungerad; stuntlic; sott**

In William Shakespeare's day: **mossy; buzzard; as dumb as a beetle; dumpish; calvish; dorbellical; grout-headed**

In Jane Austen's day: **numskulled; wittol; borné; muzzy; ram-headed; chuckle-headed; or mud-headed**
In Queen Victoria's day: **like a bump on a log; dolly; dunch; crass; lean-minded;** and even **stoopid**

For scholars, historians, language-lovers, and those who think that finding the right word is of inestimable value, the *Historical Thesaurus of the Oxford English Dictionary* is an embarrassment of riches.

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