

## A brief history of dictionary publishing at OUP

Dictionaries written for children and dictionaries written for adults have a common history. In fact, the first alphabetical word lists ever produced were for children, not for adults.

English lexicography had its beginnings in the 16th century. In 1596 Edmund Coote, master of Freeschool at Bury St. Edmunds produced a text book called *The English Schoole-Maister*. It consisted of passages of graded text and an alphabetical supplement containing 'slightly hard words in alphabetical order with meanings'. Another early example of an English dictionary can be traced back to 1604 when a school master Robert Cawdrey produced *A Table Alphabetical*, a list of about 3000 words with simple definitions. This booklet was to help readers understand 'hard usual English words' and these were 'gathered for the benefit and help of ladies, gentlewomen, or any other unskilful persons'.

But it wasn't until the 18<sup>th</sup> century that Samuel Johnson compiled the first major dictionary of the English language, at the behest of a number of London booksellers, which was published as a 2 volume edition in 1755 by Longman's (OUP turned him down!). It contained 42,000 entries and took him over 9 years to compile.

Johnson's remained the definitive dictionary until the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which is when work began on the first edition of the Oxford English Dictionary. The dictionary was commissioned from Oxford University Press by the Philological Society of London in 1879; words and their meanings were sent in by members of the public on 'slips', creating the first paper-based corpus, or word bank. The dictionary's editor – and his 11 children, whom he used as unpaid labour! – worked on the dictionary for 5 years – and they only got part way through the 'A's, reaching the word 'ant', in this time. They then realised the project was going to take longer than the 10 years they had anticipated. In fact, the final volume of the dictionary did not appear until 1928 – nearly 50 years after work began. Once published, the dictionary immediately became out of date, as new words entered the language – so in the period 1933-1986, 4 supplementary volumes were published.

Many different editors and contributors worked on the dictionary in this time, including JRR Tolkien, who edited the 'W's – from 'Waggle' to 'Warlock'.

The second edition - which incorporated the supplementary volumes – was published in 1989 as a 20 volume set. In 1992 the first electronic edition was published on CD-ROM. The third edition (and first revision of the original text) is currently being worked on.

At no period in its history has the Oxford English Dictionary been commercially profitable. The current revision programme is estimated to cost £34 million.

The OED has now achieved iconic status - and is an irreplaceable part of English culture.

All the English language dictionaries OUP publish use the OED as their source.