

A MARITIME ORIGIN FOR THE WORD 'POMMY'

As readers will have no doubt gathered from my editorial rantings, both DHL and the origins of the word 'pommy' are personal hobbyhorses.

But my love of DH Lawrence does not extend to his knowledge of Australian etymology, so I would now like to foist upon readers an alternative derivation to that of DHL.

And you'll all be relieved to know it is not my own. It's my father's. But as his name is also Joseph Davis, it's probably not going to matter much anyway.

His belief is that the word 'Pommy' has nothing to do with Pomegranates and is actually of maritime origin. My father is a retired merchant seaman and wharf labourer of primarily English landlubbing stock, but his maternal grandfather was a Swedish seaman.

On my mother's side I am descended from Peter Hibbs, a seaman on the 'Sirius' and reputedly the only first fleeter who'd sailed with Cook on the Endeavour.

Hibbs does not appear in the records of any of Cook's voyages, so unless he was the unnamed cabin boy on the Endeavour (and this is not impossible) both this and his claim to be the second crew member (after Banks) to set foot on Australian soil at Botany Bay are probably fabrications.

More certainly, Hibbs was Master of the 'Norfolk' during Bass and Flinders famous circumnavigation of Tasmania. Bass and Flinders named Point Hibbs on Tasmania's West Coast in his honour. So seafaring is in my parent's blood.

None of this background can do much to support my father's etymological theories but they do indicate that my family has had some experience of the sea and the language of sailors.

THE THEORY

According to my father, Portsmouth (England) was regularly referred to by sailors as 'Pompey' both this and last century. As the English settlers in Australia had often arrived directly from Portsmouth my father's theory is that they were referred to as 'Pompeys'. This, he feels, was eventually corrupted to 'Pommies' and gained a wider parlance in the Australian colonies once these English settlers disembarked and, having heard themselves referred to as such by the sailors, took the word into the wider community.

I make no claims as to the accuracy of my father's theory but am virtually certain that it is a derivation that has not been canvassed previously.

The first recorded use of the word 'Pommy' by the Australian National Dictionary is in the Sydney Bulletin for November 14, 1912.

Joseph Davis Snr and Jnr.