

Proud to be a chav?

The term 'Chav' appears to be going nowhere, but **Gina Heslington** investigates whether its usage is acceptable.



"I have my own business, a post graduate degree, 4 A-levels, speak French and Italian, and drive a Merc. Happy slap that"

**Top: Cheryl Cole
Above: Burberry pattern**

wind forward a few decades and imagine how minds of the future will think of our view-points? Which will be old-fashioned, even backwards? I couldn't help thinking that I was standing in the midst of a scene that would one day be viewed in such a light. Like some of the racially prejudiced elderly who can never let go, perhaps we are destined to be a generation of unashamedly classist OAPS, unable to see the folly of our beliefs in a more liberal thought paradigm, justifying our prejudices as 'just a bit of fun.'

"It's political correctness gone mad" I berated my father when he banned me from using the word 'charva' or 'chav' in his presence. It's a media

buzz-word, we're surrounded by it; 'chav' themed parties, 'Chav-D' - if YUSU allow it, surely it's okay. Yet as a typical 'born choking on a silver spoon', child of the middle-classes, perhaps it's easy for me to be so flippant. For my father, and many of our parents who were raised in working class environments, icicles-hanging-from-the-inside of their four-kids-in-a-bed council houses, such acceptance of a term may only be endorsed by a sheltered and ignorant perspective.

"I'm proud to be a chav, if by chav you mean working class made good." Mused Girls Aloud star Cheryl Cole to Marie Claire magazine in 2005. But unfortunately that is a rather positive view of the term. In the same year as Cheryl's confession, 'Chav' proudly became an accepted word of the English language, making the Collins English Dictionary.

The BBC website provides a thorough character guide of her most distinguishing features: 'Your common-or-garden teenage delinquent, the sort you can see hanging around any number of off licences in Britain, trying to persuade people going inside to buy them 10 fags and a bottle of White Lightning.' Rather than the sleek and manicured beauty of last year's X Factor judge, it seems that Vicky Pollard is more akin to one's usual idea of a 'Chav' or 'Chavette'. Adorned in a pink Kappa tracksuit, gold hoop earrings, sovereign rings and a bleached high ponytail for the crowning glory, perhaps we've found our Queen of the Chavs, Britain's favourite comedic scapegoat lampooned by the masses.

The word 'Chav' certainly has many equivalents, depending on your region. Think Townies, Kevs, Hood Rats, Charvers, Steeks, Stigs, Bazzas, Yarcos, Ratboys, Chorer, Skangers, Scutters, Janners, Kappa Slappers, Scallies, and Spides. Every town seems to have a variation. The origins of the word arose from the North East, where the term 'Charva' has been used for decades to the same effect.

The 'Urban Dictionary' describes 'Chavs' as 'amoral,' 'inherently racist,' and 'highly fertile' with many offspring, sporting a love of modified cars, cigarettes and R'n'B. In terms of dress they have a fondness for sportswear, 'bling and Burberry.' This 'chav' fashion sense has even been recognised by those in the business. Rather than encouraging the market however, Burberry attempted to distance themselves from their more 'uncouth' fans. When pubs and clubs started banning those who dressed in the label Burberry took action, removing the sale of checked baseball caps and reducing the visibility of the pattern. The symbol that used to adorn a fifth of all their products was, by 2004, on less than 5%.

"It has become quite a jokey thing. But the white working class are the last acceptable group to demonise," Michael Collins, author of *The Likes of Us*, a biography of the white working classes, told the BBC when questioned on the usage of the term. There's nothing new with the middle classes sneering at the working class people who are a bit "showy" yet with the 'chav phenomenon' it seems that much of the vitriol has come from masses "who con-

"Can I just ask, are you a guy or a girl?" I hesitate, take a sip of bad punch in a plastic cup and gaze upwards. "Are you serious?" "Yes! I mean, are you, like actually a girl, or a guy dressed up as one? I can't tell."

"I won't dignify that question with an answer." I can't believe I used that line. I throw the drunken boy a dirty look and totter off in my ridiculously high heels. I plough through the intoxicated party goers and head for the drinks corner. So much for making an effort, my makeup's on thick, my hairs up, my Union Jack thong pulled painfully high for all to see. Yet this is no drag and slag party. I thought I was embracing my Northern roots, exposing the true essence of Geordie life; I may not speak with much of a traceable accent, but I've pole danced with the best of them.

It turns out there are downsides to trying to be the star of the local 'Chavesque' themed party. Yet as I gaze around, shreds of guilt begin nagging at my conscience. My friend tries to reassure me: "it's only because you're tall and thin." "That I was mistaken for a man?" I growl back, doubt taking hold, but not, however, regarding my gender. Though we may look like a scene from that notoriously dirty comic book 'Viz', was I really doing Newcastle any justice? In fact, is this all just harmless student fun, or is it something that runs a bit deeper? Is there not just a touch of socially condoned class discrimination behind the coke-bottle fringes and 'kappa slapper' gear?

Have you ever tried to look at your life through the telescope of the future,