

GLOSSARY OF BRITISH AND PERIOD SLANG

The English language has evolved over the years. This is a guide for those unfamiliar with some of the colloquialisms and items in use in the 1950' and '60's. Some have survived. Some haven't.

a cabbage: brain dead

a set of pipes on her: a good singer

addles your brain: messes with your head

all hands to the pumps: lots of help needed

antique copper: vessel for boiling a large quantity of water in which to wash clothes. A forerunner of today's washing machine

a welsher: reneges on deals, doesn't pay their debts

Babycham: cheap alternative to champagne – made from pears

balloon's gone up: an emergency situation

balls-up: an error, a mistake

banana boat: derogatory term for immigrants transport to UK

barrel of laughs: sarcastic term for a serious character

beat bobby: uniformed police officer who patrols the streets

bee's knees: something special

be sick: vomit

bells ringing: equivalent of police sirens today

belter: it was a fantastic goal

better step on it: hurry up

biscuits: cookies

Black Maria: a police van

bod: derogatory term – anonymous man - a nonentity

bonnet of his car: the hood & (UK boot = US trunk)

boozy: a bit drunk

“Bowling me a googly”: cricketing term. To take by surprise

bread-and-butter work: routine work

brief: lawyer

Brylcreem: hair cream (pomade) to give men’s hair shine and smoothness

calling in the cavalry: asking for reinforcements

Cambridge University: prestigious British university divided up into autonomous colleges such as Corpus Christi or Magdalene. The students live and socialise within their colleges.

car park: parking lot

cat that got all the cream: satisfied

CID: Criminal Investigation Division

clobbered: hit hard

cobbler’s shop: shoe menders

copper: slang for policeman

'couldn't hit a cow's arse with a banjo': not very good at aiming a dart or arrow

council estate: social housing

crazy-paving: patio or path made from broken concrete slabs set in random pattern

cuppa: a cup of tea

cut along to: go along to

David Nixon: UK TV magician popular in the '50's and '60's

dessert: pudding

digs: lodgings, boarding house

dollar a frame: two half crowns in old UK money = five shillings - called a dollar and five bob

do his nut: lose his temper

doormat: meek

dressing down: telling off

emergency police box: telephone box for police use

en-print: an 8 x 10 photograph

excuse my French: sorry I swore

fellow: boyfriend

flatfoots: derogatory name for police

fly in the ointment: problem

gassing: talking

get you a brew: a cup of tea

get your skates on: Hurry up

greenhouse: glasshouse

go to the dogs: go to rack and ruin, be destroyed

good collars: good arrests

guv'nor: the boss (& guv)

gymkhana: horse-riding event

gymslips: school uniform of bib and skirt design

had it in spades: had a lot of it

half of bitter: beer.

Harold MacMillan: British Prime minister 1957-63

haversack: backpack, rucksack

Hendon: police training school

Herbert Beerbohm-Tree and Mrs Patrick Campbell: actors

his beat: the area he patrols

hit a brick wall: come up against an obstacle

huge chip on her shoulder: resentful

I'm blown: I am surprised

I'm spitting nails: very angry

keep it under your hat: keep it a secret

keep mum about it: keep it a secret

Keep your hair on: don't get so excited

knighted: given a British honour

knock his block off: punch him hard, block = head

"Knock down ginger" : a children's game of knocking on someone's door and running away before the occupant has a chance to answer it

late birds: go to bed at a late hour

lavatory: restroom / bathroom

legged it: ran away

Lincrusta: An embossed wall covering much in use in early 20th century Britain

load of tripe: lot of nonsense

loo: toilet (also bog, khashi)

little hussy: girl of loose morals

Lonnie Donegan : father of British skiffle music

LSE: London School of Economics

mantelpiece: shelf above a fireplace

Marmite or Bovril: yeast and meat-based sandwich spreads

Mickey Finn: a drugged drink which makes the drinker unconscious

milkman: person who delivers milk to the house

Mosquito: British airplane used in Second World War

mooning over a boy: teenage girl infatuated with a boy

noggin: head

North London / South London: separated by the River Thames

off his chump: slang for being mad, crazy

old chestnut: weak excuse

off-licence: shop selling alcohol

old toffee: lies

on my tail: after me, chasing me

on the game: prostitute

Ovaltine: malted milk beverage – served hot

pax, fainites: children's terms for a truce in hostilities

Palais: dance hall

a pasting: beaten up

Pathé News and Pearl and Dean: newsreels and adverts before the movie starts

pin money: small amount of earnings

pissing around: messing about, not telling the whole truth

playing cards close to her chest: being coy with the truth

plods: derogatory name for police

pounding the beat: working as a uniformed officer on the streets

pretty good going-over : a thorough investigation (can also mean beating up)

prick: slang for penis

pull the wool over their eyes: fool people

pulling my leg: having a joke at my expense, teasing

pushover: soft touch, easily manipulated

Q cars: A car that has high performance engine and an unassuming exterior. US version is sleeper car.

quite sweet on you: likes you romantically

Reggie and Ronnie: the Kray twins, criminals

restroom: place where staff can relax or recover in

rozzers: policemen

ructions: disagreements

S.P.: starting price = the truth about what is being said

School Friend: comic aimed at teenage girls

settee: sofa

a shoot: a wrestling match where the wrestlers fight for real

sick: vomit

skiffle: 1950s style of popular music

slacks: UK trousers US pants

sling your hook: go away

“the smoke” – slang term for London

snapshot: photograph (also snap, shot, print, photo)

spewed: vomited

stick of rock: a cylinder of candy often sold at the seaside

sticking plaster: Band-Aid

stinks like a haddock left out too long in the sun: doesn't sound correct

stitching me up: framing me

swot: a nerd, a geek, someone keen on their studies

tabard: apron worn for some work

tart: woman with loose morals

tart's boudoir: a hooker's bedroom

Teddy boys: thugs and young tearaways, usually dressed in drape jackets and drainpipe trousers and crepe soled shoes (brothel creepers)

Ten bob: ten shillings: pre-decimal money — half of £1 = ten-shilling note

This Is Your Wife: parody of TV show This Is Your Life

tightly permed hair: hair artificially curled

Tizer: fizzy pop/soda

Tommy Steele: 1950s-60s pop star

trousers: pants

tugging my forelock: acting in a subservient manner

tuppenny tart: a cheap hooker

two hoots: couldn't care less

two peas in a pod.: two people similar to one another

ugly mug: ugly face

up and comers: young and rising sports people (over the hillers = past their best sports people)

very snarled up: gridlocked traffic

Victor Sylvester: popular ballroom dancer and band-leader in the 1950s

whistles and bells: top specifications

winkle-picker shoe: long narrow male shoe

Wolseley: model of saloon car used by the police

a work: A wrestling match with a pre-determined outcome

yobs: thugs and young tearaways (boy spelt backwards)

your lazy arse: ass

your racket: your loud noise

