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## portable, *adj.* and *n.*

**Pronunciation:** Brit. /'pɔːtəbl/, U.S. /'pɔrdəb(ə)l/

**Forms:** IME **portable** (transmission error), IME **portabil**, IME– **portable**; Sc. pre-17 **poirtable**, pre-17 **portabill**, pre-17 17– **portable**.

**Frequency (in current use):**

**Etymology:** Of multiple origins. Partly a borrowing from French. Partly a borrowing from Latin. **Etymons:** French *portable*; Latin *portabilis*.

< Anglo-Norman *portable*, *portabel*, *portible* and Middle French *portable* (French *portable*) that may be carried (13th cent. in Old French), bearable, tolerable (late 14th cent.) and its etymon post-classical Latin *portabilis* bearable, enduring (Vetus Latina), that may be carried (from 12th cent. in British sources), wearable (13th cent. in a British source) < classical Latin *portāre* PORT *v.*<sup>2</sup> + *-bilis* *-BLE* *suffix*. With use as noun compare post-classical Latin *portabilia* (plural) portable goods (14th cent. in British sources), use as noun of neuter plural of *portabilis*.

Compare earlier UNPORTABLE *adj.*, IMPORTABLE *adj.*<sup>1</sup>

### A. *adj.*

†1. Bearable, enduring; that can be tolerated. ***portable charge*** (**also *burden***) (*Sc.*): a payment or service that is to be, or must be, rendered by every person or corporation liable for it. *Obs.*

- c1450 *Contin. Lydgate's Secrees* (Sloane 2464) 2384 (*MED*), Dere sone..the hous of thy mynde be thy sogettys..ffroom velonye..Them to diffende to the is portable.
- c1460 LYDGATE *Fabula Duorum Mercatorum* (Harl. 2255) 315 in *Minor Poems* (1934) II. 497 (*MED*), Dnye tisyk is withal partable [*read portable*].
- 1489 in J. Marwick *Extracts Rec. Burgh Edinb.* (1869) I. 57 The outlandis folkis..hafand nother stob nor stake within this towne..nor yit beris sic portable chargis with tham as extentis and vtheris quhen thai occur.
- c1500 *Melusine* (1895) 209 To putte me to raisounable raunson & payement portable to me.
- 1589–90 in D. Masson *Reg. Privy Council Scotl.* (1881) 1st Ser. IV. 452 Fra all watcheing,..stent or contributioun, or beiring or sustening of ony uther portable chargeis.
- 1608 SHAKESPEARE *King Lear* xiii. 101 How light and portable my paine seemes now.
- a1653 H. BINNING *Serm.* (1845) 585 The soul puts upon Him that unsupportable yoke of Transgressions, and takes from Him the portable yoke of His commandments.
- 1689 in R. Renwick *Extracts Rec. Stirling* (1889) II. 58 He is ane burges of the burgh and hes borne portable burding with the remanent burgesses.
- 1707 W. BLACK *Privileges of Royal Burrows* v. §1 47 None be chosen to be upon the Council but Magistrats [*sic*] and Craftsmen, actual and real Burgesses dwelling within the Town, and bearing all portable charges within the same.

2.

**a.** Capable of being carried by hand or on the person; capable of being moved from place to place; easily carried or conveyed. Also: (designating a device, apparatus, etc.) made smaller and lighter than normal, to enable it to be carried easily.

- 1454–5 *Acct. in Berks., Bucks. & Oxon. Archaeol. Jrnl.* (1903) 9 118 (MED), Item, for mendyng the portabil crucyfix at Corpus Xri day, ij s. iiij d.
- a1500 (†?a1425) tr. *Secreta Secret.* (Lamb.) 91 Þat portable kynde..he þanne þat yn his name racys hit and berys it with hym clanly, he shal purchase reuerence and honour.
- 1598 A. M. tr. J. Guillemeau *Frenche Chirurg.* lf. xvi b/1 The Instrumentes of a little portable case.
- 1669 S. STURMY *Mariners Mag.* v. xii. 49 Very portable and fit for his Pocket.
- 1730 A. GORDON tr. F. S. Maffei *Compl. Hist. Anc. Amphitheatres* 337 Portable Forms or Benches.
- 1787 T. JEFFERSON *Let.* 30 Jan. in *Papers* (1955) XI. 97 Having a great desire to have a portable copying machine, and being satisfied from some experiments that the principle of the large machine might be applied in a small one, I planned one when in England and had it made.
- 1821 J. Q. ADAMS in C. DAVIES *Metric Syst.* (1871) III. 200 The pound weight should be a specific gravity easily portable about the person.
- 1872 J. YEATS *Growth Commerce* 50 Holding property not in lands but portable goods.
- 1913 *Wireless World* Apr. p. xxxiv./2 The hon. secretary showed some model Marconi apparatus and a portable set.
- 1951 *Catal. Exhibits, South Bank Exhib., Festival Brit.* 128/2 Portable radio..mains or battery.
- 1995 *Sci. Amer.* Sept. 53/2 Portable telephones and other wireless devices are essentially miniature computers with some extra electronics to transmit and receive radio signals.

