

# A wigwam for a goose's bridle

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One of the joys of cataloguing the [Evolving English WordBank](#) is discovering all the weird and wonderful phrases donated to the British Library by speakers from around the world. Researching their origins and meanings inevitably leads the cataloguer down a referencing rabbit-hole – it's all part of the fun!

This week's recording is of a folk phrase given to us by an Australian speaker from New South Wales, about 30 years old

## Wigwams for goose's bridles

*There's a phrase that our mother always used in our family...it's wigwams for geese bridles. She would use it whenever we asked her what something was and she didn't want to tell us, like if she'd just bought Christmas presents or birthday presents and we were bringing them home. So we'd say, Mum what's in the bag and her answer would always be 'wigwams for geese bridles'. Which was a nonsense saying, I have no idea where it came from. It could be completely peculiar to our family for all I know!*

As the speaker describes, this enigmatic phrase is a handy way of responding to nagging questions from children. A little bit of digging, however, reveals that the phrase is not a new invention, but in fact it has quite a long history of its own, and a number of different iterations. It is commonly reported as a popular saying in Australia, but is also known in Lincolnshire and other parts of the UK, particularly among older speakers.

Originally the phrase seems to have referred not to 'wigwams' but to a 'wim-wam' or 'whim-wham' – an old word for 'trinket' or 'trifle' first occurring in 17<sup>th</sup> Century texts. Whether *wims* or *wigs*, it's all the same; reduplication with vowel variation is a common strategy in nonsense-speak – just think of *jibber-jabber*, *fuddy-duddy*, and *hocus-pocus*. A slang dictionary in 1860 lists 'wim-wam' as being 'synonymous with fiddle-faddle, riff-raff, etc, denoting nonsense, rubbish, etc.' Michael Quinion, researching the phrase, even came across the alternative [swinkle-swankle for a goose's nightcap](#)! Anything goes – as long as you fox the kids into silence!

Interestingly enough, a version of the phrase cropped up in another of our collections – BBC Voices. In an interview with speakers from [Osgodby, Lincolnshire](#), one speaker explains that a *wimwam for a mustard mill* is 'really a mild way of saying don't be nosy'.

Nosing into other people's phrases – that's what we do best here at Spoken English!

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