

# Recalling some Dialect Words -

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Throughout much of the 18th and 19th centuries, people were much less mobile than they are today. Farm labourers, for example, frequently lived and died in the house where they were born. Such isolation was one factor contributing to their limited vocabulary.

To get around the problem, novel words were invented to serve the needs of specific communities, yet might have remained unknown by anyone living, say, more than 200 miles away. On the whole, these so-called dialect words tended to relate specifically to animals, plants, household effects, farm implements and human behaviour. While an area the size of Ashdown Forest could not claim its own distinct dialect, Commoners, or **Foresters**, throughout the first half of the twentieth century used words seldom heard today. It would of course be regrettable if most of these words, dialect and non-dialect, were forgotten.

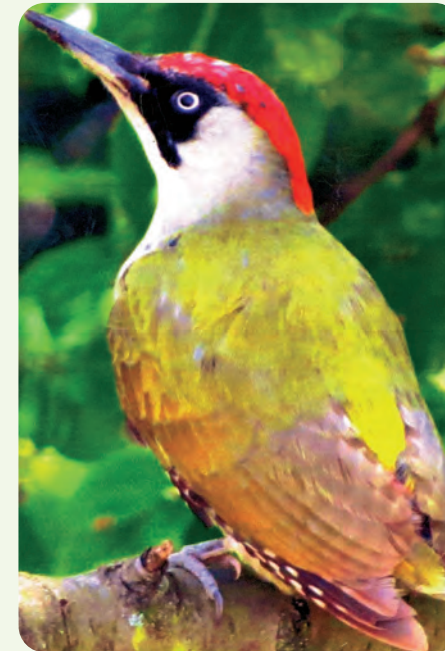
When I was a boy growing up in Nutley, my parents called foxes **mus** (mister) **reynolds**, bears **bruins**, badgers **brocks**, and donkeys **neddies**. A half-grown rabbit was a **jack-rabbit**,



and very occasionally a bat was called a **fluttermouse**. Rarer still were the names **mouldwarp** for a mole, **scug** for a grey squirrel, **kime** for a weasel and **snag** for a snail. Gipsies called the hedgehog **witchy-hotchi**. Among insects, all gnats were **midges**, ants were **ammuts**, cockchafers **May-bugs**, wasps **wapsies**, bumble bees **dumbledores**, dragon flies **adder spears**, and the common ladybird **Bishop Barnaby** or **God Almighty's cow**, possibly alluding to a yellowish milky fluid it produces when threatened. **Daddy longlegs** was the name given to crane flies.

Although many small mammals did not have dialect names, most birds did. Children's stories often featured **Robin Redbreast** or **Jenny** and **Juggy Wren**, while older residents of the Forest might have known the wren as a **cutty**. Blackbirds were **blackies** or **black ouzels**, while song thrushes were **brownbirds**. Missel thrushes, or **greybirds**, which sang a loud and raucous song whenever storm clouds approached, were more commonly called **storm-cocks** or **screechers**. It was Gilbert White who first called the blue tit a **nun**, a name that was commonly used throughout Hampshire and Sussex, where it was also known as a **Billy biter** or **tom-tit**, a shortened form of **tom-titmouse**. I knew the hedge sparrow as a **hedge-pick**. Even though I probably blushed before calling the wheatear a

**whitearse**, that is what other people have called them since the 15th century. Chaffinches were **bachelor birds**, all male colonies being common in winter. The yellow or water wagtail was a **dish-washer**, while its smaller cousin, the pied wagtail, a **dish-wipe** or **dish-lick**. Among larger birds, my paternal grandmother called the nightjar a **goatsucker**, a name based on the mistaken belief that it sucked milk from goats. Moorhens were **dabchicks**, pigeons **culvers**, lapwings **peewits**, seagulls **mews**, herons **jack-hearn**, cormorants **shags** and kestrels **windhovers**. Interestingly the green woodpecker was known as a **yaffle** or **galleybird**. While 'yaffle' is clearly derived from its laughter-like call, its other name is believed to be an abbreviation of gallowsbird. As the bodies of those who had been hanged decomposed, this was one of the first birds to take advantage of rich pickings.



Some plants, both cultivated and those growing in the wild, were also given dialect names. Confusingly, some of these such as 'our Lady's Smock' were applied to flowers of more than one species. When I was a schoolboy, most mums made **bramble jelly** from blackberries. Gooseberries were **goosegogs** and rhubarb was **rhubub**. The yellow and orange flowers of bird's-foot trefoil, known in most parts of the country as butter and eggs, tended to be called **eggs and bacon** in local villages. Its finger-like pods in groups of three to five were known as **ladies' fingers, shoes and stockings, pigs' pettitoes** or **pattens and clogs**.

