

Is that a weak cup of tea? You can take it as red

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■ Is there anything more British than a nice cup of tea and a biscuit?

Picture: PA

My Nanny – my paternal grandmother – liked “a nice cup of tea”. And she liked it strong.

If it wasn't strong enough, she had a colourful way of expressing her distaste. She would say “thass a cuppa ol' rudle, that is”. Rudle was her term for weak tea. In my family we still use this word.

As a child I wondered what rudle really meant. Was it some kind of secondary usage of a word which really signified something else? Or was there actually a special English word for weak tea? I appreciated that tea drinking was a vitally important part of British culture. And I had heard that Eskimo languages have lots of words for snow. So perhaps British English actually did have a specialised tea vocabulary, including a particular word for tea which was too watery?

Well, it turned out that it wasn't like that. I eventually found out what rudle meant by... looking it up in the dictionary. To my surprise, it was actually there; and the dictionary told me that rudle is a “drink made with warm beer and gin”, with sugar added.

My grandmother did like a glass of stout, but I rather doubt that she made a

habit of drinking a mixture of gin and beer. Obviously, though, it was something she knew about. And you can see how the word for this drink could get to be transferred to a cup of tea. If you add gin to beer, the resulting liquid will be a rather pale brown in colour: not the colour of a good cup of tea, but the colour of one which is too weak.

But in that case, what is the etymology of rudle? It seems that this is another of those “origin uncertain” words – so we are not sure. But the English Dialect Dictionary gives the main form of the

name of the drink as ruddle, with the ‘rudle’ version only being known from East Anglia. So there is a suggestion that the name of the drink ruddle/rudle might simply have been a humorous usage of another word ruddle meaning a red pigment made of ochre.

This derives ultimately from the ancient word rud which signified ‘red colour’. This word has fallen out of use in modern English, except of course for the colour adjective which is derived from it and which is very well known to Norwich City football supporters, namely ruddy.