

EVERYMAN'S
MODERN
PHRASE &
FABLE

GYLES BRANDRETH

Gyles Brandreth

**EVERYMAN'S
MODERN
PHRASE &
FABLE**

J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd, London

Foreword

While this collection of phrases and sayings is described as a 'modern' Phrase and Fable', in it you will find dozens of intriguing expressions dating back hundreds of years, each one with a remarkable origin and still in regular use.

Some phrases have been well-documented through the years. Others remain something of a mystery and we can only guess at their origin. I was particularly eager to unearth a definitive source for the expression the 'bee's knees', but my researches drew a blank and I can offer you nothing more than the somewhat obvious suggestion that the phrase originated because of the nifty way in which bees gather pollen for honey using their knees. Quite how this snippet of apiarists' knowledge came into common usage to describe someone who thinks themselves specially clever I cannot tell you. Could it be even that once upon a time a wag of a wordsmith conjured up the phrase from nowhere simply to ensure that over the years zealous word detectives have wasted hours on a 'wild goose chase' (which, happily, has a less elusive history)?

Other ancient phrases in current use can offer a special perspective on the way our ancestors lived and thought. Take the case of 'pin money', for example; a phrase we use without much thought today when we refer to an insignificant sum of money. Five hundred or so years ago, when the phrase was first recorded, 'pin money' was a far from insignificant sum. In the days before mass production pins were an expensive investment, and only available for sale on a couple of days each year. So it came to pass that every January those husbands who could afford it gave their wives some 'pin money' – and though pins soon became more freely available the phrase stuck and was applied to a sum of money given to a woman for her own personal expenditure.

The other day, with my wife (or 'better half'), I was watching a tennis match on television and remarked that one of the players couldn't 'hold a candle' to his opponent. Imagine now, if you will, a dark 17th-century street through which nocturnal travellers made their way by following servants who carried candle lanterns. This job was considered very menial and such servants were pretty low on the 'pecking order' (another fascinating derivation) but even they managed to get lost from time to time – at which their frustrated masters would declare that they 'couldn't hold a candle' to them.

If candle-holding had its problems, working as a hatter was positively dangerous. Hat-makers were gradually poisoned by the mercuric nitrate they used for working their felt. As a result they became deranged and confused – as 'mad as hatters', in fact.

I must 'speak as I find' and tell you that, in 'my humble opinion', many of the more recent words and phrases that have been included in this book lack the

picturesque qualities of their more ancient counterparts. (That said, perhaps in a century or two etymologists may point to a current word, 'loadsamoney', as being of historical interest for the gloss it casts on British society in the late 1980s). My overriding impression of the contemporary words and phrases that have found their way into this collection is that the majority of them are to do with categorizing and defining people. Take the Yuppie phenomenon, for example. Not long after the archetypal Young Urban Professionals had been identified and named, related groups began to spring up. There were Buppies and Woopies, Swells, and Glams, and foodies and deccies. There was even a category for failed Yuppies, known to demographers as Droppies. No sooner had we revealed the 'bimbo' than we uncovered her 'toy-boy' equivalent, the 'himbo'. And in the United States the 'now generation' includes that bizarre phenomenon, the 'kidult', a young adolescent who, while outwardly a child, has absorbed so much information and so many sophisticated attitudes from television and the media that he or she is, in mind and spirit if not body, an adult. As well as an excess of television, which may turn them into 'couch potatoes', such children may also be in danger of suffering from 'muesli-belt malnutrition', a debilitating condition brought about by a diet based largely on high-fibre health food.

Computers and business have also had a significant influence on the development of our vocabulary. From the 'electronic virus', a bug inserted into computer software which leads to its gradual destruction, to such phrases as 'catching a cold' and 'golden parachute' which hail from the business world, our language inevitably reflects the technical and socio-economic changes of the recent past.

Some concerns have remained consistent over the centuries. The most predictable of these is death. While our ancestors talked with brutal frankness of 'kicking the bucket' (alluding to the way in which pigs were hung up to be killed) or euphemistically of 'going to Abraham's bosom', the newer phrases tend to be more clinical. In American hospitals a patient who defies the best efforts of his doctors is said to have suffered a 'negative patient care outcome' or to have 'flatlined' – this last phrase referring to the fatally flat line shown on a screen monitoring the heart and other vital functions.

