

# The Puzzle of the British English

By : Carl Halling

Also known as "The Riddle of the British English (redux)"



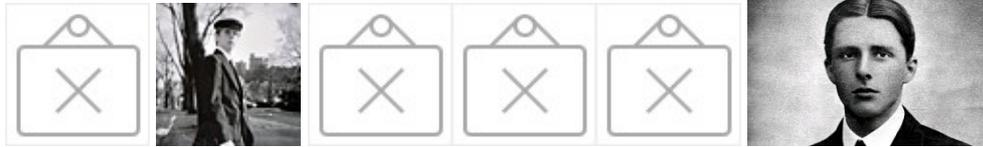
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# The Puzzle of the British English

## Revised Version



The Riddle of the British

English

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In 1955, Carl Robert, the first son of Pat and Ann Halling - who also happens to be the narrator of this convoluted tale - was born at the tail end of West London's Goldhawk Road which is a bit of a no-man's-land inasmuch as it's the only part of the road - prominently featured Franc Roddam's 1979 film of the Who's Quadrophenia - not to bisect Shepherds Bush, being officially in Hammersmith, but considered by some to be part of the more bourgeois area of Chiswick.

My first home was a small workman's cottage in Notting Hill, but by the time of my brother's birth on the 2nd May 1958, the family had already moved to nearby Bedford Park, which while also in Chiswick according to its postcode, is part of the Southfields ward of South Acton, and presumably was then too. One thing is certain, it was part of the now defunct Borough of Acton.

Carl was the name of my paternal grandfather, and Robert that of my mother's brother Bob, and I came into the world very much as a Briton as opposed to an Englishman...which is to not to say that I don't consider myself English, because I do. But my origins are British as opposed to strictly English...which is to say Scots-Irish, Scottish and English Canadian through my mother, and Danish Australian and English Australian through my dad, with a possible Cornish admixture coming through my paternal grandmother. Her maiden name of Pinnock is a common one in England's poorest county, and therefore of possible Brythonic Celtic origin.

Like the Welsh and Manx of Britain, and the Bretons of France, the Cornish are of the Brythonic family of Celtic peoples, while the Scottish and the Irish are of the Gaelic. It could be therefore that I partake of both Gaelic and Brythonic Celtic ancestry.

Whatever the truth, I'm proud of my roots in Ulster and Glasgow, both of which possess - I think it's fair to say - long-established working class traditions. The same applies to Wales and the north and midlands of England, while the south and especially the south east of England are widely seen as affluent, middle class regions, although needless to say, variations exist within all regions of the country. For example, the aforesaid Cornwall in the south west is, as I've already stated, England's poorest county, and the great metropolis of London, which is Europe's financial centre and still one of the most powerful cities in the world, contains no less than fourteen of the nation's most deprived twenty boroughs.

What's more, while Glasgow is home to a massive working class with clearly defined Catholic and Protestant communities, Scotland's capital Edinburgh, known as the Athens of the North, has a reputation for great gentility. Yet, in common with other affluent cities throughout a nation of striking extremes of wealth and poverty, Oxford, Cambridge, Bristol and so on, Edinburgh contains areas of considerable deprivation...Wester

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Hailes, Broomhouse, Clermiston, Muirhouse, Pilton, Granton, Leith, Niddrie and Craigmillar being especially affected in this respect.

I'm also proud of a more bourgeois English ancestry which comes through my father, who although born in the Tasmanian hinterland in Rowella and raised by a Danish father, is English through his mother Mary, whose own father was apparently what is known as a gentleman, which means he was independently wealthy, and therefore arguably part of the lower gentry. Yet, by leaving her first husband - an army officer by the name of Peter Robinson - for a Dane with no steady profession from what I can gather, she effectively cut herself off from her class and country, act which ultimately forced her out to work to support her young family, and with Carl desperately sick with the Multiple Sclerosis that would ultimately kill him.

Yet, while I'm proud to be British, England is the country of my birth and the one I identify with in spirit despite the fact that I'm more British than English as such...indeed if anyone incarnates the riddle of what it is to be British, a citizen of a nation consisting of four nations and yet existing as one, it's me. For all that though, in the words of the famous hymn...there's another country, in which all distinctions of ethnicity and class will be a thing of the past, and whose citizens will be of one race alone, the human race, the only one created by God.

