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Haggard Hawks and Paltry Poltroons

Written by Paul Anthony Jones

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HAGGARD HAWKS AND PALTRY POLTROONS

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INTRODUCTION

Haggard is a strange word. Five centuries old, having been adopted into English from French in the mid-1500s, on its first appearance in the language it was a falconer's term used to refer to a wild hawk captured as an adult and then trained to hunt and retrieve prey. As these *haggard* hawks tended to remain quite wild and unpredictable even after their training, especially compared to captive-bred birds, over time the meaning of the word developed to come to describe anything similarly unruly, erratic, world-worn and – well, *haggard.* As unusual as this history is, however, *haggard* is not alone. It is just one of a number of English words, including *allure, turn-tail, rouse, poltroon* and even *codger,* that all share some kind of connection to falconry. And this is precisely what this book is all about.

Assembled here are fifty lists of ten words, each group of ten having some linguistic quality or etymological quirk in common. From words derived from places in Ancient Greece to words derived from colours, from unusual animal names to words with fictitious histories, and from *abbot, abdest* and *abelmosk* to *zed, zigzag* and *zombie,* the 500 entries listed in *Haggard Hawks and Paltry Poltroons* comprise some of the most remarkable words and word origins in the entire English language. Here you will find the connection between a family tree and a stork's foot, what connects a sitcom to a hybrid zebra,

which item of gym equipment was originally a jailhouse punishment, what the first *blockbuster* was, how long an *ohnosecond* is, which weapon is named after a musical instrument, how to stop plagiarism with a spelling mistake, what you should really call a unknowledgeable critic, how to cure a fever with a magic word and where to find a vampire in a theatre. The entries here mix the familiar with the unfamiliar, the exceptional with the everyday, and the old with the new – you might not know what an *aphengescope* is, or how to *lucubrate*, but they are related to the chocolate éclair and the name of the shortest bone in your arm.

So, where better to begin than where the English language calls home . . .

I

TEN WORDS DERIVED FROM PLACES IN BRITAIN

Besides the ten words listed in this chapter, the English language also contains a vast number of phrases and expressions that make reference to some British location, like *shipshape and Bristol fashion* and *carrying coals to Newcastle*. Expressions like these are often rooted in an area's association with a particular industry or historical event – *Bristol fashion* is derived from the city's world-renowned seafaring proficiency, while the naturally coal-rich north-east of England (as in WALLSEND) implies that *carrying coals to Newcastle* would be a thankless or pointless task. Likewise, to be *stabbed with a Bridport dagger* was a seventeenth-century phrase meaning to be 'hanged', referring to the rope-making industry of Bridport in Dorset; to *get yourself to Bath* was a nineteenth-century way of being told that you are talking nonsense, as the city's spring waters were once widely known to be used to treat patients with mental illnesses; and to walk *Newgate fashion* was a Shakespearean expression meaning to walk two-by-two, like prisoners shackled together in Newgate jail.

One of the most familiar of all of these British expressions, however, is also one of the most mysterious, as the origin of to *send to Coventry*, a seventeenth-century phrase meaning to 'ostracize' or 'ignore', is entirely unknown. Amongst the numerous suggestions attempting to explain its history are that it makes reference to a prison

established in the city during the Civil War; that the locals' supposed historical dislike of members of the British Army meant that anyone seen talking to a soldier would be shunned; or else that Coventry was once the site of an austere monastery, to which monks failing or disobeying their orders would have been sent to observe a strict vow of silence.

1. BADMINTON

The first recorded reference to the sport of *badminton* in English dates from 1863, when it was described as a game 'played with sides, across a string suspended some five feet off the ground'. Seemingly named after Badminton House, the Gloucestershire home of the Dukes of Beaufort, it is often claimed that the game originated amongst British Army officers on leave from India at Badminton in the nineteenth century. The game itself, meanwhile, is a development of the much earlier sixteenth-century game 'battledore and shuttlecock' (first recorded, rather unfortunately, as *shittle-cock* in the 1601 Ben Jonson play, *Cynthia's Revels*) in which two players, with no net between them, would attempt to bat a shuttlecock back and forth as many times as possible without letting it touch the ground.

