

# Come on, use your loaf and take a butcher's at this

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The subject of rhyming slang was raised in a letter to the EDP from Richard Shephard. Rhyming slang is an interesting phenomenon. We tend to associate it with Cockney, but it's well-known in Glasgow, Australia, and other places. You know the sort of thing – in Cockney slang, “plates” means feet, “dog” means phone.

Most people know how it works – you disguise a word by taking a phrase which rhymes with it, and then omit the rhyming word. The word “stairs” is disguised by taking the phrase “apples and pears” and then leaving out “and pears”, so that “apples” means “stairs”. Plates is from “plates of meat”, dog is from “dog and bone”.

Some of these words have moved into general usage and their origins have been forgotten. If everyone knew what the origin of “bottle” (“courage”) or “cobblers” (“nonsense”) was, some people might decide not to use them anymore.

When I was at school, I knew perfectly well what “give us a butcher's” meant, but I had no idea that its origins were in “look”, disguised in the phrase “butcher's hook”



■ A Pearly King at Liverpool Street Station in London. Many of us use Cockney rhyming slang, but how many of us know the origins of the words we use?

Picture: WENDY TURNER

with the rhyme left out. I didn't realise that “use your loaf” was a shortened version of “loaf of bread”, ie head. I certainly didn't know that “on your tod” (“alone”) came from “Tod Sloan”; and I was totally ignorant of the fact that Mr Sloan was an American jockey who became famous after riding five consecutive winners at Newmarket.

Rhyming slang is creative – anyone can invent their own – and fun; but it does have a purpose. One of its functions is to operate as an “anti-language” – a way of speaking which is designed to be intelligible only to insiders, like the Gipsy anti-language Anglo-Romani, which I've also written about.

But rhyming slang isn't always a particularly serious barrier to communication – you can often work out what a word means, even if you've never heard it before. Sometimes the rhyming word isn't even left out – “would you Adam and Eve it?”. It's probably more important as a way of signalling that you are a member of some particular in-group.

But rhyming slang did permit Richard to smuggle a couple of rather indelicate terms into the EDP which I don't think the editor would have allowed him to use if he hadn't disguised them. I'm sure Richard knew what he was doing. If he says he didn't, we know he's telling porkies.