

THE TANGLED WORD WEB SPANNING FROM STEWS TO BROTHELS

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unravels a complex linguistic chain stretching back to the Classical era and spanning an entire continent



If you have been up in the Greek mountains, you may have encountered the word *somba*. This is an important Greek word in the winter time as it means 'stove' – in mountainous country most often referring to a wood-burning heater.

Somba is a much-travelled word. It came into Greek from Turkish: the modern Turkish word for 'stove' is *soba*. Most Greek speakers were under the suzerainty of the Ottoman empire for several centuries, and during that time many words of Turkish origin made their way into modern Greek. This was also true of Romanian speakers – one of their modern words for 'stove' is *soba* – and of Albanian speakers – the corresponding word in Albanian is *sobe*.

But *soba* was not originally a Turkish word. The Turks had borrowed it from Hungarian. In modern Hungarian the word *soba* means 'room', though this originally referred to a heated room – as it did in German, which is where the Hungarians, in their turn, got the word from. In Old High German, which is what the language of southern Germany up until about 1000AD is known as, the corresponding word was *stuba*.

But it turns out that *stuba* was not originally a German word either. The details aren't totally clear, but it seems that it came into German from the Late Latin form *stufa*, from the verb *stufare*, which was originally *extufare* in Vulgar Latin, where it meant 'to take a steam bath'.

Amazingly, though, this was not even originally a Latin word. The *ex-* part of *extufare* certainly was Latin, but the *-tufare* part came from *tupha*, which had been borrowed into Latin from another language: *tupha* meant 'steam' or 'smoke' in Ancient Greek, first recorded in the writings of Hippocrates in the 400s BC! So over the course of several centuries, the word went full circle, from Greek to Latin to German to Hungarian to Turkish and back to Greek again.

This word also made its way into many other languages. The modern German descendant of ancient *stuba* is *stube*, which refers to a sitting-room. In the Plattdeutsch or Low German of northern Germany, the corresponding word is *stuw*. From there, it made its way north into the Scandinavian languages: in Icelandic it's *stofu*, in Norwegian *stove* or *stue*, in Danish *stue*; and in Swedish, *stuga* means 'a cabin'.