My first school was a kind of nursery school held on a daily basis at the home of one Miss Pierce in Bedford Park, and then aged 4 years old, I joined the exclusive Lycée Francais Charles de Gaulle, situated in the fabulously opulent West London area of South Kensington, where I was to become bilingual by the age of four or thereabouts. My father was far from wealthy, but he was determined that my brother and I enjoy the best and richest education imaginable, and we were dressed in lederhosen as small boys with our heads shorn like convicts so that we be distinguished from the common run of British boys, with their short back and sides, and to this end, he worked, toiled incessantly in the tough London session world to ensure that we did. Almost every race and nationality under the sun was to be found in the Lycée in those days... and among those who went on to be good pals of mine were kids of English, French, Jewish, American, Yugoslavian and Middle Eastern origin.

It was in this totemic decade of pop and youth culture that Pat Halling moved into the session music world, where he was to record for film, television and above all, the new popular music that had been recently sired by the Rock and Roll revolution. In the meantime, Miss Ann Watt's musical life was put on hold while she concentrated on being the mother of two small boys, while supporting her husband in his various passions, which included dinghy racing on the Thames and elsewhere. She faithfully crewed for him for many years at the Tamesis Sailing Club in Teddington, West London, where he was a member for much of the sixties, winning several racing trophies initially in a Firefly - number 1588 - while his career as a session player thrived.

According to what Pat has told me, he worked on early sessions for British musical sensations Lulu, Cilla Black and Tom Jones, as well as with superstar producers Tony Hatch and Mickie Most. Hatch wrote most of Petula Clark's hit singles of the sixties, some alone, some with his wife Jackie Trent, and she went on to become a major star in the US as part of the so-called British Invasion of the American charts, as did several acts produced by Most, including Herman's Hermits whose angelic front man Peter Noone ensured that his band were briefly almost as popular as the Beatles stateside, and the Scottish singer-songwriter Donovan.

Pat became close friends with both Most and composer-arranger John Cameron, the two men who helped Donovan achieve a string of international hit records once he'd moved away from his early Folk-Protest style towards something far more Pop-oriented, starting with the psychedelic "Sunshine Superman" (1966), which was a massive stateside smash, and the first produced by Most.

Among those session musicians who played for Most in the '60s were Big Jim Sullivan, Jimmy Page and John Paul Jones, who also arranged for him. Page went on to join seminal British Rock band The Yardbirds, which had been managed initially by Simon Napier Bell, before being taken over by Most's business partner, Peter Grant. When the Yardbirds collapsed in 1968, the two remaining members Page and bassist Chris Dreja set about forming a new band, also to be managed by Grant. This turned out to be the New Yardbirds, which ultimately evolved into Led Zeppelin, one of the most successful Rock bands of all time, and second only to

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the Rolling Stones in terms of legendary darkness and mystery.

It seems incredible that a force of such seismic power and influence as Led Zep should emerge from the relative innocence of the London Blues and session music scenes of the sixties, but then a similar thing could be said of British Rock as a whole. What was it that transformed an interest among young men of largely middle class origins in the bleak brooding music of the Blues into a musical movement which took America and the world at large by storm all throughout the '60s and beyond? That's not an easy question to answer, but I'm going to give it some sort of a go, but first we return to the birth of the New Yardbirds.

While attempting to forge a new band to supplant the disintegrating Yardbirds, Jimmy Page's first choice as vocalist, Terry Reid, turned him down, but while he did so he recommended a young 19 year old singer from the Midlands of England known as Robert Plant for the job. Page duly travelled to Birmingham with Dreja and Grant to look the youngster over, and was impressed by what he saw. He then invited Plant to spend a few days with him at his home, the Thames Boathouse, in the beautiful little Berkshire village of Pangbourne for initial discussions related to the band...all this taking place in the summer of '68, just months before I joined the Nautical College situated a few miles from the village itself.

### The Playing Fields of Pangbourne

I left the Lycée in this summer...before spending a few months at a crammer called Davies Preparatory School so as to become sufficiently up to scratch academically to pass what is known as the Common Entrance Examination.

