

# History of the OED

The *Oxford English Dictionary* has been the last word on words for over a century. But, as with a respected professor or admired parent, we count on its wisdom and authority without thinking much about how it was acquired. What is the history of the *Oxford English Dictionary*? Exploring its origins and development will give new insight into this extraordinary, living document.

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## How it began

When the members of the Philological Society of London decided, in 1857, that existing English language dictionaries were incomplete and deficient, and called for a complete re-examination of the language from Anglo-Saxon times onward, they knew they were embarking on an ambitious project. However, even they didn't realize the full extent of the work they initiated, or how long it would take to achieve the final result.

The project proceeded slowly after the Society's first grand statement of purpose. Eventually, in 1879, the Society made an agreement with the Oxford University Press and [James A. H. Murray](#) to begin work on a *New English Dictionary* (as the *Oxford English Dictionary* was then known).

## More work than they thought

*Existing English dictionaries were incomplete and deficient*

The new dictionary was planned as a four-volume, 6,400-page work that would include all English language vocabulary from the Early Middle English period (1150 AD) onward, plus some earlier words if they had continued to be used into Middle English.

It was estimated that the project would be finished in approximately ten years. Five years down the road, when Murray and his colleagues had only reached as far as the word 'ant', they realized it was time to reconsider their schedule. It was not surprising that the project was taking longer than anticipated. Not only are the complexities of the English language formidable, but it also never stops evolving. Murray and his Dictionary colleagues had to keep track of new words and new meanings of existing words at the same time that they were trying to examine the previous seven centuries of the language's development.



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### *The English language never stops evolving*

Murray and his team did manage to publish the first part (or 'fascicle', to use the technical term) in 1884, but it was clear by this point that a much more comprehensive work was required than had been imagined by the Philological Society almost thirty years earlier.

## One step at a time

Over the next four decades work on the Dictionary continued and new editors joined the project. Murray now had a large team directed by [himself, Henry Bradley, W.A. Craigie, and C.T. Onions](#). These men worked steadily, producing fascicle after fascicle until finally, in April, 1928, the last volume was published. Instead of 6,400 pages in four volumes, the Dictionary published under the imposing name *A New English Dictionary on Historical Principles* – contained over 400,000 words and phrases in ten volumes. Sadly, Murray did not live to see the completion of his great work; he died in 1915. The work to which he had devoted his life represented an achievement unprecedented in the history of publishing anywhere in the world. The Dictionary had taken its place as the ultimate authority on the language.

## Keeping it current

An exhilarating aspect of a living language is that it continually changes. This means that no dictionary is ever really finished. After fifty years of work on the first edition, the editors must have found this fact exhausting to contemplate.

Nevertheless, as soon as the original ten volumes of the *New English Dictionary* were completed, Craigie and Onions, the two editors still involved with the project, began updating it. In 1933, a single-volume *Supplement* to the Dictionary was published. Also at this time the original Dictionary was reprinted in twelve volumes and the work was formally given its current title, the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

### *Modern English was continuously monitored by the celebrated 'reading programme'*

The twelve-volume *Oxford English Dictionary* and the single-volume *Supplement* represented the final statement from Oxford for many years to come. However, in 1957, Robert Burchfield was appointed Editor for a new *Supplement* that would replace the 1933 volume and include much new information on the language (especially on twentieth century vocabulary) obtained in the intervening years. Modern English was continuously monitored by the Dictionary's celebrated 'reading programme', more scientific and technical terms were added, and the scope of the Dictionary was broadened to include considerably more words from North America, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, South Asia, and the Caribbean. Substantially longer than the 1933 edition, this new *Supplement* was published in four volumes between 1972 and 1986.

## Making it modern

In 1982, as Burchfield's work on the *Supplement* came within sight of the completion, Oxford University Press debated how to bring this monumental dictionary into the modern age. It soon became clear that the traditional methods of compiling entries would have to be updated, and that the source material should be transferred from paper to an electronic medium. The enterprise must change to deploy project managers and systems engineers as well as lexicographers. The Press duly set about this with the formation of the New Oxford English Dictionary Project in 1984. The team was given the objective of publishing an integrated print edition in 1989 and also of providing a full, electronic text to form the basis of future revision and extension of the Dictionary.

### *The most adventurous computerization project seen in the publishing industry*

How do you take a multi-volume, century-old, print-based reference work and turn it into a machine-readable resource? By spending \$13.5 million over five years in the most adventurous computerization project seen in the publishing industry at that time. Bespoke computer systems were built for both pre-

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processing the text and editing it in electronic form; text was marked up in the (then) novel SGML encoding scheme; the pages of the old edition and the *Supplement* were typed again by 120 keyboarders; and more than 50 proofreaders checked the results of their work.

In Oxford John Simpson and Edmund Weiner with a core group of lexicographers reviewed, corrected, and edited this new electronic dictionary, as well as adding 5,000 new words and senses to 400,000 definitions previously expressed in 60,000,000 words. In all, the Project team succeeded in accomplishing around 85 per cent of its work by software, but the remaining 15 per cent required the critical eye of the editors. The culmination of this mammoth task was the setting in type and subsequent printing of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, Second Edition. In 1989 this was published on time, to great acclaim. The finished work, edited by Simpson and Weiner, fills 22,000 pages which are bound in twenty substantial volumes.

## Into the electronic age

In 1992 the *Oxford English Dictionary* again made history when a CD-ROM edition of the work was published. Suddenly a massive, twenty-volume work that takes up four feet of shelf space and weighs 150 pounds is reduced to a slim, shiny disk that takes up virtually no space and weighs just a few ounces.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* on CD-ROM has been a great success. The electronic format has revolutionized the way people use the Dictionary to search and retrieve information. Complex investigations into word origins or quotations that would have been impossible to conduct using the print edition now take only a few seconds. Because the electronic format makes the *Oxford English Dictionary* so easy to use, its audience now embraces all kinds of interested readers beyond the confines of the scholarly community.

## The future has begun

Today, once again, the *Oxford English Dictionary* is under alteration. Continuing the technological innovations, the Dictionary is now available as an online publication designed to take full advantage of this powerful and accessible medium.

The content of the Dictionary is also being comprehensively revised. However, instead of adding new material in supplements to the main edition, or simply interspersing new information throughout the body of the old edition, the entire work is being updated. This is the first time material written by Murray and the early editors has been changed since they finished in 1928. The result of this ambitious undertaking will be a completely revitalized *Oxford English Dictionary*.

At no period in its history has the *Oxford English Dictionary* been profitable commercially for Oxford University Press. However, the Press remains committed to sustaining research into the origins and development of the English language wherever it is spoken. This commitment to the cultural values embodied in the Dictionary is shown by the £34 million (US\$55 million) funding of the current revision programme and the associated programme for new words. The remedial work of revising original 19th and early 20th century editorial material is in progress, and the results of the revision programme and additions of new words will be published online every three months.

The ambitious goals which the Philological Society set out in 1857 seem modest in comparison with the phenomenal achievement which their initiative set in motion. The *Oxford English Dictionary* is a living document that has been growing and changing for 140 years. Far more than a convenient place to look up words and their origins, the *Oxford English Dictionary* is an irreplaceable part of English culture. It not only provides an important record of the evolution of our language, but also documents the continuing development of our society. It is certain to continue in this role as we enter the new century.

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