2. BEDLAM

The word *bedlam*, describing a scene of utter madness or confusion, was first recorded in English in the mid-1600s. Derived from a corruption of *Bethlehem*, the word is ultimately taken from the name of the Hospital of St Mary of Bethlehem in London, a former thirteenth-century priory that was later converted into a hospital and, after the dissolution of the monasteries, into an insane asylum, hence its modern connotations. Indeed, the word is

found as the name of an asylum in Shakespeare's *Henry VI, Part 2* (V. i), in which Lord Clifford dismisses Richard Plantagenet, the Duke of York's claim to the throne with the words, 'To Bedlam with him! Is the man grown mad?'

3. BORSTAL

As the name of a reformatory or detention centre for delinquent teenagers, the word *borstal* derives from the name of the village of Borstal near Rochester in north Kent, where just such an institution was established in 1902 on the site of an old Victorian prison. Used as a general term for any institution of this type since 1907, the word's very specific British origins have ultimately led to it being only seldom encountered outside of British English.

4. BRUMMAGEM

Brummagem is an old local name for the city of Birmingham and as such is the root of other familiar local words like *Brummie* and *Brum*. As an adjective, however, *brummagem* has been used since the mid-seventeenth century in English to describe anything inauthentic or counterfeit, as Birmingham once had a reputation across the country for the manufacture of counterfeit coinage. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the term came to be used more generally of anything showy yet cheaply made, and in particular referred to so-called *brummagem ware*, namely poor-quality metalwork or other merchandise of little real value.

5. CANTER

A horse's *canter* – that is, a slow to moderate galloping pace – derives its name from a shortening of *Canterbury*, the English ecclesiastical city in which the principal Archbishop of England and a famous shrine to St Thomas à Beckett are both located. Dating from the early

1600s, the term *canter* supposedly makes reference to the so-called 'Canterbury pace' or 'Canterbury trot', a colloquial name for the dawdling speed supposedly favoured by Christian pilgrims as they made their way to the city.

6. LYDDITE

Lyddite is an explosive, developed and widely employed by the British military in the late nineteenth century. First tested in 1888 – and named after the town of Lydd in Kent where the initial tests took place – *lyddite* was one of the first high explosives used in British mortar shells, produced by melting and then solidifying a volatile chemical known as trinitrophenol or picric acid. *Lyddite* was employed in both the Boer War and First World War until it began to be replaced by the relatively more reliable and controllable trinitrotoluene, better known as TNT, in the early twentieth century.

7. STRONTIUM

Chemical element number 38, *strontium* (Sr) is the only element of the periodic table named after a location in the British Isles. It derives its name from that of the Highland village of Strontian where its principal source mineral, strontianite, was first discovered in lead mines in the eighteenth century. A silvery-grey alkaline metal that is highly reactive to both water and oxygen, *strontium* was also one of the first elements to be isolated using electrolysis by the British chemist and inventor Sir Humphrey Davy in 1808.

8. SURREY

A *surrey* is a four-wheeled, two-seater American horse-drawn carriage so called as its design is believed to have developed from an earlier style of carriage first manufactured

in Surrey in the nineteenth century. Introduced to the United States in the 1870s, the first record of a *surrey* comes from the 1896 novella *An Open-Eyed Conspiracy* by the US writer William Dean Howells, but today the word is arguably much more familiar to English speakers thanks to the song 'The Surrey with the Fringe on Top', from the 1943 Rodgers and Hammerstein musical *Oklahoma!*

9. WALLSEND

Originally a town in Northumberland but now a suburb of the city of Newcastle upon Tyne, the place name *Wallsend* literally describes the town's location towards the eastern end of Hadrian's Wall. For over 150 years, from the end of the eighteenth century to the beginning of the twentieth century, the town was a major base for coal-mining in the north-east of England and was widely celebrated nationwide for the high quality of its produce – so much so, in fact, that the specific type of coal that the town produced came to be known as *Wallsend* in the early 1800s, as mentioned by Charles Dickens in *Our Mutual Friend*: 'I would rather have approached my respected father by candlelight . . . but we will take him by twilight, enlivened with a glow of Wallsend'.

10. WORSTED

Worsted is the name of both a type of yarn and a type of thick woollen fabric, both of which are thought to have been developed in the Norfolk village of Worstead by weavers and cloth-makers who emigrated to England from Flanders after the Norman Conquest. As the name of a fabric, the word was first recorded in English in the late thirteenth century, with the first reference to *worsted* yarn dating from the mid-fifteenth century.