Remarkably, English has borrowed the

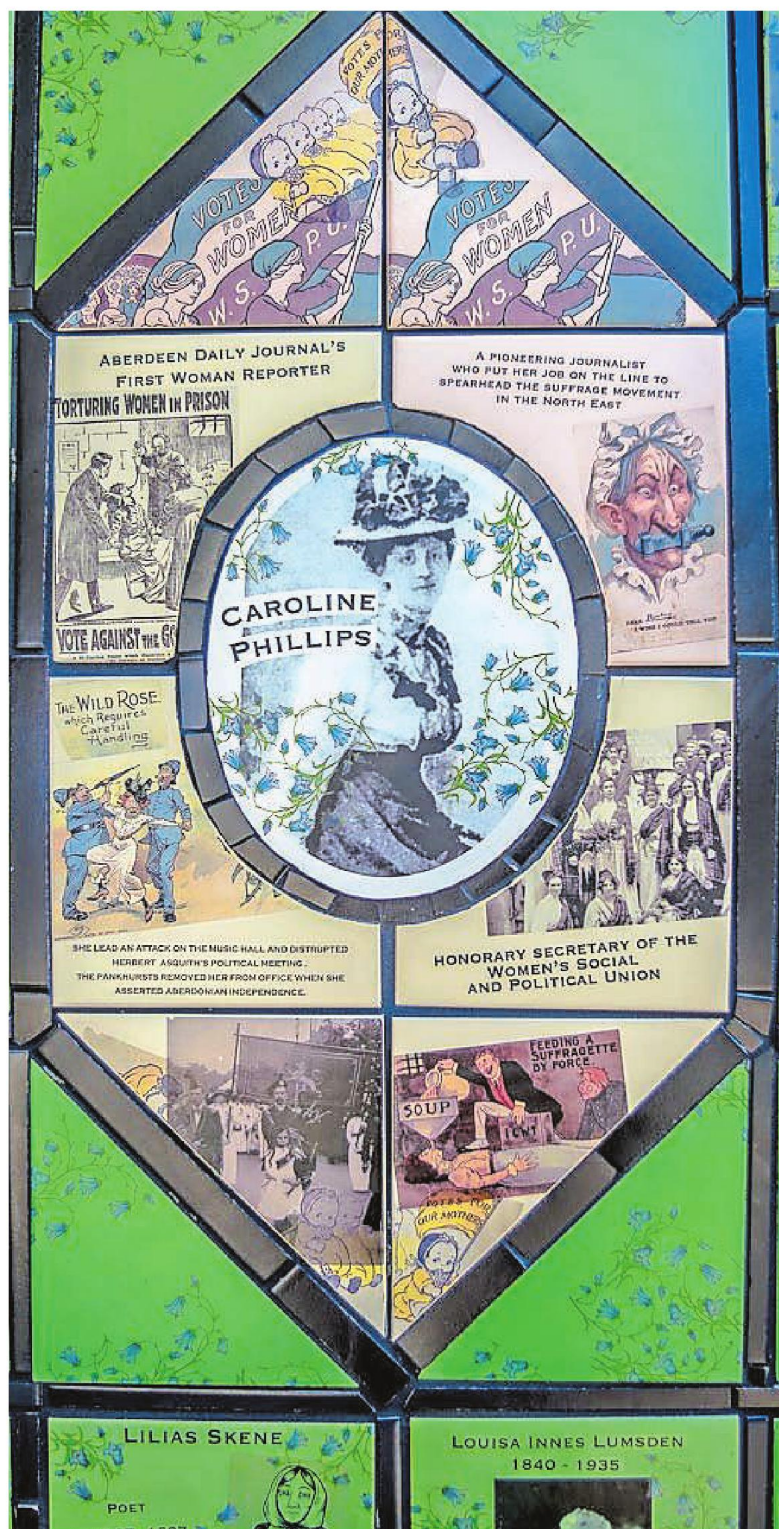


stufa word no fewer than three times. Old English had a rare word *stofa*, meaning a room for taking a steam – or hot-air – bath; the form *stufbaef* also occurred, meaning 'hot-air bath'. Then the word seems to have disappeared from the language, not coming back again into English until around 1450 as *stove*, a borrowing from Low German meaning of 'heated room'. Gradually, from about 1600 onwards, the meaning of the word started being transferred from referring to a heated room to the device used to do the heating. During the 1700s it then also came to refer to a device used for cooking as well as heating.

But during the 15th century, English not only borrowed *stove* from Low German, it also borrowed the word *estuve* from Mediaeval French. This too had originally come from the Late Latin *stufa*: modern French *étuve* means 'steam room'. *Estuve* became *stuve* or *steve* in English, where it meant one of two things. First it could, like *stove*, mean a heated room – and by the 1300s it was also being used to mean 'brothel', presumably because of the frequent use of bath-houses for prostitution. Secondly, it also referred to a vessel used for cooking by means of steaming or boiling, so 'cauldron'. During the 1700s there was then another transfer of meaning, with the result that *stew* gradually came to refer to the food cooked in a cauldron rather than to the vessel itself. It was a long journey from Hippocrates to Irish stew.

METONYMY

Metonymy is the substitution of one word by another which has an association with it of some kind: suit for 'business-executive' is an example. Changes in the meanings of words can involve metonymic processes, as with stove 'heated room' becoming 'heater'; and stew 'cauldron' becoming 'food cooked in a cauldron'.



Artwork by
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Photo: Brian
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residents, business, tourism and the overall atmosphere of the place, but with funding secured for the next three years there's at least a better chance that this art extravaganza will amount to much more than an exercise in prettification. Reactions in the street and the positive feedback to the Chamber of Commerce and co-initiators of the festival Aberdeen Inspired amongst others bode well.

But lastly, talking of reactions, we're not sure what Trump will make of the searing and witty interventions placed at the entrance to his golf course but when Dr. D was out about pasting up his *Curfew* posters one dear Aberdonian approached

him with an earnest expression. The poor fella wanted more details. What's going on? Why is there a curfew and when's it starting? Today? If this degree of trepidation sits in the heart and mind of even one citizen of Aberdeen then a dose of fun, visual delight and thoughtfully provocative urban interventions surely can't do the place (and that poor bloke) any harm.

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