

Dialect names for a donkey avoid the rather ruder word

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■ Would you know how to reply if someone asked you if you had a 'dicka'?

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There is a phrase, well-known to older Norfolk people, which is supposed to be exchanged, when in foreign parts, with any new acquaintance you suspect of also being from our area. You have to say: "Ha' your far gotta dicka, bor?" The other person then establishes their East Anglian credentials by giving the correct reply to this question. Do you know what it is?

The question translates into Standard English as: "Has your father got a donkey?" Dicky is simply our local dialect word for a donkey, and the English Dialect Dictionary shows this word as occurring only in Norfolk, Suffolk, Essex and Cambridgeshire.

But where did "dicky" come from? We all know that men and boys who are called Dicky are officially named Richard. But why would donkeys be referred to by the familiar form of a male first name? Well, there is another similar example: a widely used children's word for a donkey is "neddy" – Neddy the donkey. That, too, is a familiar form of a man's name – Edward.

In Scotland, Northumberland and Cumberland, there's yet another local

word for a donkey derived from a male name: "cuddy", from Cuthbert. And, according to the English Dialect Dictionary, eastern Suffolk also had the word jeremiah for a donkey, though I've never heard that.

This is all a bit puzzling, until we start to examine the origin of the word donkey itself. Where did that come from? We're not entirely sure. But the Oxford English Dictionary has a suggestion which I like because it fits in very nicely with Richard, Edward, Cuthbert and Jeremiah. This is that donkey derives from the man's name Duncan. This supposition is strengthened by the fact that we know that donkey used

to be pronounced "dunky", to rhyme with monkey.

So what is going on here exactly? Why have all these familiar forms of men's names been used to refer to a donkey? The answer is that they are all jocular nick-names which were used to avoid saying something else. I'm not going to spell it out – this is a family newspaper, and some readers might be having their breakfast. But donkey is first recorded as having been used in the late 1700s; before that the usual word was "ass".

By the way, the correct response to the Norfolk question is: "Yis, and he want a fool to ride 'im – will you come?"