

WORD OF THE MONTH

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sparrow ticket

- **noun:** a means of gaining admission to, or viewing, an event such as a sporting match without paying for a ticket.

THE STORY BEHIND THE WORD OF THE MONTH

Today the security that surrounds concert venues, sporting contests, and other events makes it difficult for a person not holding a ticket to sneak in without paying. In the past this was not always the case. Fences encircling sporting venues were often porous, allowing access through existing gaps or gaps made by the person seeking entrance. In Australia gaining access to a venue without paying was sometimes referred to as a **sparrow ticket**.

An early example of the term **sparrow ticket** provides evidence for the word's origin and the prevalence of the behaviour it describes:

The officials have conducted several prosecutions of a similar nature recently in order to prevent boys flocking into the pavilion on what the youngsters term 'a **sparrow's ticket**', or, in other words, by 'flying' the fence. It is the intention of the officials to continue these prosecutions until the nuisance has abated.
(Perth *Daily News*, 12 June 1906)

Sparrow ticket alludes to the bird's ability to fly over fences. The quotation refers to 'youngsters' and evidence suggests that the term is often associated with children:

Attraction of the '**Sparrow Ticket**'. As a boy is said to find fruit sweeter than that which he comes by honestly, so he enjoys a show much more when his appetite for it has been whetted by the excitement of scaling a fence or dodging a gatekeeper. (Adelaide *Advertiser*, 4 June 1920)

While many examples of **sparrow ticket** refer to children squeezing through gaps in fences or scaling them, there were other ways of taking advantage of an event for free, as the following quotations demonstrate:

Pirie Football Association wrote to the council complaining that people who leant bicycles against the oval fence and stood on them, and others in larger vehicles, obtained a view of football matches without paying a fee. It suggested that if the corporation enforced its bylaws there would be a cessation of the issue of such '**sparrow tickets**'. (Port Pirie *Recorder*, 23 May 1934)

There were plenty of '**sparrow ticket**' holders watching last night's tennis exhibition on the Association Courts. ... A group of youths climbed to the top of the ... band room roof, others enjoyed a bird's eye view from the roof of Bent and Bennetts, across the street, while still others stood on their push-bikes to watch over the fence. (Broken Hill *Barrier Miner*, 27 February 1952)

The first evidence for **sparrow ticket** comes from the late nineteenth century. By the early 1950s the term appears to have almost died out. This could indicate that the activity encompassed by the term had become less common: better fences, cheaper tickets, and the like had perhaps made it harder for people to gain access to venues surreptitiously.

Sparrow ticket will be included in the second edition of the *Australian National Dictionary*.



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