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Bog standard

Professor David Crystal

It's pretty rare in English to find a compound word with a slang first part and a formal second part. Bog standard is one of those that's come in in the last few years. It means...what does it mean? It means to be basic, to be ordinary, to be unexceptional, to be uninspired – it just means ordinary. If you say something is 'bog standard', you mean it is perfectly ordinary. "He's got a bog standard car" means a perfectly ordinary car. "I've got a bog standard library book" means I've got a perfectly ordinary library book that's not exceptional or interesting in any way.

It's a British slang thing; its origin is quite obscure; nobody quite knows where it came from. Some people think that it's actually from early motorbike sales, because motorbikes used to come in a very large box you know when they were delivered – you didn't sort of drive them away, they were delivered. They came in what's called 'box standard' – and then that became 'bog standard'; in other words, out of the box, it's a perfectly ordinary kind of delivery, or ordinary kind of a bike that you bought.

But people don't like that and they think that it's got a much more interesting etymology than that: a bog of course is a slang word for toilet in British English, and some people think that 'bog standard' has that kind of origin. Don't see it myself, somehow. I rather like the idea that bog means something rural, you know – the rural people are often in the bog, 'cause the bog's a muddy sort of area, full of peat and things like that. And so bog is often used to mean 'unsophisticated'. So I don't know: there's three possible etymologies for it; nobody quite knows where it comes from. It may have an ordinary meaning, but it certainly isn't an ordinary word.



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