If the evidence of recent phrase-making is to be relied on, a peculiarly modern fixation is prejudice – and, more specifically, the need to combat it. Racism and sexism are two obvious and well-established examples, but how about 'ageism' and 'ableism' and 'fattism'? And what about 'heightism' – defined as prejudicial treatment of a person on the grounds of their height? My favourite-ism is 'alphabetism', discrimination, believe it or not, against someone on the grounds of the initial letter of their surname. As a privileged B who never has to wait long in alphabetically-arranged lines and who is always towards the top of the list, I have discovered a new sympathy for all those Walkers, Youngs and Zimmermans who are waiting for their turn. Despite having 'turned over a new leaf' with this recent conversion to a non-alphabetist attitude to life, in the pages that follow I have decided to be somewhat 'old hat' and give you the words and phrases in traditional 'apple-pie order', running all too predictably from A to Z. To those of you who spot my errors of omission and commission, I say 'Please pardon by BOOBS.' To the gentleman reader, I say 'Right on, man'; and to the ladies, 'wham, bang, thank you, ma'am'. To one and all, whether kidult or Crumbly, 'common or garden punter' or 'man on the Clapham omnibus', I say 'ENJOY!'

A

A1 means first-rate, the very best, and derives from the rating given to ships in *Lloyd's Register of British and Foreign Shipping*, where the letters denoted the state of the ship itself and the figures the state of the ship's fittings – A1 therefore being the mark of the best. The expression was used at Lloyd's at least from the 1770s. Charles Dickens was the first person to use it in reference to people. In *The Pickwick Papers* Sam Weller describes a character as a 'first-rater'. 'A1', is the response of Mr Roker.

AC/DC. Bisexual, practising both homosexual and heterosexual intercourse – by analogy with electrical devices which are capable of operating with either type of electric current. *See also* AMBIDEXTROUS and SWING BOTH WAYS.

ADA. A computer programming language – the standard language adopted by the US Department of Defense – named after Ada Augusta, Countess Lovelace, who was Lord Byron's daughter and, as the colleague of Charles Babbage, was the first female computer scientist.

A.I.D. Artificial Insemination by Donor. A process used by women and couples in which the man is unable to father a child, whereby the woman is artificially impregnated with donated sperm, often from a sperm bank. Not to be confused with AIDS.

à la carte. A menu of varied dishes

offered in a restaurant, each of them prepared to order. It is French for 'according to the menu card' and is the opposite of the **table d'hôte** menu, translated as 'the table of the host'. The table d'hôte menu consists of a limited selection of dishes, mostly prepared in advance. Dining à la carte is more expensive. Recently the expression has been used in the names of a number of businesses keen to promote the image of personal attention and unique results. Among other things, one can now buy cosmetics, clothing and interior decoration and hairdressing services à la carte, i.e. to suit individual requirements. Such services are not cheap.

A-O.K. means 'first-class', 'great', 'better than O.K.'. It is widely believed to have originated from the American astronaut Alan Shepard during the first suborbital space flight (1961). In fact Shepard simply said 'O.K.', but did so with so much zest that the NASA public relations officer heard it as A-O.K. and reported it as such. Even though this expression came into being by accident, it was subsequently consciously cultivated by Shepard's fellow astronauts and others involved in the space programme. *See also* BAD, CRUCIAL, FAB.

ableism. Discrimination against the disabled and in favour of the able-bodied, specifically in the workplace.

Coined in the 1980s by analogy with racism, SEXISM etc, it is said to have originated in America and, according to *The Daily Telegraph*, was first used in Britain in a press release issued by London's Haringey Council. Haringey having the reputation of being a LOONY LEFT borough, both the word ableism and the concept behind it were greeted with ridicule. *See also* AGEISM.

Abominable Snowman. Also known as the YETI, an elusive (some would say mythical) hairy man-like creature living among the snowy peaks of the Himalayas. The term came into popular use following Eric Shipton's Everest Expedition of 1951. Shipton, with his companions Michael Ward and Sen Tensing, discovered tracks in the snow at an altitude of 18,000 feet. The tracks, of a creature that walked like a man and must have been about eight feet tall, continued for a mile and then disappeared in some ice. Since then many other Himalayan explorers have discovered similar tracks. In 1970 the well-known British mountaineer Don Whillans, after photographing similar tracks in the mountains of Nepal, saw in the bright moonlight a creature like an ape moving on all fours. There are also many reports from natives of the area concerning a race of giant wild men. *See also* BIGFOOT.

above-board, meaning honest, is an expression originally used in 16th-century gambling circles. In an attempt to prevent cheating and promote an honest game, card players were encouraged to keep their hands above the table, or board, at which they played. Those whose hands strayed **under the table** were suspected of dishonestly swapping their cards. The word **underhand** may also have originated in this card-playing setting; it has been suggested

that it refers to the habit of 'palming' a playing card that has been hidden on the underside of the hand.

above the line is a term used in the business world to describe marketing activity through the mass media. This includes advertising on television, in the Press and on posters. **Below the line** advertising is, in contrast, selective marketing activity through on-pack sales promotions and direct mail. In the media world these phrases have a different meaning. Above the line is used to describe the indispensable creative force behind a film, TV advert or production including directors, producers, writers and stars. Below the line is used to refer to the dispensable personnel who work on such projects – hairdressers, lighting technicians etc, all of whom can be easily replaced.

abracadabra. A magical charm believed to be made up of the Hebrew initials for the words Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The earliest reference to it occurs in the second century AD, in the writings of Severus Sammonicus who used it as a charm against malaria. It survives today as a popular incantation for those doing magic tricks.

abuse. A 1980s vogue word much abused by sociologists to describe various social problems – e.g. alcohol abuse (drunkenness), solvent abuse (glue-sniffing), drug abuse, child abuse, etc.

