

The Septic's Companion

A British slang dictionary

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The most common British words or British English terms related to cars (or parts of cars), travel and transport generally.

artic: *n abbr* articulated vehicle, usually a large hauling truck or semi.

articulated lorry: *adj* semi truck which is able to bend in the middle. Of course, I just wrote pretty much the same thing two seconds ago. I'm beginning to understand why the guy who wrote the first Oxford English Dictionary ended up going mad and cutting his penis off.

Belisha Beacons: *n* yellow flashing lights on sticks that are positioned next to zebra crossings and flash constantly to alert drivers. They were named after Hore Belisha, who was Minister of Transport when they were introduced. Perhaps a more interesting derivation was put forward by an episode of the BBC radio programme "Radio Active," which featured an unwinnable quiz, one of the questions being "From where did the Belisha Beacon get its name?" Answer: "From the word 'beacon'." I was younger then, and in the cold light of day it seems less funny now than it once did. You can't take away my childhood.

big end: *n* the end of the conrod, which is attached to the crankshaft in a conventional combustion engine. The other end, attached to the piston, is called the "small end."

bollard: *n* small concrete or metal post generally used to stop cars from driving into certain places. While used only in a nautical context in the U.S., it is accepted universally in the U.K. When not on boats, Americans call them "pylons," which to Brits are the giant metal structures used to hold up national grid

electricity wires.

bonnet: *n* hood of a car; the part of a car which covers the engine. Confusion arises in the U.K. when dealing with rear-engined cars; it's difficult to determine whether to call it a bonnet or, as seems perhaps more logical, a boot, on account of it being at the back. The trials of modern life. To encourage confusion, "hood" is used in the U.K. to describe the convertible top of a convertible car.

boot: *n* trunk of a car. The boot of a car is the part you keep your belongings in. So called because it was originally known as a "boot locker" — whether it used to be commonplace to drive in one's socks is anyone's guess.

camper van: *n* motorised caravan in which you can take your entire family for a horrible holiday. Americans call them "R.V.s," but the average European camper is significantly smaller than the average American one. Also, the average European is, of course, smaller than the average American, as proven by statistics.

car park: *n* parking lot. The large buildings composed of many floors of just parking spaces are called "multi-storey car parks" in the U.K. but "parking garages" in the U.S.

caravan: **1** *n* terrible device which attaches to the back of your car and allows you to take your whole family on holiday at minimal expense and with maximum irritability. They're more popular in Europe than they are in the U.S., where they're called "trailers." Be careful not to confuse a touring caravan (which a family will generally keep outside their house and drag behind their normal car somewhere for a few holidays a year) with a static caravan, which is generally deposited once by a truck and left there. Americans call both of these things "trailers," and where a distinction is needed they'll call the touring variants "travel trailers." The devices that Americans call a "fifth wheel" — caravans which attach to a conventional diesel truck — are pretty much non-existent in the U.K. Another caravan variant common to both sides of the Atlantic is the "trailer tent," which is like a caravan except the walls and roof fold out like some sort of ghastly mobile puppet theatre. No doubt you're much less confused now. I could go on about caravans for days. **2** *v* the act of staying in a caravan: *Doris has taken it into her head to go caravanning this weekend.*

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cat's eyes: *n* little reflectors mounted in the centre of the road, amid the white lines. When you're

driving along at night your headlights reflect in them to show where the road goes. When you're driving like a screaming banshee they gently bounce the car up and down in order to unsettle it, causing you subsequently to lose traction and crash the rented 1.3-litre VW Polo through a fence and into a yard. Everything goes black — your senses are dead but for the faint smell of petrol, and the dim glow of a light coming on in the farmhouse. Somewhere in the distance a big dog barks. As you slowly regain consciousness, you find that you're in a soft bed, surrounded by candles and with a faint whiff of incense drifting on the breeze from the open window. You see a familiar face peering down at you — could it be Stinky Potter, from down by the cottages? Wasn't that corner just about where they found poor old Danny's motorbike? And how does this guy know your name? If you try to run, roll the dice and turn to page seventeen. If you choose to kiss the old man, turn to page twelve.

