

An extract from Lydia Thornley's
Nerd Nite London talk *Apostrophes:*
from Greece to greengrocers.
Nerd Nite is a monthly night
of short talks, for charity, at
The Backyard Comedy Club.

ἄποστροφή

Apostrophe
LydiaThornley



Apostrophe

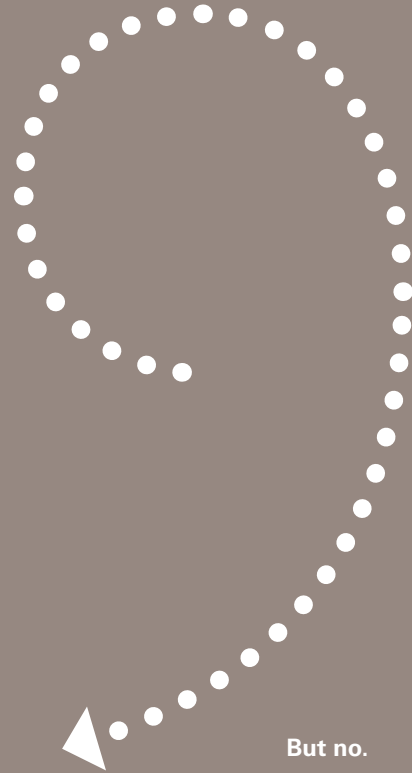
Grammarians have fought fierce battles over them. According to a survey in 2008, half of Britons struggle with them. But what are they? Just as interesting, what aren't they? Why are they the shape they are? And what do greengrocers have to say about them?

I've been on a voyage of typographic nerdery to find out.

ἀποστροφή

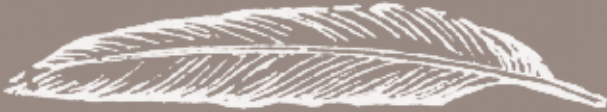
The word 'apostrophe' came from the Greek *apostrophos* via late Latin. It means 'turning away'. As well as a piece of punctuation, it's a literary and theatrical device – addressing someone not in the scene, a fictitious person or an abstract concept.

So somewhere in my head, that turn made the shape of the apostrophe.



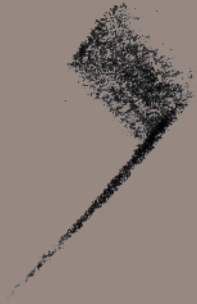
The shape

The shape is rooted in the use of a quill pen.



Ever the method designer, I decided to have a go. The instructions said 'pick one of the first five flight feathers of a goose, a swan or a peacock'...

So I used a carpenter's pencil.



Blackletter



Johnston



Bembo



Gill Sans



Grot 9



Avenir

In the development of the apostrophe as printing type, there was a missing link between shapes... which Edward Johnston filled in 1916 with his typeface for the London Underground.

What apostrophes are for

Omissions, contractions and possessives. But then it all gets a bit more interesting. Fo'c's'le (forecastle, the bit of a ship in front of the main mast, since you ask) has two apostrophes or three, both correct.

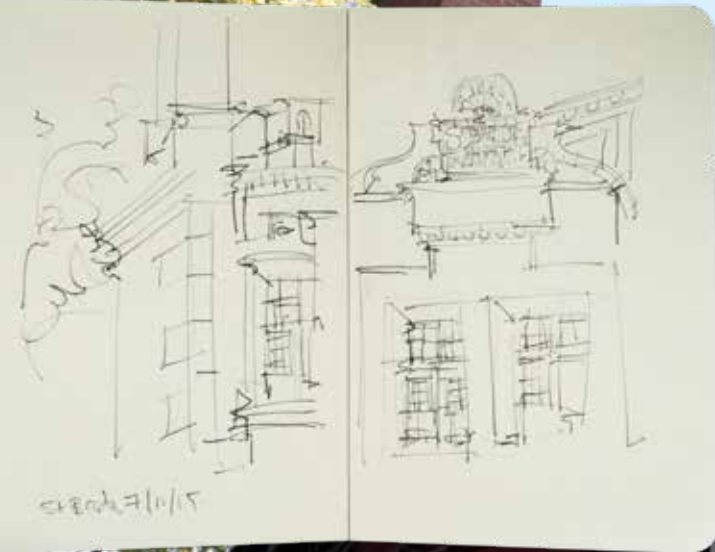
fo'c's'le
Hawai'i

In some languages, the apostrophe is a letter of the alphabet. Apostrophes are also used for glottal stops or to change pronunciation.

In Czech, apostrophes are optional: tricky when your name is O'Reilly. A client's colleagues in Prague resorted to calling him Mr Ireland.

O'R

Online forms that don't recognise apostrophes are another peril for people with O' in their surnames.



A surprising apostrophe find has been a mid-1800s rant. It puts apostrophes firmly in their place after earlier, more wide-ranging use, suggesting fashions in punctuation.

Pictured left is a sketchbook. I was so delighted to have an excuse to visit the wonderful St Bride Library, off Fleet Street, that I was early for my appointment.





Things that look like apostrophes but aren't

Quotation marks, primes
(for measurement) and
acute accents.

Typewriters pulled quotation
mark, prime and apostrophe
into one key.





In search of beautiful examples of marks that aren't apostrophes, I went to Gardners' Market Sundriesmen in Spitalfields. Run by fourth-generation market sundriesman Paul Gardner, the shop has labels from earlier times on display among the swing tags and paper bags.

There was much care and craft in these everyday things: Paul showed me some of the hand-lettered artwork that his father would produce for customers' labels.



Baker's Row

Bakers Row

Missing apostrophes

Street names are, literally, all over the place. Bakers Row in West Ham is Baker's Row in Clerkenwell.

Councils have banned apostrophes from street signs – and then guerrilla punctuators have put them back in again.

Harrods, Selfridges, Currys, Barclays, Waterstones, Morrisons... brands drop their apostrophes strategically. In 2006, The Apostrophe Protection Society called on companies to mend their ways.

Hells Angels have no apostrophe. And marvellously for anyone wanting to find out why, there is an FAQ page on their website.

But the last word goes to a greengrocer.

Tedsveg had no apostrophe. It wanted to be different. But so many customers pointed out that there should be an apostrophe that it had, in the end, to add one.

A very small one.

