

Some Variations in our Common Language

There are a number of common Oxford expressions not much used in the outside world (some are used throughout Britain but are not in common use in North America.)

Afters: Dessert (working class); the middle class call dessert "dessert"; the upper-middle class call it "sweet" and the upper class call it "pudding"

Anorak: Parka, ski jacket

Barbour jacket: Oiled, rainproof overcoat

Bangers and mash: Sausage and mashed potatoes

Battels: College bills presented at the end of term (for meals, clubs dues, etc.)

Blades: Oars awarded for winning boat races and displayed over fireplaces

Bitter: Smooth, dark beer

Bloke: Guy ("guy" is more common in Scotland)

Blue: An award for playing against Cambridge

Bog: Rest room

Boot: Trunk (of car)

Bonnet: Hood (of car)

Braces: Suspenders

Brill: From "brilliant" – Great

Bubble and squeak: Fried mashed potatoes and cabbage

Bulldog: In America, campus police - They wear dark suits and bowler hats.

Bump: Ramming a boat on the river

Bursar: College officer who handles finances, housing, and administration

Carfax: The centre of Oxford – The Norman tower at the corner of High Street and the Cornmarket. It means "Four Corners" in Norman French.

Chemist: Pharmacy, drugstore

Cherwell: Pronounced "Charwell" - One of the two rivers of Oxford; also the student newspaper

Chips: French fries (unfortunately a common food in Oxford)

The City: The financial center of London

Come Up: To arrive in Oxford (as a student)

Comprehensive school: State school

Constable: Police officer

Council housing: Low-income housing administered by local government

Crisps: Potato chips

Dean: In Oxford a Dean is usually a Dean of Students, in charge of discipline. The Head (master) of Christ Church is called the Dean. This college is also known as The House (Old English for Church) and the fellows are called Students.

Dear: Expensive

Dicey: Iffy, problematic – a common expression

Digs: A house or flat outside a college shared by students

Don: An Oxford or Cambridge teacher. All teachers are dons (from the Latin for "teacher"). Professors are those very senior scholars who hold chairs in the university, there is usually only one Professor in each subject; they "lead" their "departments" (there are no departments) and rarely teach. Most of the teaching is done by tutors, who may be Fellows of their colleges (members of the governing boards, equivalent to boards of trustees of Colleges). Heads of colleges are dons and are variously called Master, Provost, Principal, Rector, Dean, President, Warden.

Dosh: Cash

Duvet: A heavy blanket with a washable, removable sheet cover

Entz: Entertainment, a disco, mini Ball, etc.

Entz Rep: The elected member of the college JCR responsible for planning college entertainment events.

Estate car: Station Wagon

Essay Crisis: Academic Work

Faculty: Academic department

Fag: Cigarette

Fortnight: Two weeks (from fourteen nights)

Formal Hall: Dining in college wearing academic gowns. Grace is said in Latin so that non-believers will not be offended. Food is slightly better than normal. Most colleges have formal hall once or twice a week – some as the second shift every night.

Fresher: A new student (including new graduates)

Full stop: Period (at the end of a sentence)

Git/get: Jerk

Glasgow kiss: A head-butt to the nose

Go down: To leave Oxford upon graduation (or otherwise)

Gobsmacked: Stunned, shocked

Grass (on someone): To snitch on someone

Ground Floor: The First Floor, the Second Floor is called the First Floor and the Third Floor is called the Second Floor (you get the idea).

Hack: Common term for super-ambitious student trying to get elected to whatever office is open at any given time.

Hall: (a) Dining Hall, either Formal or Informal

(b) Technical Oxford term for the five smallest colleges - which are component members of the University

Hearty: Athlete, sometimes called a Rigger Bugger

Hertford College: Pronounced "Hartford" College

High Table: Where the dons eat. They generally eat the same food as you do. Hard to believe isn't it?

Hooray Henry: upper class nitwit – sometimes called Champagne Charlie

JCR: Junior Common Room. The student government of the college and also the student lounge, complete with video machines.

Jumper: Pullover

Kip: Sleep, nap

Kebab Van: An important part of Oxford: the late night snack. A doner kebab is a gyro.