Acapulco gold. The name given to marijuana of a very high quality, which is grown near Acapulco in Mexico, and has leaves of a golden colour. *See also* GRASS, POT, REEFER.

accidentally on purpose. Something that is done deliberately, or even maliciously, but in such a way that it appears to be accidental. This expression, which seems thoroughly

modern, in fact dates back to the 1880s.

according to Hoyle. Following the rules or established procedures; in the usual or correct way. Edmond Hoyle wrote *A Short Treatise on the Game of Whist* which was published in 1742. This book was very popular and became established as the absolute authority on the rules of the game. The name of the author thus became synonymous with the correct procedure to be followed, not just in the game of whist, but in any field of activity.

ace. (1) A unit or single point, as in cards, dice, dominoes, etc. – derived from the Latin word *as*, meaning 'unity'. (2) During World War I the French word *as*, applied to an airman who had shot down ten or more enemy aircraft, was imported into English as ace. Thence it came to be applied to any expert or someone of distinguished achievement in any field of activity. (3) In the early 1980s ace was a vogue word used by young people to express approval – in the long tradition of words like 'super', 'smashing', 'fab', 'brill', etc.

ace in the hole. Something important or of special effectiveness – a clever stratagem or argument, for example – that is not revealed and is kept in reserve for use when the time is right to bring success or victory. The expression comes from the game of stud poker. In this game, five cards are dealt to each player, the first round of cards being dealt face down and the remainder face up. So each player's hand consists of four cards visible to his opponents plus one – the 'hole' card – which he alone sees. If a player has one or more exposed aces plus an 'ace in the hole' he has a hand that is hard to beat.

Achilles' heel. One's only vulnerable spot. In Greek mythology Thetis, chief of the Nereids or sea-nymphs,

in order to make her infant son Achilles invulnerable, took him by the heel and dipped him in the river Styx. The heel by which she held him, however, was untouched by the water, and so remained liable to injury. Later, when Achilles was fighting in the Trojan War, his mortal enemy Paris learned of this weak spot and deliberately aimed an arrow at Achilles' unprotected heel, thus causing his death.

acid. A term for the hallucinogenic drug LSD (lysergic acid diethylamide) which had a great vogue in the late 1960s.

acidfreak or acidhead. One who uses LSD habitually.

acid pad. A place, particularly someone's home, where LSD is used.

acid rock. A form of rock music, played very loudly, and often accompanied by weird lighting effects to suggest the hallucinatory effects of LSD. *See also* PSYCHEDELIC.

acid test. (1) A test that proves the worth, genuineness or reliability of something beyond all doubt. The phrase goes back to the Middle Ages when an object that might or might not be made of gold was tested by applying acid to it. Gold, the 'royal metal', is not affected by most acids but does react to 'aqua regia' – a mixture of concentrated nitric and hydrochloric acids. (2) In the 1960s in America an acid test was a party at which ACID (LSD) was added to the food or drink. The verb phrase 'to acid test' meant to provide PSYCHEDELIC effects such as strobe lighting. (3) In business jargon, the acid test is a measure of business solvency, involving the ratio of cash to liabilities.

acid – to put the acid on someone. An Australian slang phrase meaning to put pressure on someone for a loan or favour, particularly to do so in such a way as to yield immediate results.

actress – as the actress said to the bishop is an innuendo added after a perfectly ordinary statement to draw attention to its sexual double meaning. 'Actress' is here used as euphemism for 'prostitute' or **HOOKER**. Such innocent remarks as, 'It's too big to fit in,' or 'You can't have it both ways at once,' could be followed by, 'As the actress said to the bishop.' Although the phrase was first in recorded use in RAF circles in the 1940s it is said to be Edwardian in origin.

actressocracy is a derogatory term applied to those female members of the aristocracy who were once actresses, models or starlets and who have been ennobled only by virtue of marriage. Members of the actressocracy, the term implies, are not real aristocrats.

Adam's Ale (or, in Scotland, **Adam's Wine**) is a fanciful term for water as a beverage.

