

# 'Curious behaviour' proves hard to define

by Sabine Eiche

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Did you have any inkling that there are things, behaviours, situations, and goodness knows what else, for which the English language has NO words? In German, you can construct a new word by stringing together existing words (as Mark Twain delighted in demonstrating), but not in English. In English you have to resort to descriptions.

Douglas Adams and John Lloyd gave this dilemma a twist in 1990 with their book, *The Deeper Meaning of Liff*, "a dictionary of things that there aren't any words for yet." They took toponyms (place-names) and turned them into words for which they concocted hilarious meanings – for example, "Nipishish (adj.) Descriptive of a person walking barefoot on gravel."

Disappointingly, Adams and Lloyd didn't provide the word I was looking for – the word to describe a certain behaviour that's been intriguing me for years.

This 'certain behaviour' first caught my attention in Italy, back in the 1970s, when I often travelled by train. Then, small towns and villages were linked by a network of trains called "locali." The carriages were usually very old and the pace leisurely. The "locali" stopped at every minor station for several minutes, giving me time to look around. I observed that nearly every one of these minor stations had a pergola, over which the station master trained grape vines. Nearby was usually a garden plot, surrounded by a picket fence. A wooden bench, worn smooth by the station master's cronies, stood in front of the fence. These weren't just train stations, they were outdoor living spaces, lovingly tended.

To my amazement I encountered the same phenomenon in the hinterland of southern Germany, where the secondary railways stopped at every village. The German station masters may not have had pergolas with grape vines but they often had gardens and benches. As in Italy, they'd turned what could have been a barren strip of blacktop into an inviting place from which to watch the world go by.

I was pleasantly surprised to come across something that reminded me of this 'certain behaviour' here in Richmond, at the Lynas Lane Recycling Depot, where I've spotted garden chairs flanked by potted plants – the depot workers' version of the station masters' benches, I decided. Our friendly recycling men also have wit. They've transformed a garden near the exit into a venue for the whimsical display of salvaged objects – recently I saw bits of ironwork, a wringer washer, blue portrait bust, green frog and stuffed bear.

Why is this 'certain behaviour' – which is heartwarming – detectable only in certain places? Size has something to do with it. The places where I noticed it are small and local rather than big and metropolitan. This means the people frequenting them are probably regulars – they're familiar, not strangers. Big places are impersonal. In big places, anonymity prevails over familiarity.

Whether or not I ever find the word I'm looking for, this 'certain behaviour' will continue to intrigue me. Why? Well, mainly because the juxtaposition of opposites – nature and machinery, beauty and ugliness, waste and creativity – results in unexpected delights and insights.