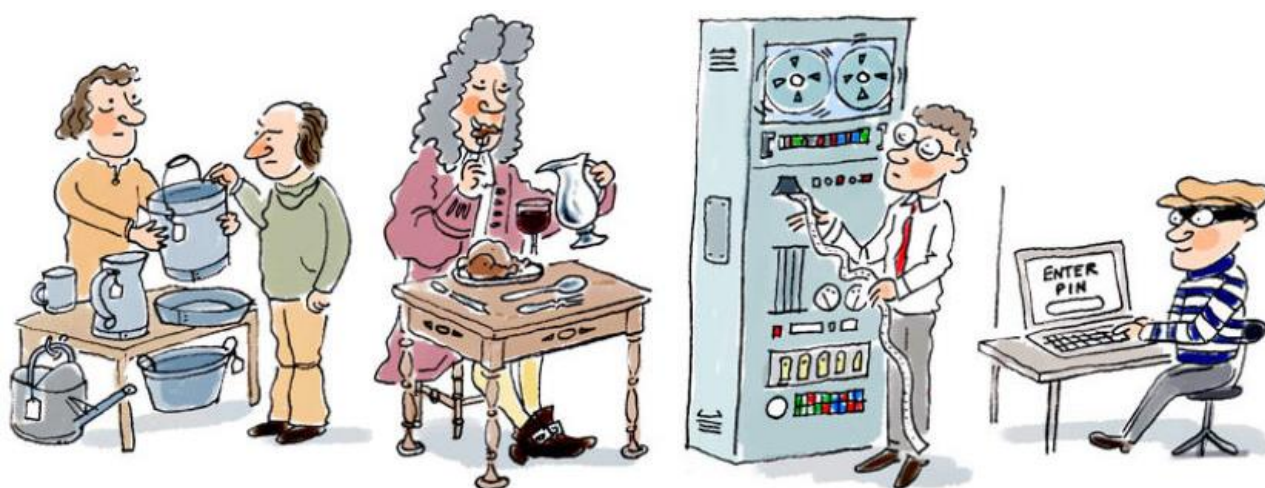


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From ironware to doxware, ware is well-adapted to changing times

John Kelly · Posted on April 26, 2017



Illustrations by [John Taylor](#)

We upgrade the latest *software* on our smartphones. We fend off *malware* and *spyware* on our laptops. We get up early and wait in long queues to grab the latest and hottest *hardware*. Modern technology comes at us fast, but a lot of our language for it isn't exactly reinventing the wheel. Consider trusty old *ware*.

Ware's old and new

[Ware](#) reaches all the way to back to the Old English *waru*, referring to general 'articles and goods for sale'. The *Oxford English Dictionary* finds evidence for *waru* in the *Homilies* of Aelfric, a tenth-century abbot. A word of Germanic origin, *ware* likely emerges from a slightly older sense of the word: 'watchful care' or 'protection', surviving in *aware* and *beware*. Etymologically, then, we can think of a *ware* as a carefully guarded object, hence an item of some value.

On its own, we usually use *ware* in the plural today, *wares*, e.g., *the vendors sell their wares at the market*. But *ware*'s greatest success over the centuries has been as a combining form. In a few instances, *ware* modifies words, like *warehouse*, which has been storing goods since 14th-century English. More commonly, though, *ware* is the head of compound designating mass nouns, such as *ironware*, or various objects forged from iron.

An early emporium

Ironware, attested in 1398, joins a few other, long-lost Middle English *-ware* compounds in the record. *Mercery-ware* (1377) was sold by a *mercier*, or a 'dealer in fine textiles'. *Pottage-ware* (1398) included the 'ingredients for soup or stew', or *pottage*. Around 1400, we mortals once described ourselves as *worm's ware*. And one colorful early example is *ape-ware*, 'counterfeit money', found in the 13th-century *Acrene Riwe*.

Hardware has proven a durable formation. It enters the record by 1419, originally 'small items made of metal' like the tools and fittings we pick up at *hardware stores* today. Some other 15th-century compounds include *ploughware* (animals for ploughing), *hornware* (made of animal horns), and *haberdashery-ware* (measuring tape, cords, etc.).

Come Early Modern English, *-ware* increased its productivity. *Field-ware* (1546) comprised 'harvested vegetables' and *hookware* (1541) 'tools for reaping'. The mid-1600s yield *poultry-ware*, *grocery-ware*, and *fat-ware*, or 'cattle fatted for market'. *Earthenware*, another sturdy compound, emerges by the 1620s for 'pots, dishes, and other objects made from clay'. Not long after, we see *pottery-ware* and *stoneware*, with yet more specific ceramic *ware* emerging over the centuries, e.g. *Japan ware*, *slipware*. And on the naughtier side? Elizabethan English had *lady ware*, slang for 'genitalia'.

The rise of *-ware*

Glassware, *kitchenware*, and *tableware* are notable 18th-century constructions we still use today. And *rhyiming ware* (1719) was a humorous term for 'commercialized poetry'.

But it was during the 19th century, perhaps coinciding with the rise of the middle class, that *-ware* proliferated in domestic compounds: *basket-ware*, *cabinet-ware*, *crystalware*, *house-ware*, *flatware*, *paperware*, *tinware*, *toilet-ware*, and *woodware*. By 1862, the record shows *silverware*, tableware fashioned, of course, from silver, though general 'cutlery' today.

The 20th-century witnessed the further domestication of *-ware*: *stemware*, *ovenware*, and *plasticware* all debuted in the first half of the 1900s. Then, American inventor Earl Tupper transformed reusable kitchen storage containment with his *Tupperware*. Though trademarked by 1954, the term was developed earlier. Other brands have since competed in the *-ware* space, e.g. *GladWare*.

The dawn of a new *-ware*

It was modern computing that truly revolutionized *-ware*. In the 1940s, scientists recycled *hardware* to name the physical components of computers. Back then, computers were massive equipment, evoking *hardware*'s application to machinery and weaponry in the mid-1800s.

Come the 1950-60s, *hardware* had naturally suggested its counterpart, *software*, for all the programs and applications that make computers run. There were earlier instances of

software including 'textiles' and 'perishable consumer goods', but the *OED* attests the computing sense comes by 1958.

On the model of *software*, *-ware* has named many types of computer programs, so much so that it's perhaps becoming its own suffix designating 'computer software'. From the 1960-80s: *firmware* (permanently built into a computer), *courseware* (designed for educational use), *adware* (displays pop-up ads), and *groupware* (facilitates collaboration). Appearing in the 1980s, *demoware*, *freeware*, *shareware*, and *lovelware* all describe how a user accesses new software. And on the cutting edge is *cloudware*, running on remote servers.

So digitalized have our lives become that some people joke humans are *liveware*, *peopleware*, or *humanware*. The tech community has developed its own slang. *Warez* (1987) is 'pirated software' while *bloatware* takes up a lot of space on a device. Computers have changed how we think about the physical world: *wetware* (1975) likens the brain to computer networks and *mindware* (1977) can refer to artificial intelligence or virtual reality.

In recent decades, *-ware* has especially designated types of computer viruses scams: *malware* damages the operation of a computer while *spyware* covertly steal private user information. With the *ransomware*, *leakware*, *doxware*, and *extortionware*, hackers [threaten](#) to release sensitive data unless the 'hack-ee' meets monetary demands.

Ware, no doubt, has had a lot of updates since its Old English days, but it's adapted well to changing times.