Adam's Apple. The protuberance of the thyroid cartilage in the front of the throat. The name derives from the legend that when Adam ate the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden a piece of the fruit stuck in his throat.

adult. In some modern contexts, a euphemism for 'obscene' or 'pornographic' – e.g. 'adult books', 'adult movies', 'adult entertainment'.

adultify, to. This new verb, which originated in the USA, describes the way in which, in recent years, the period of childhood has been steadily reduced. Today's children are adultified by exposure to television and the media and develop a degree of worldliness at an increasingly early age. *See also* **KIDULT**.

advertorial. Advertising material in a newspaper that is designed to resemble editorial matter. The name is a portmanteau word, combining 'advertisement' and 'editorial'.

aerial pingpong. An Australian term

for Australian Rules football in which, unlike the European version of the game, high leaps and kicks feature strongly. Its first recorded use was in 1965.

aerobic is a scientific term used to describe those organisms or tissues which require free oxygen for respiration. According to sports scientists, aerobic exercise is useful in developing the heart muscles and lungs and improving the efficiency of the body's oxygen take-up. Jogging, swimming and cycling are said to be effective aerobic exercise if effort is maintained for a period of thirty minutes without a break. Other sports such as tennis, football and squash, though physically demanding, do not have the same beneficial aerobic effect. Aerobics is a shortened version of 'aerobic exercises,' part of the diet and exercise craze that swept the world during the 1980s. Popularised by the actress Jane Fonda, whose workout videos and books sold in their millions, it is a form of strenuous non-stop exercise to music practised mainly by women. The craze waned after 1986 with reports of injuries to the feet and shins and rumours that Miss Fonda, the aerobics guru, was herself suffering from heart problems.

Affluent Society, The. This was the title of a book published in 1958 by John Kenneth Galbraith, a Canadian political economist. In this book, which reached a wide readership, Galbraith commented on the contrast between 'private affluence and public squalor' in Western industrial democracies. The term passed into general usage as an encapsulated criticism of modern society.

affluenza. An American term coined by psychologists to describe the sometimes bizarre and disturbing changes that occur in an individual's personality as a result of their tremendous wealth.

Afro-Saxon. A black person considered by other blacks to be servile to whites or to be too anxious to emulate or adopt the standards of white society – in other words, a modern synonym for **UNCLE TOM**.

aftermath. Consequences – particularly, in current usage, the consequences of some destructive action. The original meaning, and one still in use in some rural areas, is ‘a second crop of hay after one crop has already been cut in the same season’. *Math* comes from an old Teutonic root, meaning ‘a mowing’. An alternative form of the word, in its agricultural sense, is ‘lattermath’.

ageism. Discrimination against an individual on the grounds of age. Coined by Robert Butler, M.D., while he was director of the Institute of Aging, using analogy with racism and **SEXISM**. Ageism is most often applied to discrimination against those of advanced age, particularly in the job market. An extreme example occurred in 1986 when it was revealed that at its factory in Wales the Japanese company Hitachi was attempting to arrange early retirement for workers over the age of thirty-five. *See also* **ABLEISM**.

agonizing reappraisal. This popular cliché originated in a speech made at a NATO meeting in December 1954 by US Secretary of State John Foster Dulles.

ahead of the game. A common cliché in modern American English, it means simply ‘in a position of advantage; in a winning position’.

Aids. An acronym for Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (or Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome as it should more accurately be called.) A serious and often fatal disease that leads to the breakdown of the body’s auto-immune system. Aids was first properly recognised in Africa in 1980 and was later found to

have spread to New York and San Francisco, where its prevalence among the gay community led to the nickname ‘the gay plague’. Further research showed that the disease was being transmitted in blood and other body fluids, and that while haemophiliacs and intravenous drug users were among those most at risk, heterosexual sex with an infected person was also dangerous. In 1986–7 there were widespread Aids education campaigns throughout Europe and America aimed at educating people about what has been called ‘the greatest threat to human life since the Black Death.’ Nowhere was the campaign more hard-hitting than in Britain, where the word **CONDOM** has subsequently achieved a new respectability. As yet there is no cure for the disease, though medical research suggests that it may be caused by a virus.

Aids terrorist. A person infected with the Aids virus who knowingly has unprotected sex with the intention of infecting their partners.

album. This word comes from the neuter form of the Latin adjective meaning ‘white’. Among the Romans an album was a white tablet on which edicts and other public notices were recorded. In English, it came to mean a book containing blank pages in which things were to be inserted – a stamp album, photograph album, autograph album, etc. Later it came to mean a book-like folder containing two or more gramophone records. Later still it came to be used of any long-playing gramophone record (earlier called an L.P.) as opposed to a **single** which contains only one song or musical track on each side.

alibi. A Latin word simply meaning ‘elsewhere’. It came to be used as a legal term for a defence by an accused person that he was elsewhere at the time of the offence with which he is

charged. From this legal usage, it came into colloquial use meaning loosely any excuse or pretext.

Alice blue. The blue-grey shade named after Alice Roosevelt, daughter of President Theodore Roosevelt. Her fondness for this colour was celebrated in a popular song of the day, 'Alice Blue Gown', and brought the phrase into common use.

all chiefs and no Indians. A catch phrase used of a business or other organisation in which there are perceived to be too many people wanting to give orders and not enough people to do the actual work. The phrase is common in Britain and America, but the first recorded use is from Australia – it dates from around 1940.