Taking the CE is a necessity for all British boys and girls seeking entrance into private fee-paying schools, including those known as public schools, which are the traditional secondary places of learning for the British governing and professional classes...the ruling elite in other words. The vast majority of those who go on to public schools begin their academic careers in preparatory or prep schools, and so for the most part leave home at around eight years old.

The school my father hoped I'd manage to get into was the Nautical College, Pangbourne, although I think his first choice had been either HMS Conway or Worcester, also known as the Incorporated Thames Nautical Training College. However, naval colleges and training schools were fading fast in the late 1960s, Conway being on its last legs as a so-called stone frigate on the south coast of Anglesey, and Worcester having recently been incorporated into the Merchant Navy College at Greenhithe, Kent.

Somehow, though, I managed to pass the CE, and so at still only twelve years old became Cadet Carl Robert Halling 173, who was for a few months the youngest in the college, and an official serving officer in Britain's Royal Naval Reserve. Pangbourne's regime was tough in '68, even by the standards of British public schools which had historically trained boys for service on behalf of the Empire, and its headmaster - a serving officer in the Royal Navy for what I think was a quarter of a century - was known as the Captain Superintendent.

I was what was known as a stroppy moosh, stroppy meaning insolent, and moosh a neophyte or new boy, as distinct from a doggie, which was the Pangbournian equivalent of the traditional public school fag, or personal servant in the so-called fagging system. In my first term, I was deemed as so transcendently incompetent that none of the seniors, or older boys would even consider me as their doggie...and yet when it came to my stropiness, this came ultimately to work in my favour, when I became a virtual mascot of some of the hardest and coolest boys in college.

I idolised these lads and happily clowned for them like some kind of court minion, and they protected me in return, instilling me with a sense of invincibility which can't have had any kind of positive effect on the development of my character, which wasn't too strong to begin with. I'd go so far as to say that I wasn't born with natural backbone as perhaps some are, but that doesn't mean to say that those who lack moral fibre can't go on to develop it, nor that those who don't are not capable of losing it, because they certainly are. Am I

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wrong to suggest that thanks to the New Covenant established by Christ, natural born sons and daughters of Cain can go on to become the noblest of men and women, while natural born scions of Abel can degenerate into the most unspeakable monsters? Perhaps so...but one thing I am right about...I've struggled to develop character in a way my parents never did, and I'm still struggling. If anyone ever needed Christ it's me.

By my second year, all the social standing I'd worked so hard to acquire had evaporated, as I was required to remain behind in the third form, while all my friends went on to the fourth, a reversal which exerted a devastating effect on my morale. Insecure and disaffected, I started throwing my weight around among my new classmates, until two of them came down so hard on me that I was cured of trying to act the lout with them at least. We eventually became very close friends, but I don't think they ever fully forgave me for trying it on with them, not that they ever let on about it. Actually, I jestâ of course they did.

From the outset, I desperately wanted to distinguish myself at Pangbourne...and especially at sports, beginning with the great ruffianly game for gentlemen of Rugby Football...and oh with what longing I gazed at the sight of rugger colours on the blue blazers or striped Paravicinis of those who'd earned them on the playing fields of Pangbourne. At Pangbourne, colours were - and presumably still are - awarded during one or other of the main sporting seasons of rugger, hockey, cricket and rowing and for such subsidiary sports as swimming, boxing, sailing, fencing and so on, to one showing distinction within a particular team or rowing eight or whatever, and are a long-standing tradition within British private schools and universities. Sad to say, none ever came my way.

The fact is that, raised as I was in the western suburbs of London in the sixties with its alleys, greens, parks, sweet shops and narrow streets lined by terraced or semi-detached houses, I was wholly ignorant of the secrets of the hallowed sports of Britain's gilded elite...so ignorant in fact that by my third term, I'd got it in my head that I wanted to be a rowing coxswain, due to some crazy dream of mine of one day ending up in the 1st VIII. As things turned out, I ended up in the conspicuous yet humiliating position of coxing only lesser crews...except for on those rare occasions when a better man was unavailable. We were pretty thin on the ground we coxes.

