

# Keeping us on our mettle over the spelling of words

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■ At one time the spelling of the word flower applied to the product of grinding wheat too.

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A reader wrote to the EDP during the winter pointing out that a car which had skidded off an icy road had mounted a kerb, not a curb as reported in the newspaper.

The letter-writer was right. A kerb is a stone edging to a raised path. A curb is a restraint on something.

Except that in the USA they do spell kerb "curb". We regard curb and kerb as two different words; Americans think of them as being the same. Historically speaking, they're right.

In English, a curb was originally a strap bound round the jaw of a horse in order to restrain it – to curb it.

The word came from Old French *courbe*, which descended from Latin *curvus*, bend – also the source of our word *curve*.

By 1500, curb had also come to refer to a bent enclosed framework, and later it was applied to the edge of a garden bed, bent or not.

Then, by 1800, the meaning had been extended to include the edge of a street-side path.

This was a meaning so different from a strap round a horse's jaw that it's easy to see why it was no longer perceived as the same word; and it's not surprising that an

alternative spelling developed for the newer meaning.

The same thing happened with *flower* and *flour* – they were originally the same word, too.

Flower was borrowed from Old French *flor*, meaning "flower, blossom", and through time also came to mean "the best of its kind" – especially, by about 1250 or so, the best part of the wheat, ie wheat after the bran had been removed, the "flower of the wheat".

Eventually this meaning became divorced from the "bloom" meaning, and started being spelt differently to avoid confusion.

Another example of the same phenome-

non is provided by *metal* and *mettle* – again, they used to be the same word. English acquired the word from Old French *metal* – "metal, material, stuff".

In Shakespeare's time, the two spellings were used interchangeably, for both the literal sense of metallic stuff and the metaphorical sense of "stuff that a person is made of", ie their character.

During the 1700s, the two spellings began to be used systematically to apply to the literal and metaphorical meanings respectively, and we now no longer think of them as being the same word.

And if we think of them as being different words, then they are different words.