



THE LOVE LONDON GUIDE N. 010

British Sayings & Idioms

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Listen to the platform announcements on the [Transport for London](#) network and you will hear the same three words thousands of times a day: "Mind the gap." The phrase was first recorded for the Underground in 1968, when automated warnings replaced station staff, and it has since escaped the railway to become shorthand for British caution itself. Idioms behave like that here - they start somewhere exact, then spread until nobody remembers the source. This is Guide 010 in The Love London Guide series.

Where British Idioms Actually Come From

A surprising share of everyday English traces back to two sources separated by only a few decades. William Shakespeare, whose plays are still staged at [Shakespeare's Globe](#) on Bankside, is credited with popularising phrases such as "in a pickle," "wild-geese chase," and "break the ice." The King James Bible of 1611 gave us "the salt of the earth," "a fly in the ointment," and "the powers that be." In many cases these works did not

invent the words outright but fixed them in print at the moment English was settling into something close to its modern form.

The next great consolidation came in 1755, when Samuel Johnson published A Dictionary of the English Language after roughly nine years of work in a house off Fleet Street. You can still visit [Dr Johnson's House](#) in Gough Square, where he and his assistants compiled around 40,000 entries, illustrating meanings with real quotations - a method that shaped how dictionaries have defined idioms ever since.

Cockney Rhyming Slang

Cockney rhyming slang, which grew up in the East End during the 19th century, works by replacing a word with a short phrase that rhymes with it - then, often, dropping the rhyming part altogether. "Plates of meat" means feet; "dog and bone" means phone; "trouble and strife" means wife. The trick is that "use your loaf" (from "loaf of bread," meaning head) hides its own logic, which is partly the point. The [Museum of London](#) documents how the slang spread through markets, docks and music halls.

A "true" Cockney is traditionally said to be someone born within earshot of the bells of St Mary-le-Bow church in Cheapside, known as the Bow Bells. The definition is folklore rather than law, and modern traffic noise means the bells carry nowhere near as far as they once did - but the phrase endures as a marker of old London identity.

The National Habit of Understatement

Perhaps the most confusing feature of British English for newcomers is understatement. "Not bad" frequently means genuinely good. "A bit of a nightmare" can describe a serious disaster. "I'm fine" may mean nothing of the sort. The humour works by saying less than you mean and trusting the listener to fill in the rest - which is why a flat "quite good" from a British colleague is often high praise, while "with the greatest respect" tends to precede sharp disagreement.

Phrases You Will Actually Hear in London

Several idioms remain in daily use and are worth knowing. "Bob's your uncle" means "and there you have it," typically ending a set of simple instructions. "Chuffed to bits" means delighted. "Gobsmacked" means astonished - from "gob," slang for mouth. "Taking the mickey" means mocking or teasing. "Knackered" means exhausted. None of these are archaic; you will hear them in pubs, offices and markets across the city, often alongside the newer slang that each generation adds.

Where to Look Things Up

If you want to check an origin rather than trust a good story, the authorities are freely consulted online. The [Oxford English Dictionary](#) traces first recorded uses with dated citations, while the Collins Dictionary and the [Cambridge Dictionary](#) both include idiom entries with plain definitions. For the written record behind many phrases, the collections of the [British Library](#) hold early printings of Shakespeare, the King James Bible and

Johnson's dictionary, and the [BBC](#) regularly explores regional dialect and slang in its language programming.

Myths Worth Retiring

Myth: Shakespeare invented over a thousand words single-handedly. He is the first known user of many words and phrases in surviving print, but "first recorded use" is not the same as invention - much was already spoken, and he simply wrote it down before anyone else whose work survives.

Myth: Cockney rhyming slang is a dead museum piece. Some older terms have faded, but the form keeps generating new coinages, and plenty of classics are still in circulation.

Myth: "Mind the gap" is the same at every station. It is not. The warning is used where the platform curves away from the train, and different lines and stations have long carried different recordings and voices.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the difference between a saying and an idiom?

A saying, or proverb, is usually a complete piece of folk wisdom that stands on its own, such as "the early bird catches the worm." An idiom is a phrase whose meaning cannot be worked out from its individual words, such as "kick the bucket." Many expressions blur the line, which is why the two terms are often used loosely.

Will people understand me if I use these phrases?

In London, yes - the city is used to every variety of English, and common idioms like "chuffed" or "knackered" are widely understood. Deeper rhyming slang is more of an in-joke, so it is fine to recognise it without feeling you have to deploy it yourself.

Where can I hear the oldest phrases in their original setting?

A performance at Shakespeare's Globe is the closest you will get to hearing Elizabethan English delivered aloud, while the British Library's galleries let you see the printed sources where many sayings were first fixed on the page.

Official websites mentioned

Transport for London: tfl.gov.uk

Shakespeare's Globe: shakespearesglobe.com

Dr Johnson's House: drjohnsonshouse.org

Museum of London: museumoflondon.org.uk

Oxford English Dictionary: oed.com

Cambridge Dictionary: dictionary.cambridge.org

British Library: bl.uk

BBC: bbc.co.uk