### The Boy Who Discovered Guevara

It would be false to assert that Pangbourne was exclusively composed of the sons of the British privileged, because it wasn't...and neither was it a narrowly Anglo-Saxon institution, because during my time I knew American, West Indian, Middle Eastern and South African cadets as well as British ones, and several of these were close friends. What's more, it was supplemented in the autumn of '68 by cadets from the recently dismantled TS Mercury, founded in 1885 by a wealthy businessman and keen yachtsman Charles Hoare for the rescue of London slum boys who would then be trained for service in the Royal and Merchant Navies.

Until as recently as the previous July, she'd been moored on the River Hamble near Southampton. Its regime made that of Pangbourne resemble a holiday camp in comparison. For example, there'd been no heating onboard even in winter, and the boys were forced to sleep in hammocks. Nonetheless, I was friendly with several of them, and most were not too tough, although the truth is that a degree of resilience was necessary in those days at Pangbourne, even after '69, when despite being renamed Pangbourne College, she changed little.

As much as I struggled in the arena of sporting activities, my true failure came in the classroom where I had little if any interest in what the master was trying to teach me in any given subject except French, English and Physical Education. Terminally bored, I was constantly in trouble for one misdemeanour or another, and my

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grades were rarely anything other than appalling during the entire four year period I was at Pangbourne. In fact in pretty well every subject except French, I tended to be bottom of the form, term after term, year after year, and if not bottom then very near it.

Itâs my contention that I was a slow developer suffering from mild learning difficulties, and certainly there were those teachers at Pangbourne who found my behaviour medically worrying with good reason. On one occasion, I went for an eye test in the village, only to return to college without having taken it, before announcing that Iâd forgotten why Iâd gone into town in the first place. As for my hygiene, it was so minimal that at one point the bottoms of my feet were literally as black as soot, as if someone had painted them.

But it would be false to say I was an unqualified rebel. In fact, I never stopped longing to be recognised as being good at something, anything...even going so far at one point as to become a member the college boxing team. As such I suffered punch-drunkenness at Eton at the hands - or should I say fists - of an elegant young adonis with a classic Eton flop who later commented on an especially cruel blow he'd inflicted on me with a certain degree of remorse, which was decent of him. But how deceptively graceful he was, this flower of Eton...king of all public schools.

However, in around 1969, some time after having seen a TV programme about young revolutionaries who idolised Che Guevara, I became a Che acolyte myself, and one of the few genuine accolades I ever received while at college came in consequence of a short story I wrote about a young man who becomes involved with Che in his revolutionary activities in South America. Even the headmaster commended me for my work.

Following on from my infatuation with Che, I came to fancy myself as a full-blown Communist, covering various items with the hammer and sickle, including at various times, a school notebook, and my own hand, which provoked an older far larger boy into accusing me of being a "bloody Red bastard" - or something similar - before playfully setting about me in a spirit of mock-outrage...but he wasn't going to deter me from my chosen path: I'd fallen hard for the hard Left and that was that.

My time at Pangbourne coincided with the counterculture being at its point of maximum intensity, which is to say between the infamous year of rioting and street fighting of 1968, and that, four years later, when the sixties really and truly came to a final close and which was defined in Britain at least by the artifice and decadence of Glam.

One afternoon around the turbulent turn of the decade, I found myself longing to join the Hippie throngs I saw flocking to the Reading Rock Festival one afternoon from the window of a college coach in all their ragged multicoloured glory. Rebellion was everywhere in a desperately imperilled West, and Pangbourne was not exempt, in fact, many of us dreamed of a world of Bohemian freedom lying only just beyond the confines of our college, and intensely close friendships were forged smoking cigarettes in secret wooded places where the Cadet Officers couldn't find us, and where we were united by a love of Rock music and its iconsâHendrix, Morrison, Jagger, Page et al, their defiantly androgynous clothes, their floating, flouting hair and so on.

Yet for all that, there was a part that never stopped wanting to be accepted by the system...never stopped hoping that one day, favour would look kindly on Cadet CR Halling 173, and he'd be promoted to Cadet Officer, and so given a star to proudly display on the right sleeve of his navy blue pullover, but it was never to be...never to be...never to be...

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**Warning: Actually posted on the 1st of June 2010, thence the number of views will almost certainly be inaccurate.**

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