



EVESHAM FESTIVAL OF WORDS: JULY 1, 2 AND 3, 2016

# A neat scoop for Festival

THERE is one word to describe this *Vale Magazine* coup: neat.

Actually there are countless words and who better to ask than the august gent who's just added his creation to the growing made-up lexicon for our Plant a New Word project.

Best spell-check first though, as John Simpson suspects most people do when they email or write to him.

For he is the former Chief Editor of the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) and it's mega neat that he accepted our challenge to get fabricating, because he'd normally run for the hills.

John, who spent 20 of his 40 OED years in the hot seat, doesn't do "artificial" word games. So don't be frit (from the early 19th century: dialect, past participle of fright) of asking him to play Scrabble or vie at TV's Countdown. He won't.

"I'm also no good at them. I know it sounds sad, but I prefer to be working out why a particular word was first used in centuries past than trying to puzzle out word games," says the man who moved from Oxford back to his home town of Cheltenham three years ago.

He is, however, all in favour of our word planting challenge, which was launched to promote Evesham's first Festival of Words on July 1-3.

"I think it's a great idea. It's fun for all ages, and a great teaching aid for schoolchildren to find a word that someone has made up and then, back in the classroom, to explore inventing their own and why people might want to use them.

**"I applaud anything that intrigues people about words"**

"I applaud anything that intrigues people about words and encourages them to read, write or make them up," adds John, who's already booked to speak at the 2017 Festival.

Many years ago, the expert lexicographer was casting around for a post-university job when he spotted the OED advert for an assistant. By happenchance (OED: mid 19th century. Apparently from happen + chance)

he'd stumbled on a fascinating future career.

John, who went on to lead an editing, researching and referencing team of 70, also kick-started a revolution, by spearheading the move online.

The OED's was one of the first 400 sites on the web, and became, in 2000, the first major online national historical dictionary.

Was it a tad difficult to persuade the purists? "There were some people who didn't want us to change even a definition in the dictionary, which they regarded almost like tablets of stone.

"They were worried about the idea that someone who wasn't as Olympian as the great scholars of the Victorian era might have the impunity to make changes and update it.

"But even they came round gradually when they saw what sort of job we were doing and that we were actually improving the data and methodology behind the text."

Even more importantly, the move made the weighty dictionary (20 volumes and 600,000 words with 3,000,000 quotations at the last count) instantly accessible to all (and free, with a British public library card - just type your county and eresources into

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John Simpson - Photo courtesy of bloomingphotography

your search engine to reach the right page), rather than just those determined word-hunters who schlepped off to the library or bore the weight on their own bookshelves.

The OED is not just a collection of words and current meanings of course. It minutely charts the historical provenance and is being added to all the time by its team of scientific analysts.

John still has a hand in. He's currently adding early uses from the 17th century. That's another boon of the internet - access to knowledge is growing all the time.

"These days, for instance, you can read Dublin newspapers from the 19th century, which means we can see expressions that James Joyce weaved into his work.

"We know now that he didn't invent many new words, but rescued fading words from the local Dublin culture," says John, a James Joyce expert and Emeritus Fellow of Kellogg College, Oxford, among other things.

He's also author and editor of piles of books, including co-editing *The Oxford Dictionary of Modern Slang*.

He doesn't think OMG when he sees textspeak then? "Oh no. Language, like dictionaries, is constantly evolving and text-messaging is just another facet of language fuelled by the internet and social media," he points out.

"I certainly don't get annoyed by words when I have my work hat on. We try to be as objective and scientific as we can possibly

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be. In private I can get a bit irked. I'm annoyed by the use of heft in so many novels. It's such an authory word!"

Outside work he enjoys researching (on pauperism in Gloucestershire at the moment, together with local project Pittville History Works) and spending time with wife Hilary, their daughters and granddaughters.

He's looking forward to the Evesham Festival, and checking out those growing new words. I wonder if any will make it into the OED? "If you can tap into the spirit of the age and it becomes common parlance, you never know."

And now cue drum roll. I know you've been waiting... here's John's offering:

**vocabulous:** knowing many words; exulting in the pleasure of words and language (John Simpson, Cheltenham, writer and lexicographer - formerly Chief Editor of the Oxford English Dictionary).

Neat, eh?

LYNNE POWELL

JOIN John by getting creative for our Plant a New Word, but hurry... you only have until May 20, 2016. All you have to do is send your word and a brief description to [info@valemagazine.co.uk](mailto:info@valemagazine.co.uk). We'll also need your full name and address (only the nearest town or village will be used in the attribution) and age and guardian's permission if appropriate.

A selection will be published next month in the magazine and 'planted' round the town in the run up to the Festival.

## HERE ARE SOME MORE RECENT ADDITIONS:

**croomeability:** the ability to use the efforts and achievements of the historical creators of Croome to inspire the next generation of New Talent (Rachel Sharpe, Local Partnerships Officer Croome National Trust)

**humblebumble:** language used by footballers in post-match interviews when they wish to maximise kudos for their own performance but then say that the three points were much more important (John Sandalls, Wantage)

**eyepiphany:** the moment of clarity when you put on your new spectacles (James Osborne Opticians, Evesham)

\* The first English 'dictionary' was written by former schoolmaster and clergyman Robert Cawdrey in 1604.

\* One of the most famous early examples is Samuel Johnson's 1755 Dictionary of the English Language.

\* It took more than eight years for the team of seven to polish off and list the 40,000 words, with definitions backed up by 114,000 quotations.

\* A comparable French tome had taken 55 years and 40 scholars.

\* The first of the OED stable was A New English Dictionary on Historical Principles, published in parts from 1884 to 1928, by which time it was ten volumes.

\* In 1989 the Second Edition of the OED was published in print, with tagged machine-readable text. It took 120 typists making 67 million keystrokes over 18 months to key in.

## EVENT HIGHLIGHTS

JOHN Simpson is one of three big names already signed up for the 2017 Festival of Words because this year's event is full to bursting.

This July's 1-3 highlights include an evening with best-selling author Katie Fforde (July 1) who comes with her latest novel, A Summer at Sea, hot off the press.

Other must-see/hears include the talk Romance, History, Psychology: inside the minds of three authors (July 1),

the July 2 Festival Village in Evesham's Market Place (10.30am-3.30pm)

which will include Deborah Alma, The Emergency Poet and her Nurse Verse.

July 2 also includes a full fun day of events for children, while July 3 sees a Poetry Walk, among many other events.

**For full details, and to book your tickets, please go to [www.eveshamfestivalofwords.org](http://www.eveshamfestivalofwords.org)**

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