I called the large white bell-shaped flowers of bindweed or convolvulus **old-lady's bonnet**, while in other parts of the country they were called Lady's smock or old-man's-nightcap. The pale pink spring-flowering herb I knew as **Lady's smock** was also called **milkmaids**, each flower resembling an 18th century milkmaid, who milked cows at country fairs wearing a pink cap with a pink apron over a white dress.

M.J. Leppard, the East Grinstead historian, undertook the arduous task of recording several hundred dialect names that were listed under the heading: "*Dialect Vocabulary of the East Grinstead Area*" in "E.G. Museum Compass", a journal produced by that museum. Using some of the entries from this list, I have chosen roughly 100 words that contributed to the vernacular speech of Commoners during the first half of the 20th century but are less often heard today. In addition, the list contains some non-dialect words that were given a specific local meaning.

**Ackle** (to operate successfully), **anywhen** (at any time), **argify** (to argue), **bad** (ill), **bait** (afternoon snack), **beazled** (worn out),

**blether** (log-winded talk), **bogeyman** (bogey = police; a nose picking), **brakes** (cut bracken), **bricks** (paved path to house), **brishing** (trimming hedge), **bumfrazzled** (confused), **catlicks** (wet kisses), **chachet** (to cough), **chiddles** (chicken/rabbit guts), **chipe** (verbal bullying), **chog** (apple core), **chopper** (billhook), **codlins** (cider apples), **criddle** (abusive slang), **dabster** (expert), **damping** (fine light rain), **dander** (anger), **dang/dannel** (damn), **darnocks** (old/worn working clothes), **diddikai** (gypsy), **dimpsey** (dusk), **dorling** (weakest piglet), **dosset** (small portion), **dreening** (dripping with water), **duffer** (dim person), **dunikin** (earth closet), **durnst** (dare not), **eked** (added to), **estovers** (Commoners' rights), **faggot** (bundled twigs), **fardy** (loving friend), **fiddle-farfer** (time-waster), **gaffer** (old man), **gobbet** (lump), **grummies** (spent tea leaves), **gurt** (big), **hatch** (gate for pedestrians), **hey up!** (look out!), **hobbledehoy** (clumsy youth), **hoick** (to lift up), **hunking** (carrying heavy load), **jiggered** (surprised), **larrup** (to beat), **lights** (lungs), **liversick** (torn skin beside nail), **met** (mate), **midden-privy** (earth closet), **mixen** (manure heap), **moosh** (male stranger), **monkey's birthday** (simultaneous sunshine and rain), **muggins** (oneself), **mugwump** (aloof person), **nibs** (self-important man), **niggardly** (mean), **nohows** (in no way), **pannage** (oak/beechn mast), **peart** (healthy), **pimp** (short log, split into ten to twenty pieces, then tied), **pither** (gritty eye deposit), **plat** (plot of land), **pound** (small enclosure), **prong** (pitchfork), **rake** (thin), **rattlebones** (old/worn out), **rheumatics** (arthritis), **riddle** (sieve), **rimy** (cold and damp), **shuck** (to shell), **skep** (beehive), **skew-whiff** (askew), **skilly** (meat/oat broth), **slob** (thick mud), **slubber** (wet kiss), **snob** (shoemaker), **somewhen** (sometime), **spindleshanks** (tall), **squitty** (insignificant), **stodge** (thick milk pudding), **stook** (stacked sheaves of grain), **strig** (fruit stalk), **surelye** (surely), **swap** (sickle), **swimy** (giddy), **swot** (student), **tackle** (tools/nasty food), **titfer** (hat),



**twtitten** (public footpath between buildings), **tupping** (mating sheep), **tye** (communal field/space), **underconstumbled** (partially understood), **whinny** (cut gorse), **whoop** (hello), **windy** (lacking courage), and **wooding** (cutting trees).

Finally, do you walk on Ashdown Forest or in it? The answer depends largely on whether you are a native of this part of Sussex or grew up outside it. Local residents almost invariably do things – walk, ride, graze sheep, and cut bracken – on the Forest, as they might on any other large expanse of heath. But those who are unfamiliar with this area, supposing that all forests are dominated by a dense canopy of trees, might continue to think that one day they might enjoy walking in it.

I **be** done. **Tat-ta fa** now, and don't forget to say **rabbits\*** as soon as **ya** wake up on the first day of every month.

\*Rabbits in warrens are believed to have been culled on the first day of every month.

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*If you know of any local dialect word not mentioned in this article, the Editor would be pleased to hear from you.*