central reservation: *n* median. Far from being a sought-after restaurant booking, this is in fact what Brits call the grassy area in the centre of a motorway which is there to stop you colliding with oncoming traffic quite as easily as you might.

coach: *n* bus. Generally used in the U.K. for longer-haul buses (50 miles or more). The difference between a *coach* and a "bus" is that a coach tends to have a loo, not so much chewing gum attached to the seats and fewer old ladies hacking up phlegm in the back. Brits do not use coach to refer to economy-class seats on an aircraft; that's a peculiar American thing.

damper: *n* shock absorber. The part of a vehicle's suspension system that stops the suspension from bouncing (rather than actually absorbing any shock).

demister: *n* defroster. The little network of electrical wires that weave around your car's rear window and are intended to remove frost. They are perhaps referred to as such in the U.K. because any devices attached to British-built cars have precious little chance of getting rid of frost, and, indeed, don't stand much of a chance against mist, either.

deplane: *v* disembark from an aeroplane. A very antiquated term, it'd be met with a vacant stare by most Brits under forty, as would its antonym, "enplane."

dodgem: *n* bumper-car. Once used in U.S. English too, but now chiefly British. Odd that it should imply an aim to the game that is quite the opposite of what it is.

dual carriageway: *n* divided highway. There is generally very little difference between a dual carriageway and a motorway except that learner

drivers are not allowed onto motorways.

earth: *n* ground. Only in the electrical context – this is the wire that zooms off into the planet somewhere and somehow stops people from electrocuting themselves in the bath.

enplane: *v* get onto an aeroplane. As out of use as its sister word, “deplane.”



estate car: *n* station wagon.

gear lever: *n* the “stick” of a stick-shift car. This applies to cars with manual transmission - automatic cars in the U.K. are reserved for pensioners, the severely disabled and Americans.

▶ **gearbox:** *n* transmission. The box of gears that sits between the engine and the prop shaft of a car.

▶ **give way:** *interj* yield. This phrase on a road sign means that, at the junction you’re approaching, other traffic has the right of way. The signs themselves are white upward-pointing triangles with a red line around them. Americans have similar signs but the arrow is downward-pointing, and they have “Yield” written on them instead. Americans used to have yellow ones, but this turns out to be a whole separate topic that I don’t want to get into.

▶ **handbrake:** *n* emergency brake (on a car). A *handbrake* operates like a normal brake pedal but only on the rear wheels. Before the days of speed-cameras, Brits used to use the *handbrake* to slow down when they passed police cars as the brake lights don’t go on and it’s not so obvious you were speeding.

▶ **hard shoulder:** *n* shoulder. The poorly-surfaced bit at the side of the road that you’re only supposed to drive on if you’ve broken down, have fallen asleep at the wheel or desperately need to wee.

▶ **hood:** *n* convertible top. The part of a convertible car that, well, converts. This only serves to complicate the bonnet/boot confusion. Brits do not use “hood” as an abbreviation of “neighbourhood,” unless they are trying to act like American rap stars. Brits are not very good at that, although it doesn’t stop them trying.

▶ **indicator:** *n* turn signal. The little orange lights that flash on the side of the car to show that you’re about to frantically try and turn across four lanes of traffic into your driveway.

▶ **jump leads:** *n* jumper cables. The pair of heavy

wires which you use to connect the battery of your working car to the battery of your dead car, or to a person from whom you wish to extract information.

▶ **kerb:** *n* curb. Not entirely sure how the different spellings arose.

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▶ **L-plates:** *n* big white square stickers with a red letter "L" in them, which have to be put on the front and back of a car that's being driven by a learner driver (i.e. someone on a provisional license). There's no real American equivalent.

