

WORD OF THE MONTH

OXFORD AUSTRALIA: THE FUTURE OF AUSTRALIAN ENGLISH | JUNE 2015

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hubbard

- **noun**: an inexperienced, unskilled, or unfashionably attired cyclist.

Warning: this article contains explicit language.

THE STORY BEHIND THE WORD OF THE MONTH

A posting on the *Urban Dictionary* website from February 2008 proposed a definition for the word **hubbard**:

An uncool, slow, unfashionable, annoying, awkward or stupid cyclist. Often identified by wearing a helmet that is more than 15 years old, poor judgement on the road or by the ridiculous cargo they carry on their bike. In a racing context **hubbards** are identified by having unshaven legs, riding a Giant or by an inability to go round a corner with the peleton [*sic*] without almost causing a crash. Recumbent cyclists are automatically **hubbards**.

The posting marks the first written evidence for this term, although it likely dates back to at least the early 2000s. The next significant evidence for **hubbard** occurred in 2012 when several Australian websites featured the term, including this forum posting on the *Bicycles Network Australia* site:

I'm a **hubbard** because: 1. I ride a touring bike, with pannier, for my daily commute. 2. I wear a (wool) t-shirt and shy shorts. 3. My average speed rarely cracks 25km/hr. 4. My bike has a mirror, lots of lights and a horn.

Further comments in this forum highlight some of the characteristics that might be associated with a **hubbard**, including: the use of mudguards, the use of recumbent or old bicycles, commuting to work, and unshaven legs. They also suggest a **hubbard** may be understood as someone who is an incompetent and potentially dangerous rider.

The common thread in the evidence for **hubbard** is the perceived lack of commitment to the fashion and etiquette of road cycling. An article in *The Australian* newspaper sums up this perception:

Mock if you will, but ignore the look and you risk the ultimate cycling insult: you will be referred to as a '**Hubbard**'. Worse still, nobody will want to ride with you. You will be deemed uncool and, more important, unsafe. (12 October 2012)

The evidence for **hubbard** after 2012 indicates that the word is chiefly used in Australian English. In the same *Australian* article the origin of **hubbard** is stated simply: 'Derived from the nursery rhyme Old Mother Hubbard'. This possible origin is

mentioned in one of the online forums as well. The problem with such an etymology is that there is no evidence to link it directly with the nursery rhyme—the 1805 nursery rhyme seemingly has nothing to do with the cycling sense of **hubbard**, although there could be some arbitrary use of *Old Mother Hubbard* in the sense of 'old fuddy-duddy'. Another candidate for the origin of **hubbard** is the originally US slang term *mother-hubber*, and its variant *mother hubbard*, which is used as a euphemism for *motherfucker*, 'a despicable or very unpleasant person or thing'. Again there is no direct link to the cycling term. One other possibility is that **hubbard** is derived from *hub*, meaning the 'central part of a wheel, rotating on or with the axle, and from which the spokes radiate'. More specifically **hubbard** may derive from *hub gear*, often associated with commuting and city bicycles, as opposed to the derailleur gear system found on most racing bicycles. Further evidence may shed more light on the origin of this term.

The Australian National Dictionary Centre team would love to hear about your experience and understanding of the term **hubbard**. Editors will be researching **hubbard** for possible future inclusion in the *Australian National Dictionary*.



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