All my eye and Betty Martin. This phrase, which means simply 'nonsense', is a bone of contention among etymologists. One account of the origin of this phrase, staunchly defended by some, ridiculed by others, is that it originated when a British sailor visited a church in Italy and overheard a beggar offering a prayer to St Martin beginning with the words 'O mihi, beate Martine' ('O grant me, blessed Martin') which sounded to the sailor like the nonsensical 'All my eye and Betty Martin'. Another improbable theory is that the phrase derives from 'O mihi, Britomartis', Britomartis being the name of a Cretan goddess associated with the sun worship of the Phoenicians who had trading links with ancient Cornwall. Variations of this phrase have been common in England since about 1770. Eric Partridge, in his *Dictionary of Catch Phrases*, is of the opinion that Betty Martin was a 'character' in the London of the 1770s, who left her mark on history only in this phrase.

all systems go is the phrase used by technicians and scientists at Cape Canaveral to describe the state of

readiness of a rocket prior to launching. It was first used in the 1960s and came into popular use when the launches were broadcast on television. It is often used humorously, indicating a readiness to undertake some minor task. *See also* A-O.K.

allergy. An abnormally sensitive reaction to something. When used as a medical term it refers to the physical sensitivity of some people to certain foods, fabrics, dust, pollen or other substances. Hay fever is one of the most common allergies. Although medically recognised since the First World War, growing interest in environmental issues and the boom in alternative medicine brought allergies into fashion in the 1970s and 80s. In popular usage the word has come simply to mean an aversion to something. For example, 'Richard is allergic to exams.'

almighty dollar, The. This phrase may refer to the power of money to rule people's actions – or, in other contexts, to the ability of the USA to use its financial strength to influence world events. The phrase was first used by Washington Irving in his sketch *Wolfert's Roost, Creole Village* in 1837: 'The almighty dollar, that great object of universal devotion throughout our land . . .', although the phrase 'almighty gold' had been used by Ben Jonson in a similar sense almost two hundred years earlier.

alphabetism. Coined originally as a parody of other 'isms', alphabetism – discrimination on the grounds of the first letter of one's surname – has turned out to have a surprisingly serious side. The Atkinsons, Brewers and Collins' of the world have, it seems, an unfair advantage over the Unwins, Vernons, Walkers and Youngs. The As, Bs and Cs are always at the top of the list, the first to be dealt with in queues that have been organised by alphabet, the first

to be called to interviews or receive announcements and the first in telephone and address books; while the Us, Vs, Ws and Ys (not to mention the Xs and Zs) suffer the psychological disadvantage of always coming last. Whether their cause will be taken up by the LOONY LEFT remains to be seen, but the effects of alphabetism are already being studied by academics who have coined their own vocabulary to describe the alphabetical position of names. Thus those whose surnames begin with the letters A–F and U–Z are known as extremilexics, those beginning A–M are summilexics, while N–Z are fundilexics and G–T are medilexics. *See also* ABLEISM, AGEISM, SEXISM etc.

Alpha man. The idealised, fantasy male found in fiction but never in real life. The phrase was invented by psychologists to describe the classic romantic heroes of books such as *Pride and Prejudice*, *Jane Eyre* and *Gone With the Wind*. The Alpha man is by definition more attractive, more fascinating and more attuned to the female psyche than any real man could ever be.

also-ran. A loser, a competitor who didn't come close to winning the contest. It originated in the world of horse-racing, where racing results listed the first three horses past the post in order and then, under the heading Also-ran, mentioned the number of other competitors in the race. In America in 1904 it was used in a political context for the first time and since then has come into popular use to describe failed politicians, job candidates, sportsmen and anyone else who doesn't make the grade.

alternative. A vogue word used to describe anything novel, unconventional, fashionable or faddy – e.g. alternative lifestyle, alternative comedy, alternative diet, alternative religions.

Amazon. In Greek mythology, the Amazons were a race of female warriors, located variously in Scythia, Asia or Africa. They had their right breasts burnt off or cut off in order to make it easier to draw a bow. In Greek the word Amazon means 'without a breast'. In current usage, the word is used of a female soldier or a strong, vigorous or manlike woman. The river Amazon in South America was so called because the early Spanish explorers who discovered it claimed to have seen a race of female warriors in the region.

ambidextrous. As well as its traditional meaning of a person who is able to use both right and left hands with equal dexterity, it is also a modern euphemism for 'bisexual' – one who is sexually attracted to both men and women. This has in turn led to the punning variation ambisextrous. *See also* AC/DC.

ambulance chaser. The phrase originated in the USA in the late 1880s when unscrupulous lawyers started following ambulances from the scene of accidents in the hope of persuading the victims to let them represent them in a case for damages. They are still in action today. After the Union Carbide chemical factory disaster in Bhopal, India in December 1984 it was reported that a number of American lawyers had flown to India. Their intention was to persuade victims to sue Union Carbide through the American courts where they could expect to receive massive damages – and where the lawyers could rake-off a lucrative percentage of the award.