**b.** Of a liquid substance: that may be carried or transported conveniently, having been reduced by evaporation to a dried or concentrated form able to be reconstituted later by the addition of water. Now *hist.*

- 1594 H. PLATT *Jewell House* III. 36 A portable ynke to be caried in the forme of a powder in any paper, leather purse or boxe.
- 1725 E. STROTHER *Ess. Sickness & Health* (ed. 2) ii. 49 Consider the fashionable and portable Soop, now in Use with the Quality.
- 1747 H. GLASSE *Art of Cookery* vi. 65 To make Portable Soop..the Glew will be quite hard... When you use it, pour boiling Water on it.
- 1775 tr. *Valuable Secrets Arts & Trades* p. xxii, A portable ink, without gall-nut or vitriol... Another portable powder, to make ink instantly.
- 1836 W. IRVING *Astoria* II. 192 Five pounds of portable soup, and a sufficient quantity of dried meat to allow each man a pittance of five pounds and a quarter.
- 1849 *Punch* 17 91/2 We have all heard of 'Portable Soup'... Now we have 'Portable Milk'. A small jar of this solidified material, we are told, contains the equivalent of six gallons of fluid milk.
- 1892 *Daily Citizen* (Iowa City, Iowa) (Electronic text) 19 Aug. One ounce of 'salep', boiled with an equal quantity of the animal jelly known as portable soup, in two quarts of water, will suffice for

the daily nourishment of an able-bodied man.

- 1930 R. V. BILLIS & A. S. KENYON *Pastures New* 94 Even 'soup' made from colonial meat, was exported to England. This was in the form of dried or powdered meat, packed in tins. The idea came from Sydney, where the product was called 'portable soup', and in England it was termed 'concentrated gravy'.
- 1961 C. LLOYD *Nation & Navy* viii. 138 Salt provisions caused scurvy, hence the importance of new methods of preserving food, notably portable soup (used by Cook) and canned meat, first issued in 1813.
- 2003 *Manch. Guardian Weekly* (Nexis) 27 Aug. 18 It began with the Great Exhibition. Not all exhibits were aesthetic—they included preserved meat, 'portable soup', and 'consolidated milk'.

**c. Of a building, bridge, etc.: not of a permanent construction; capable of being dismantled and re-erected elsewhere.**

- 1604 G. DOWNAME *Lect. XV Psalme* 5 A Tabernacle is a militarie mansion, and as it were a portable house which hath no fixed seat or settled place.
- 1655 W. GOUGE & T. GOUGE *Learned Comm. Hebrewes* (ix. 1) ii. 300 [The tabernacle] was a kind of portable Temple.
- 1670 H. OLDENBURG *Let. Feb. in Corr.* (1969) VI. 476 Antiquity attributes..the Holy Utensils, fittest for a Portable Tabernacle, to Moses.
- 1718 J. OZELL tr. J. Pitton de Tournafort *Voy. Levant* I. 384 Nothing surpriz'd me so much as these portable Houses; they are prodigiously magnificent.
- 1773 J. BENTHAM *Let.* 4 Dec. (1968) I. 174 Estimates of portable Houses for East Florida as they call them at Carolina.
- 1827 E. GROSVENOR in G. Huxley *Lady Elizabeth of Grosvenors* (1965) vii. 140 The artillery..was very finely appointed, with cannon and portable bridges.
- 1860 *Players* 1 v. 39 (*adv.*) Portable Theatres with scenery, Gas Fittings, &c. fitted up in town or country.
- 1904 *Collier's* 7 May 20/1 (*adv.*) M & M Portable Houses... Better built and better looking than you can have constructed at home and at much less cost.
- 1955 *Sci. News Let.* 5 Mar. 160/1 Portable rink for outdoor ice skating makes this winter sport possible in some areas from April to November.
- 1992 *Daily Tel.* 24 July 4/4 A stolen car was used to ram-raid a shop and a portable building was set alight.

**d. Computing. Of software: usable on different machines or on different systems; transferable from one machine or system to another.**

- 1971 J. F. TRAUB in J. R. Rice *Math. Software* v. 136 By portable software we mean that only small easily identifiable changes are necessary to transfer the software to a new environment.
- 1984 *QL User* Dec. 28 As it is written mostly in machine-independent code, the system is extraordinarily portable.
- 2001 *Star-Ledger* (Newark, New Jersey) (Nexis) 8 Jan. [He] has experience writing his own asset-management software. The difference this time is that he's making it fully portable, and useful

across industry groups and even the military.