▶ **lay-by:** *n* rest area. A little parking area off the side of a main road (usually a motorway), where people generally stop to have a sandwich, let their children vomit, empty the dog or copulate with their work colleagues. Perhaps this is where the name came from.

light: *n* car window. Largely obsolete - most seen in modern English inside the term "quarterlights," which is used to refer to those small windows a little ahead of the front door windows, near where the mirrors are attached. "Light" is used in the U.S. architecturally to refer to the individual panes of a split window. The etymology of the term is nautical - small prisms were inserted in the decks of sailing ships to improve visibility below deck, and these themselves became known as "lights."

lorry: *n* truck. Not a pick-up truck (which barely exist in the U.K.); more of a goods truck.

manual gearbox: *n* stick-shift transmission. The way God intended cars to be driven.

milometer: *n* odometer. The thing that tells you how far you've gone in the car. A fairly antiquated term.

motor: *n* automobile. Derived from the time when all cars were known as "motor-cars."

motorway: *n* freeway.

multi-storey car park: *n* commercial car parking garage with, well, many floors. Americans call the same building a "parking ramp," "parking structure" or "parking deck," depending upon where they are in the country.

nearside: *n* the side of a car closest to the kerb. The other side is the offside. Don't bother looking up "offside," because it's pretty much a copy-paste of this with one word changed. I'm lazy like that.

number plate: *n* license plate. I already wrote about this under my entry for "registration" and I'll be damned if I'm writing any more.

offside: *n* the side of a car furthest from the kerb.

omnibus: *n* **1** old-fashioned bus. This is a quaint word, dating back to the times when buses were open at the rear and had a conductor ready to meet you. An omnibus is essentially one step technologically forward of a tram. **2** concatenated episodes of a week's worth of television or radio series (typically soap operas) often screened at the weekends (also called "omnibus edition"). The Latin word "omnibus" means simply "for all," which could explain both of these etymologies. I'm just saying that because I can't be bothered checking either of them. I can't even be bothered checking the Latin - someone just told me it. For all I know it's Latin for pig-fucker.

pavement: *n* sidewalk. Brits call the part that cars drive on "Tarmac." I wonder how many holidaymakers have been run over as a result of this confusion. Well, probably none really. I digress. Historically, "sidewalk" is in fact an old, now-unused British English word meaning exactly what the Americans take it to mean.

Pelican crossing: *n* pedestrian crossing. An area of the road, marked with black and white stripes, where traffic lights stop cars so that pedestrians can cross. A contraction of "PEdestrian LIght CONtrolled crossing." Yes, I know that would be "pelicon." People were stupid back then.

petrol: *n* gas. An abbreviation of "petroleum," much like "gas" is an abbreviation of "gasoline."

prang: *n* fender-bender. An event towards the more sedate end of car accidents - you're unlikely to hear on the news that fourteen people were killed in a multi-car *prang* and ensuing fireball on Wednesday evening.

puncture: **1** *n* flat tire. In the U.K., *puncture* is used to describe the offending tire itself rather than just the hole in it: *We had to pull over because we got a puncture.* **2** infraction (universal).

quay: *n* *pron.* "key" the place in a docks where boats are loaded and unloaded. The word exists in American English, but the British pronunciation can cause blank stares.

railway: *n* railroad. Can't think of anything witty.

recovery lorry: tow truck. The vehicle that comes to collect you when you have either

legitimately broken down or are too boneheaded to change a tyre. It's really not that hard. There are instructions in the glove box. And I mean you too, girls.

registration: *n* licence plate. While Americans can have anything they fancy on theirs, and they bear little pictures of sunny beaches and legends like "Ohio - The Flour Biscuit State" and such, the Brits have slightly more plain affairs and less choice about what goes on them. Well, no choice at all, in point of fact. As the government changed their systems of number/letter combinations a good few times, however, there is a lively secondary market in plates that look like they say something.

return ticket: *adj* round-trip ticket. As you probably know, it just means that you're planning on coming home again.

roundabout: *n* traffic circle; rotary. The device put into the road as a snare for learner drivers and foreigners. Everyone has to drive around in a circle until they see their selected exit road, at which point they must fight through the other traffic on the roundabout in a valiant attempt to leave it. *Roundabouts* do exist in the U.S. (predominantly in Massachusetts) but in the U.K. they're all over the place - there is no such thing as a four-way-stop.