Amen corner. An American phrase referring to any group of devoted followers or fervent believers. The term derives from the custom in some churches of placing a bench for the deacons in a corner at the front of the congregation near the pulpit,

from which corner fervent cries of 'Amen' would be elicited by the preacher.

amok or amuck. In a frenzy – especially in the phrase 'to run amok' meaning to rush about in a murderous frenzy. The origin is the Malay word *amok* meaning 'frenzied'. See also **BERSERK**.

anathema. In current usage, anything rejected as hateful or obnoxious. This word has an interesting history. In the original Greek it means 'an offering to the gods'. It later came to mean an evil offering, an execration or curse, and in the Catholic and Calvinistic Churches it was a solemn ecclesiastical denunciation involving excommunication and damnation.

And now for something completely different. This catch phrase, used with humorous intent to introduce a change of topic, originated with the BBC television series *Monty Python's Flying Circus*, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, in which it was used as a link between comedy sketches. For another catch phrase from the same series, see **NUDGE NUDGE, WINK WINK**.

Andrew, The. The British Royal Navy has become known as 'The Andrew' since the mid-1800s. Before that it was more specifically nicknamed The Andrew Miller in memory of an infamous press-gang leader who rounded up many a reluctant sailor to join the fleet.

Andromeda strain. Any strain of micro-organism, previously unknown to scientists, which could have catastrophic effects if disseminated. The expression comes from the title of a novel by American author Michael Crichton about a deadly new type of bacteria introduced into the environment by a space probe returning to earth.

angel. In the theatre world an angel is

the name given to those who put the money up to finance the production of a play. It is probably derived from the phrase 'guardian angel'.

angel dust. A narcotic – the powdered form of PCP (phencyclidine) which is either sniffed or mixed with marijuana and smoked. The phrase is also sometimes used for a form of synthetic heroin.

angel – to write like an angel. See under **WRITE**.

angels on horseback. A dish consisting of oysters rolled in bacon, cooked on skewers, and served on toast. The name, which dates from the early 20th century, is a straight translation of the French *anges à cheval* – and doubtless refers to the 'heavenly' taste of this dish.

Angry Brigade, The. Name used by a radical group responsible for a number of bomb and firearm attacks in London in the early 1970s.

angry young man. A young man outspoken in his disgust at the social order and what his elders have made of it. The archetype was the character Jimmy Porter in John Osborne's 1956 play *Look Back In Anger*. The phrase did not occur in the play, but was first used in 1957 by a reporter in *The Daily Telegraph* to describe Osborne. It soon came into general use, often applied to a group of young writers of the time, several of them from provincial and working-class or lower middle-class backgrounds, who criticised or satirised the Establishment – writers such as John Wain, Colin Wilson and Kingsley Amis.

Annie Oakley. In America, any complimentary ticket or pass. Annie Oakley was the stage-name of Ohio-born Phoebe Annie Oakley Mozee (1860–1926). She was an expert markswoman, and toured in the 1880s and 1890s with the Wild West Show of William F. Cody, better known as Buffalo Bill. One of her

famous feats of marksmanship was to toss a playing card (usually the five of hearts) into the air and shoot holes through all of its pips. The card thus ended up looking like a much-punched theatre ticket. The term was first used by circus performers to refer to their punched meal tickets, and then passed into general usage to refer to free railroad and press passes and subsequently to any free ticket or pass.

antimacassar. When fashionable Victorian gentlemen adopted the habit of dressing their hair with Macassar oil, originally imported from Makassar in Indonesia, Victorian housewives responded with antimacassars. These were pieces of washable fabric, often embroidered or decorated with lace, that were pinned to the backs of armchairs to protect the upholstery from being stained by the Macassar oil. They remained an essential part of drawing-room furnishings long after the disappearance of the hair oil for which they were originally named. In view of the latest fashion for slicked-back hairstyles, they may well be due for a revival.

antsy. Probably derived from the earlier phrase 'to have ants in one's pants', this expression originated in the USA in the late 1960s and means 'restless', 'disturbed', 'jittery' or 'nervous' – or, in some contexts, it may mean 'lustful' or 'sexually aroused'.

anything that can go wrong, will go wrong. Depending on where you come from this expression is known either as Murphy's Law (named, presumably after some inept person of that name) or Sod's Law. The phrase began life in scientific and engineering circles but has spread into common use among pessimists in all spheres.

apartheid. From the Afrikaaner word

for 'apartness', apartheid is the official system of racial segregation maintained in South Africa for the purpose of preserving white supremacy. Policies have included the prohibition of mixed marriages, the creation of separate black townships and tribal homelands, the compulsory teaching of Afrikaans in African schools and the notorious 'pass laws', by which freedom of movement around the country was curtailed for blacks. Apartheid is, appropriately, correctly pronounced 'apart-hate'.