†3. Of a river, lake, etc.: capable of carrying ships or boats; navigable.

*Obs.*

- 1580 in *Jrnl. Cork Hist. & Archaeol. Soc.* (1893) 22/2 Which Ryver is portable for a boate of two tunnes.
- 1582 in R. Hakluyt *Diuers Voy.* sig. K3, If you finde great plenty of tymber on the shore side or vpon any portable riuer.
- 1602 R. CECIL *Let.* 9 Aug. in *Lett. Cecil to Carew* (1864) 124 Yf we find that it be neere any portable Ryver that may carry it to the sea.
- 1685 A. WOOD *Life* 23 Mar. III. 136 A drie winter: no flood: waters very low, not portable.
- 1714 *Bill for making River Neene Navigable* 5 Keeping the said River open, portable and passable, for Boats, Barges, Lighters and other Vessels, as any Commissioners of Sewers..are enabled to do in any other Rivers or Places.
- 1761 *Act for making River Weaver Navigable* 4 To make the said River navigable, portable, and passable, for Boats, Barges, Lighters, and other Vessels, from..Frodsham-bridge to Winsford-bridge.

4. *fig.*

†a. Easy to carry in the memory; adapted for or easily employed in all circumstances. *Obs.*

- 1655 T. FULLER *Church-hist. Brit.* vii. 406 These Psalms were therefore translated, to make them more portable in peoples memories.
- 1711 R. STEELE *Spectator* No. 100. ¶4 This portable Quality of Good-humour seasons all the Parts and Occurrences we meet with.

b. Of a right, financial arrangement, piece of work, etc.: capable of being transferred or adapted in changed circumstances.

See also *portable pension n.* at Special uses.

- 1965 *Economist* 13 Feb. 671 Pension rights..should not be lost when an employee is sacked or moves to another firm; ideally they should be 'portable'.
- 1970 A. CAMERON et al. *Computers & Old Eng. Concordances* 22 The proposal never says..what care he's going to take to make sure that his work is portable, that his work really can be used by people at other institutions.
- 2002 *Chicago Tribune* 15 Sept. v. 3/1 Unspent funds in the spending accounts can be retained by the employee and rolled over from year to year. That could allow healthy workers to create a portable savings account for medical expenses.

†5. Portly. *Obs. rare.*

1770 R. CUMBERLAND *Brothers* II. ix. 23 He..is a little peaking puling thing; I am a jolly portable man, as you see.

## B. n.

### 1. In *pl.* Portable objects; belongings. Now *rare*.

1708 tr. M. Alemán *Life Guzman d'Alfarache* I. I. I. i. 11 Having got all her Portables in a readiness, his next Business was to find an honest Christian Captain, who..might deliver him from his Apostacy, by transporting him to his own Country.

1757 T. HALE et al. *Compl. Body Husbandry* (new ed.) II. v. lxx. 209 The cheap conveying of all Sorts of Portables from Place to Place on good Roads.

1835 A. B. LONGSTREET *Georgia Scenes* 197 He had begun to pack up his portables, for removal to a more eligible station.

1883 J. HAY in *Cent. Mag.* Dec. 281/2, I don't doubt..but what we could pay ourselves well for the job, —spoil the 'Gyptians, you know,—forage on the enemy. Plenty of portables in them houses, eh!

1924 *Times* 5 May 11/3 A new large 'pochette'..has almost a 'record' number of sections for holding necessary 'portables'—purse, cigarettes, lipstick among them.

2. An appliance, device, or piece of machinery which is portable, *esp.* a compact electrical or electronic appliance which has its own power supply, enabling it to be carried and used anywhere; *spec.* a portable computer.

1900 *Oakland (Calif.) Tribune* 20 Dec. 5/6 Gas and electric portables.

1933 *Hearst's Internat.* Mar. 101/2, I doubt if Mrs. Norris could type out a really good chapter on her rickety portable.

1960 *Life* 5 Dec. 8 (*adv.*) This is the new Motorola portable—forerunner of all TV to come and gift idea of a lifetime.

1986 *Guardian* 14 Apr. 22/5 Portables should run for at least a few hours on batteries and be small enough to fit into a briefcase.

1999 *BBC Music Mag.* Apr. 59 Tiny portables resist jogging.

2001 *Business 2.0* Aug.–Sept. 206/3 Some portables use touchpads for moving the cursor, while others use joystick nubbins embedded next to the keyboard's G key.

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## SPECIAL USES

**portable classroom** *n.* orig. *U.S.* a trailer or transportable prefabricated building used as a temporary classroom.

1908 *Chicago Tribune* 17 Oct. 1/4 The poorer children of Chicago are being taught in basement rooms,

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