Kiwi: New Zealander

Knickers: Underwear

Loo: A john

Lord: A title given to a member of the House of Lords (or in some cases to a son of a Peer). A number of professors and heads of Houses (colleges) at Oxford are Lords (Such as Professor Lord Beloff or Lord Briggs, the Provost of Worcester College.) There are also a number of Knights and Dames (the female equivalent) in Oxford. Lords are addressed as "Lord Beloff" by those who would normally call him Mr. Beloff (his friends call him Max). Dons and students at Oxford would not use the term "Your Lordship" or "My Lord". Knights are addressed as "Sir John" and Dames as " Dame Jane." Foreigners who hold honorary knighthoods (Hon. KBE, etc.) are called ML (or Prof. etc.)

Other titles that you may notice (and some would say these are far higher titles though they add no handle to your name) are: OM (Order of Merit——held by Sir Isaiah Berlin of All Souls); CH (Companion of Honour); Fellow of the British Academy or Fellow of the Royal Society (indicating the most eminent scholars in their fields). By the way doctorates are not regarded as very important in Oxford; some of the most distinguished scholars have only a BA degree (the MA, remember is honorary) and some fellows of All Souls, as one example, have no degree at all. Heads of Colleges are usually addressed as "Principal" or "Dr. Jones" or "Sir John", as the case may be.

Lorry: Truck

Magdalen College: Pronounced "Maudlin." Has a lovely Deer Park.

Mean: Cheap, not generous

Middle Common Room: Graduates' Common Room

Naff: Useless

Nick: To steal

Not bad: Very good. Often used by tutors. Always remember the British prefer understatement.

OAP: Old age pensioner, senior citizen

Pants: Underpants. Pants are called trousers or slacks

Paralytic: Drunk

Peckish: Hungry

Pigeonhole: Campus mailbox. The pigeon post is the internal college mail.

Ploughman's lunch: Cheese, bread, salad, pickle (served in pubs) – could be eaten while ploughing

Plus fours: Knickerbockers (knee-length pants)

Potato salad: Potato salad. Not every common name for food is different.

Prat: A jerk, wally etc. (insulting)

Proctor: University officials in charge of discipline. At Christ Church they are called censors. (Wardens are not like American "Wardens", they are Heads of Colleges.)

Punt: Small boat pushed by a pole in the river; usually near Magdalen Bridge. Punting is a popular spring/summer pastime among students.

Punter: An ordinary person

Quad: Quadrangle, a square in the heart of the college. The term "Campus" is not used in Oxford.

Queue: Line (pronounced 'q')

Quite good: So-so, mediocre. Not "very good" (American). If you tell a Briton his hospitality was "Quite good" he will be offended

Redundant: Unemployed

Rubber: Eraser

Rusticated: Sent down by a Dean or Proctor or Censor

Sassenachs: The English – a Scottish word

Schools: Giant lecture halls on High Street. The Final Examinations are given here. In England the word "school" is used to refer to school only (oddly enough). Colleges and universities are NEVER called schools.

Sconce: An old tradition. If you say the wrong thing in the dining-hall, you may be challenged by a classmate – sconced. You will be asked to down a large amount of alcohol in one gulp. You are not required to participate but this is usually harmless fun. Find out what the sconcing traditions of your college are. You should be careful to ask a decent, level-headed British student, else the Briton will take the opportunity to "take the mickey" out of a Fresher (that is, pull his leg.)

SCR: Senior Common Room. The college dons as a body also their faculty lounge.

Shandy: Lager (light beer) and lime juice. Popular in warm weather.

Shepherds' pie: Minced beef and carrots with mashed potatoes on top

Sloane: Fashionable young lady who probably went to a public school (you know all about that). From Sloane Square in London where many "Sloane Rangers" live.

Snog: Kiss

Spiv: Opportunist; untrustworthy entrepreneur

Spod: Nerd; hard-working student

Starkers: Stark naked

Starter: Appetizer

Subway: Pedestrian underpass

Swot: to study; someone who always studies, a spod

Ta: Thanks

Toff: Member of the upper class

Torch: Flashlight

Tube: Subway metro, underground

VAT: Value Added Tax, sales tax

Vest: Undershirt. In Britain a vest is called a waistcoat.

Wally: A jerk, usually a harmless one, sort of a nerd or wonk

WC: Rest room (water closet)

Whinger: Pronounced "winjer". Someone who is always whining – wringing hands, complaining, etc.

Wizard: Brilliant, wicked (meaning "good"): old fashioned but still in use.

Worcester College: Pronounced "Wooster". The other 45 colleges and halls are pronounced as they are (spelled – oddly enough (except Magdalen and Hertford).

Yob: A backward boy. Lager Lout. Drunk. Bum. Not to be admitted to Polite Society and (seriously) to be avoided late at night as the bars disgorge the denizens.

Zed: the letter 'z'