apparatchik. A staff member, aide or worker in a bureaucratic or political organisation – originally a Russian word meaning a Communist Party bureaucrat as distinct from an ordinary Party member.

apple of one's eye. Anything or anyone cherished and protected. Originally, the apple of the eye was the pupil and was so called because it was supposed to be a solid spherical object like an apple. Because it is an indispensable part and essential for sight, the apple of one's eye came to have its figurative meaning.

apple-pie bed. A bed in which, as a practical joke, the bottom sheet is doubled over so that the person using the bed cannot stretch out his legs in the normal way. The phrase is said to be a corruption of the French *nappe pliée* meaning 'a folded sheet'.

apple-pie order. Perfect order, with everything in its right place. The origin of the phrase is uncertain. It has been suggested that the origin is the French *nappes pliées* – 'folded linen' – compare apple-pie bed above. Other theories are that it comes from the old English phrase 'cap-à-pie' which came from the French and means 'from head to foot'; that it comes from 'alpha beta order'; or that it simply originated in the meticulous and methodical way in which New England housewives

made their apple pies, with perfectly crimped edges to the crust. I think we have to agree with the Oxford English Dictionary that the origin of the phrase is uncertain.

applesauce. An American expression, meaning nonsense, lies, exaggeration, pretentious talk or insincere flattery. The term originated in the early 1900s and derives from the custom of boarding-house keepers serving large portions of cheap apple sauce with meals, to make up for the lack of choicer (and more expensive) food.

Après moi le déluge is translated as 'After me the deluge', meaning 'I don't care what happens when I'm dead'. The phrase originated in a letter from Madame de Pompadour to Louis XV of France in which she wrote '*Après nous le déluge*', ('After us the deluge'). In her opinion, after Louis' reign, the existing order would collapse – as it did when Louis XVI was overthrown during the French Revolution.

Archer, London slang for a sum of £2,000, was named after Jeffrey Archer, novelist, playwright and one-time deputy chairman of the Conservative Party, who resigned from this position after being accused of paying a prostitute £2,000. Despite the fact that Mr Archer subsequently won a libel action against his accusers and received record damages in the process, his alleged indiscretion lives on in the English language.

Are you sitting comfortably? A jocular catch phrase used to introduce a speech or story. The full phrase is 'Are you sitting comfortably? Then I'll begin'. These words were invariably used to introduce the story that was a regular feature of the BBC children's radio programme *Listen With Mother* which began in January 1950. The phrase quickly passed into popular usage and is still current.

Armageddon is the name given in the Apocalypse (Revelations xvi, 14–16) to the site of the final battle on Judgement Day between the forces of good and evil. The name comes from the Hebrew *har megiddon*, 'mountain of Megiddon', near Samaria in Israel, which has been the scene of several real battles from pre-Christian times to World War I. In modern use, Armageddon is often used to refer to the prospect of a nuclear conflict which will annihilate all human life on earth.

Arthur or Martha. In Australian slang, 'not to know whether one is Arthur or Martha' means to be in a state of confusion.

artificial intelligence. Also known as A I, this is a computer term for programs that will enable machines to perform tasks such as understanding language, translating and communicating with people. For this the machines will need, to a certain extent, to 'think' for themselves and it is this capacity for thought that is described as 'artificial intelligence'. See also FIFTH GENERATION.

Ashes, The. A mythical prize contended for in cricket Test Matches between England and Australia. The phrase originated in 1882 when an English cricket team was beaten by Australia. *The Sporting Times* published a humorous obituary for English cricket, which included the words 'The body will be cremated and the ashes taken to Australia'. In the following year, however, England won and some Melbourne ladies presented the victorious English team with an urn containing the ashes of the stumps and bails. This urn was retained by the MCC at Lord's cricket ground – and it remains there still, even when Australia win a Test Match and 'regain The Ashes'.

aspro. Australian academic slang for

'associate professor' – a pun on the brand-name of a form of aspirin.

assassin. The original assassins were a sect of Muslim fanatics founded in Persia in the 11th century by Hassan ben Sabbah, who was known as the Old Man of the Mountain. They sought to dominate the Islamic world by a campaign of terrorism which spread through Persia and Iraq to Syria, until their reign of terror was ended in 1273. Their Arabic name was *hashishin*, derived from their habit of dosing themselves with hashish in preparation for their murderous attacks. An assassin, nowadays, is one who murders by surprise or secretly for reward or for political reasons, the victim usually being someone important such as a political leader. Assassination is regarded as a legitimate expression of dissent by many modern terrorists and extremist political groups.

assertiveness training is a form of training aimed at teaching people to act and express themselves with assertion, i.e. neither aggressively nor passively, but with straightforward confidence. Over the last decade it has become increasingly popular among women, with the result that it has been attacked by MALE CHAUVINIST PIGS who see it merely as a means of justifying female bossiness.

