

San Fairy Ann

Rosy Hall is an ESRC-funded PhD student from Oxford University working with the BL's Spoken English collections. She writes:

The phrase 'San Fairy Ann' might sound familiar, perhaps conjuring up memories of Paul McCartney's 1976 [song](#), or Barbara Windsor's 1965 [comedy](#) of the same name. But what does it actually mean, and where does it come from?

The saying has cropped up in our [WordBank](#) collection twice so far, both times the speakers attributing it to an elderly grandparent.

[C1442 San Fairy Ann \(female b.1942\) uncatalogued](#)

'My grandmother always used the phrase when she didn't want to know about something was 'San Fairy Ann' which when I started to learn French at school I discovered was 'ça ne fait rien'. I believe that this was um she probably picked it up from my grandfather when he came back from the First World War.'

[C1442X3968 San Fairy Ann \(female b.1962\)](#)

'In my family we use the phrase 'San Fairy Ann,' which is yelled at people – usually the kids – when they're misbehaving. Um, we think it might come from the French, ça ne fait rien, which we think means – is a phrase of dismissal. My grandmother who's ninety-eight uses it and we've all picked it up from her.'

As the speakers themselves observe here, 'San Fairy Ann' is the result of a common process whereby a saying or word is converted by mis-hearers into something different that seems to make (at least some) sense. There's 'all intensive purposes,' for example, 'electrical votes,' and of course 'damp squid.' Geoffrey Pullum and Mark Liberman call these ['eggcorn'](#) moments, after the mis-interpretation of 'acorn' – and explain that they are not stupid mistakes, but rather 'imaginative attempts at relating something heard to lexical material already known.'

In the case of 'San Fairy Ann', the process has taken place in translation; the phrase is recorded as becoming popular in England after British soldiers came into contact with French during the First World War. 'Ça ne fait rien' – meaning 'never mind' or 'it doesn't matter' – became 'San Fairy Ann,' also commonly 'san ferry Ann' or 'Sally Fairy Ann.' A dictionary of 'Soldier and Sailor Words' from 1925 even has an entry for 'sand for Mary-Ann.' This type of 'soldier slang' is also behind French-influenced phrases like 'mercy buckets' (*merci beaucoup*) and 'bottle of plonk' (*vin blanc*).

Author Jeanette Winterson has also written about the concept, celebrating it as ['a tribute to the exuberance and flexibility of language.'](#) Below she describes the evolution of 'San Fairy Ann' in her own family:

My father was in Ipres, (pronounced Wipers), during the War, and like many of his generation, came back with bits of French. Ce ne fait rien turned into

San Fairy Ann, meaning Stuff You, and then a new character emerged in Lancashire-speak, known as Fairy Ann; a got-up creature, no better than she should be, who couldn't give a damn. 'San Fairy Ann to you', morphed into, 'Who does she think she is? Fairy Ann?'

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[Recording of the week: the seabirds of Bempton Cliffs](#)

This week's selection comes from Cheryl Tipp, Curator of Wildlife & Environmental Sounds.

If you find yourself in East Yorkshire during the summer holidays, be sure to pay a visit to the stunning seabird colonies at [Bempton Cliffs](#). Every year nearly half a million seabirds congregate on the hard chalk cliff faces in order to breed. Numbers are at their highest between April and August, when Gannets, Kittiwakes, Guillemots, Razorbills, Fulmars, Puffins and gulls jostle for the best positions along the precipitous ledges. This recording, made by Richard Margoschis in 1990, captures all the excitement of this busy community.

You can listen to more wildlife and environmental recordings in the [Environment and Nature](#) section of [British Library Sounds](#).

Follow [@CherylTipp](#) and [@soundarchive](#) for all the latest news.

[A wigwam for a goose's bridle](#)

Rosy Hall is an ESRC-funded PhD student from Oxford University working with the BL's Spoken English collections. She writes:

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's 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's 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 17th 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!

Do you have an interesting word or phrase to share? Tweet it to us @VoicesofEnglish

Recording of the week: Gay UK – falling in love with peace

This week's selection comes from David Govier, Oral History Archivist.

The Second World War saw women take on roles that they had not been expected to undertake before. Women moved from the home into factories, ship yards and pivotal roles in war administration. In one of the earliest recordings used

in the British Library's [Gay UK exhibition](#), Mary Wilkins (born 1909) remembers her war experience and reflects on how it informed her identity.

Mary describes how her emotional feelings towards women developed during her childhood. She remembers making a promise to herself, while working as an ambulance driver during the Second World War, to join a peace organisation. She also describes listening to the pacifist and suffragist Sybil Morrison give a speech in Coventry and falling for her 'hook, line and sinker'.

[Mary Wilkins on falling in love_C456/066](#)

This interview extract is part of the Hall Carpenter Oral History Archive which is part of the British Library's Sound Archive. It is a collection of 113 oral history interviews relating to lesbian and gay experience in Britain, and, together with the Hall Carpenter physical archives held at [London School of Economics](#), is one of the largest resources for studying gay activism in the UK. The British Library's current Gay UK exhibition uses over a dozen oral history extracts from the Hall Carpenter collection to tell the varied stories of a broad range of gay people throughout the twentieth century.



The Hall Carpenter Memorial Archive was established in 1982 and grew out of the Gay Monitoring & Archive Project, which collected evidence of discrimination and police arrests in the UK. The archives were named after lesbian author Marguerite Radclyffe Hall and writer and early gay rights activist Edward Carpenter. In 1985 the archives employed Margot Farnham to coordinate an oral history project documenting the life experiences of lesbians and gay men in Britain. Farnham worked with volunteers who located interviewees, carried out interviews, and helped produce documentation such as summaries and transcripts. In 1989, an anthology called '[Inventing Ourselves – Lesbian Life Stories](#)' was published based on the interviews with lesbians.



You can find out more about the Hall Carpenter Oral History Archive and our other oral histories of sexuality in our [collection guide](#).

[Gay UK: Love, Law and Liberty](#) is a free exhibition in the entrance hall at the British Library until 19 September 2017.

Follow [@BL_OralHistory](#) and [@soundarchive](#) for all the latest news.

[Recording of the week: keep calm and](#)

carry on rehearsing

This week's selection comes from Lucia Cavorsi, Audio Project Cataloguer.

There is no doubt Arturo Toscanini was a one-of-a-kind conductor. Renowned for his mastery, Toscanini was obsessed with the most minute details of a performance. But such a quest for perfection, whose outcome would undoubtedly delight listeners, came at a price for orchestra members: shouting, swearing, and humiliation.

Here is the conductor in New York during a seemingly frustrated rehearsal with the NBC Symphony Orchestra of Alfredo Catalini's *Dance of the Water Nymphs* from the opera *Loreley*. The tension in the room is almost palpable as Toscanini delivers his fiery tirade in a mixture of English & Italian before storming off in disgust.

[Toscanini's outburst during rehearsals_New York, 1953 \(1LS0002055\)](#)

Toscanini was a man who believed music was a religious ritual to be enjoyed in absolute silence. It was he who transformed his favourite love, Milan's La Scala theatre, turning it into an autonomous body, banning encores and putting an end to the shame of risottos being served in the balconies during

performances.

Intransigent both in music and in life, it is no surprise that Toscanini's favourite motto was: 'Your back bends when your soul does'.

2017 is the 150th anniversary of the birth of Arturo Toscanini and is being marked through a series of international celebrations including concerts, exhibitions, lectures and special releases.

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