saloon: *n* sedan. The cars that, well, aren't estates or sports cars. The kind your dad and the dentist have. They are called *saloons* in the U.K. because they usually have wooden swing doors, spittoons and people tend to burst into them waving a gun and saying something about the car not being big enough for two of us. Them. Us. I see why people hate learning English.

sleeper: *n* railroad tie. The very large blocks of wood which go between the rails and the ground on a section of railway line.

slip-road: *n* on-ramp/off-ramp. A road that runs parallel to a major one, allowing you to gain or lose speed safely while joining or leaving the main road.

speedo: *n* abbreviation for "speedometer."

subway: *n* underground pedestrian walkway. Built to enable you to cross the road safely, urinate or inject heroin. Brits do not call the London underground train system the "subway." They call it the "underground."

tailback: *n* traffic jam; back-up: *Don't bother going via the M25, there's a ten mile tailback.*

tarmac: *n* blacktop. The stuff that covers roads. Perhaps you'd like to hear some road-making history? Hmm? Or perhaps not. Perhaps you're sitting in bed naked, waiting for your husband to

finish in the shower. Perhaps you're on a train in a strange foreign country, hoping that this stupid book was going to be much more of a tour guide than it turned out to be. Perhaps you're having a shit. Well, bucko, whatever you're doing you're stuck now, and so you're going to hear a little bit of road-making history. A long time ago, a Scotsman named John Loudon Macadam invented a way of surfacing roads with gravel, this coating being known as "Macadam" - a term also used in the U.S. "What happens when the road aged?" I hear you say. Well, I'm so glad you asked. Unfortunately as the road aged the gravel tended to grind to dust and so it was coated with a layer of tar - this being "Tar-Macadam," which was concatenated to *tarmac*. Somewhere in the mists of time the Americans ended up using this only to describe airport runways, but the Brits still use it to describe the road surface.

tickover: *n* idle (of a car engine): *It even overheats on tickover!* **ticking over** idling.

trailer tent: *n* pop-up camper. A sort of folding-up caravan. It starts off as an average-sized trailer and then unfolds into a sort of crappy shed when you reach a campsite.

tram: *n* streetcar; trolley. A device very much like a train except it generally runs on tracks built on top of normal roads and is often powered electrically by high-strung cables (I mean ones on poles, not ones of an excitable disposition). Trams are making something of a comeback in Europe generally, with new systems springing up in the U.K.

Tube: *n* the London Underground railway. Londoners are clearly not as inspired as Glaswegians, who call theirs the "Clockwork Orange." In the U.S., these sorts of rail systems are known as "subways" which, no doubt in order to cause confusion, is what the Brits call the walkways which go underneath roads, where tramps live and drunk people urinate.

tyre: *n* tire. The black rubber things around the wheels of your car. The British spelling in this particular instance is, well, curious.

underground: *n* subway (specifically underground railway): *There's an underground station two minutes from my house.*

verge: *n* shoulder. The edge of the road, populated by hitch-hikers, frogs and children urinating. That's "frogs" and "children urinating," not "(frogs and children) urinating." Glad I could clear that up. Let me know if you have any other questions.

windscreen: **1** *n* windshield (of a car). **2** *n* one of those things that you put up on a beach that stops the sand from blowing in and stops those

inside from noticing that the tide is coming in.

wing: *n* fender. The metal part of a car that covers the front wheel and joins onto the bonnet. Perhaps it derives from the time when cars were made which could fly.

zebra crossing: *n* the black-and-white striped pathways drawn across roads where pedestrians have right of way and motorists have to stop if anyone is waiting by them. The phrase has been slightly usurped by the less exciting term "pedestrian crossing." While this very concept of "it's alright, on you go, the cars all have to stop" is dangerous enough, a great deal of them are positioned straight after roundabouts where motorists are least likely to be ready for them. I swear these things are part of some sort of population control policy. To make them marginally easier to see, some of them are marked with Belisha Beacons.