at sixes and sevens, meaning to be in a state of confusion, arose from a dispute between two of the great livery companies in medieval London, the Merchant Taylors and the Skinners. Both companies received their charters within a few days of each other in 1327, and because of this there was uncertainty about which of them should be sixth and which seventh in the order of precedence. The dispute lasted more than 150 years, during which time there were numerous fights and battles in which lives were

lost. Eventually on 10 April 1484 the Mayor, Sir Robert Billesden, ended the conflict by deciding that the two companies should alternate between sixth and seventh places annually, and that each company should entertain the other at dinner each year. This tradition still holds and the sixth and seventh positions in the order of precedence are exchanged annually on Easter Sunday.

athlete's foot. In 1928 a copywriter was set the task of creating a catchy advertisement for a product called Absorbine Jr. This remedy was used for treating the unbearable itch of ringworm, which usually affected the skin of the feet and toes. Reasoning that this condition was often caught in the gym or the changing-room at sports venues, he coined the euphemism 'athlete's foot', which gave a glamorous image to a most unglamorous problem. The name caught on immediately and has been in use ever since.

-athon or -thon. A suffix, said to derive from 'marathon' and coined in the USA in the 1930s, indicating a feat of endurance. Such events are most often associated with raising money for charity. Examples of its use include telethon, swimathon and readathon.

Atlantic Charter. The name given to a declaration of war aims agreed between Roosevelt and Churchill in 1941. The phrase has since been revived from time to time to describe any agreement between the United States and its European allies.

Auld lang syne. Long ago; old times, particularly times remembered with fondness; old or long-established friendships. The literal meaning of this Scottish phrase is 'old long since'.

Auld Reekie. A nickname of Edinburgh old town, so called because it usually appeared to be covered by a cloud of 'reek' or smoke.

Aunt Tom

Aunt Tom. A woman who does not agree with or support the Feminist movement. This phrase is obviously derived by analogy from **UNCLE TOM**.

Auntie. Nickname, in Britain, of the British Broadcasting Corporation or, in Australia, of the Australian Broadcasting Commission.

Australian salute. A wave of the hand in front of the face to brush away flies – a common gesture in parts of Australia where insects are a great nuisance.

awshucksness. A lovely American word meaning modesty or bashfulness.

axel. A type of jumping movement in ice-skating. The term comes from the name of a Norwegian ice-skater Axel Paulsen (1855–1938).

Aztec two-step. Diarrhoea, especially as a result of eating foreign food – traditionally suffered by visitors to Mexico. Also known as **Montezuma's revenge**. The Mexicans themselves call the affliction *turista*. Various names are given to the same affliction suffered when visiting different countries – e.g. **Delhi belly**, **Hong Kong dog**.

B

B.O. stands for body odour – or, more specifically, bad body odour. It was first used in radio advertisements for Lifebuoy Health Soap in 1933.

baby boomer. A person born in the first ten years after World War II, when there was a rise in the birth-rate – a baby boom.

back-hander (1) The traditional shortened version of a back-handed compliment, meaning a badly-phrased compliment that sounds like criticism. This may be derived from the basic meaning of back-hand, a blow with the back of the hand, as in tennis; a back-handed compliment is an unorthodox blow that turns out not to be a blow after all. (2) Back-hander is also used for a bribe or payment made to obtain a service from, for example, a corrupt official. Used in this sense its meaning is probably derived from the way such a bribe is passed, with the money concealed in the palm and the back of the hand offered publicly to the individual accepting the bribe. *See also* UNDERHAND under ABOVE-BOARD.

back-seat driver. A car passenger who issues the driver with unwanted advice from the back seat.

back to square one means starting over; doing something again from the beginning because the previous attempt has failed. According to some authorities, this phrase derives from the early days of radio commentaries on football matches. To

make the commentary easier to follow, a diagram of the pitch, divided into numbered squares, would be printed in the *Radio Times*, and the commentator would refer to these numbered squares. It seems much more likely, however, that the phrase originally had reference to the game of hopscotch or to games such as Snakes and Ladders which are played on boards with numbered squares, and in which an unlucky fall of the dice can take one back to the beginning – literally back to square one.

backlist is an expression used in publishing and marketing worlds to describe basic items that sell regularly throughout the year, year in and year out, without being affected by fashion or season.

backroom boys. People who work ‘behind the scenes’, particularly those engaged in research work. The phrase arose as a result of a speech made in 1941 by Lord Beaverbrook, Britain’s Minister for Aircraft Production during World War II. Referring to the Research Department of the Air Ministry, he said, ‘To whom must praise be given? I will tell you. It is the boys in the back room. They do not sit in the limelight, but they are the men who do the work’.

backwards at coming forward. Someone who is backwards at coming forward is shy and