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## Scouse

**Scouse**, an important term in the discourse of contemporary British culture, has a long and complex history; it originates in a contraction of ‘lobscouse’, an early modern English nautical term for a basic dish consisting of meat, vegetables, and ship’s biscuit. This sub-standard standard fare was first recorded in a satire on the English navy (1708): ‘He has sent the Fellow a thousand times to the Devil, that first invented Lobscouse’. Yet although the term was evidently coined pre-eighteenth century, its roots are obscure. One possibility is that ‘lobscouse’ was a corruption of ‘lob’s course’, as in Smollett (1751): ‘a mess of that savoury composition known by the name of lob’s-course’. This would suggest the sense of ‘a meal served to a lob’ (a sixteenth-century coinage meaning ‘clumsy fellow, country bumpkin, clown or lout’). Given this, it seems plausible that the dish may have originated in England and spread through maritime trade (in which of course Liverpool played a central role in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries). Evidence to support this hypothesis lies in the appearance of a series of related terms for this type of stew across the northern European languages (modern Norwegian ‘lapskaus’, Swedish ‘lapskojs’, Danish ‘skipperlabskovs’, Dutch ‘lapskous’ and German ‘labskaus’), and the fact that ‘lobscouse’ was used in American English from the early-to-mid nineteenth century. The transition to the shortened form **scouse** appears to have been made in Liverpool by the last decades of the eighteenth century, chiefly in references to institutional food. Eden’s *The State of the Poor: or, an History of the Labouring Classes in England, From the Conquest to the Present Period* (1797), for example, makes reference to the expenditure on food in the Liverpool poorhouse: ‘Beef, 101 lbs. for scouse’; ‘14 Measures potatoes for scouse’ (420 lbs); and ‘Onions for ditto’ (28 lbs).

Yet if this accounts for the history of **scouse** the dish, the development of the transferred senses of the term is more complicated and difficult to trace. The fifth edition of Eric Partridge’s *Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English* (1961) records ‘Scouseland’, meaning Liverpool, as ‘nautical and (Liverpool) dockers’ usage of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century (though there is no evidence in support of the claim). But the crucial shift, which associates people, place and cultural (culinary) tradition, appears to have taken place around the First World War in Forces’ slang. In fact the evidence suggests that the use of **scouse**, and the derivative ‘scouser’, was a negative, or at least playfully disrespectful way of referring to the inhabitants of Liverpool by people from elsewhere. This pejorative sense is confirmed by the first reports of the use of **scouse** within the city, which note that it referred to denizens of the Scotland Road area (one of the poorest, and most Irish, districts). Indeed, while it remained as the name used in Army and Naval slang for Liverpudlian members of the Forces, **scouse** failed to displace ‘Dicky Sam’, the most widely used nickname for a Liverpudlian which dated from the early nineteenth century, until the 1920s-30s (at which point it began to contend with ‘wacker’ – the alternative form until the 1970s).

Strikingly, the use of **scouse** to refer to the language of Liverpool (usually the accent, though it can also mean the local dialect), is relatively recent; the first recorded use is in a headline in the Liverpool Echo – ‘Scouse lingo how it all began’ (1950). Though there is evidence of a sustained interest in the local language from the early twentieth century, the overt link between people, place and a form of speech only appeared and became consolidated through the activities of a small group of local historians, folklorists, entertainers and journalists in the 1950s. In many ways this was an ‘invention of tradition’ which, as so often, took the form of a combination of historical fact, myth, nostalgia, pride, ambivalence and pragmatic story-telling. And it produced a powerful if reductive narrative of the history of the city, one which belies Liverpool’s intricate multicultural past, through the history of its language (in essence: **scouse** = Lancashire dialect + Irish-English). Yet the most significant element that distinguishes the appearance of **scouse** is the fact that it was promulgated in influential early modes of popular culture and indeed became integral to them as a way of representing aspects of Northern working-class life. From the early and important BBC TV documentary on Northern working class city life, *Morning in the Streets* (1958), to the earliest forms of TV drama, *No Trams to Lime Street* (1959) and *Z-Cars* (from 1962), through the impact of *The Beatles*, and, later, *The Liver Birds*, *A Family at War*, *The Wackers*, *Boys from the Blackstuff*, *Bread*, *Merseybeat* and, for twenty-one years, *Brookside*, **scouse** was enregistered as the language of Liverpool. This was always an open and ambivalent process and **scouse** was and is both a familiar and flexible ideological marker. It has been used at specific moments to represent the lovable, cheeky, witty rogue (‘the scouse git’ of *Till Death Do Us Part*, 1965); the malingering and socially damaging trade union militant (frequently figured in the broadcast news of the late 1970s); the whining, self-pitying victim (*Hillsborough*, 1989); the confident, assertive and irreverent maker of fashion and culture (the European Capital of Culture, 2008); the deserving recipient of justice (*Hillsborough*, 2014). Thus although it retains its former senses of a type of stew and a person from Liverpool, **scouse** is perhaps best understood as a prime and indicative contemporary example of a mode of cultural representation that is peculiarly British: that curious, powerful and often damaging concatenation of language, class, geography, identity and political significance.

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