

## Recording of the week: Oldbury – a tour of a decommissioned nuclear power station

*This week's selection comes from Tom Lean, Project Interviewer for An Oral History of British Science.*

For nearly 60 years much of Britain's electricity was supplied by a fleet of eleven Magnox nuclear power stations, built between the 1950s and the 1970s. They were the first series of full-scale nuclear power stations in the world, each built with a pair of nuclear reactors supplying hot steam to a set of turbines to generate electricity for homes and workplaces. While they became the workhorses of the nuclear industry, gradually their numbers dwindled as they reached the end of their design lives and one by one they were decommissioned. North of Bristol, amongst the last to be built was Oldbury, which first went critical on the 18th of September 1967. Switched off in 2012, it now stands silent awaiting the start of a decades-long process that will gradually demolish the station and decontaminate the site. Yet today Oldbury remains much as it was when the station was operational, even if its control rooms and reactor halls seem eerily empty, as Peter Webster, station manager in the 1990s, explains in this video tour of Oldbury recorded last year for [An Oral History of the Electricity Supply Industry](#).

In-depth oral history interviews documenting the lives and careers of those who worked in the electricity industry can be found in the [Industry: water, steel and energy](#) collection on British Library Sounds.

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## Recording of the week: Epic

*This week's selection comes from Rosy Hall, an ESRC-funded PhD student from Oxford University working with the BL's Spoken English collections.*

**Epic** 3. b. colloq. (orig. and chiefly U.S.). Particularly impressive or remarkable; excellent, outstanding. ([www.oed.com](http://www.oed.com))

According to [one Urban Dictionary entry](#), the birth of 'epic' as a popular catchphrase has its origins among 'avid gamers and pretentious English majors'. This fits with the [WordBank](#) contribution of one of our speakers (b.1991), who attributes it to 'video gamer culture' and his gaming friends.

Um, I think that 'epic' is a very interesting word that I constantly hear my friends use, because, it's interesting because it's, I feel it comes from like some kind of like video gamer culture, cause my friends are like ((bay kid)) gamers, I mean I'm not so much, but they always use the word 'epic,' 'that was epic', or like 'epic fail' and {cough} I just, where, what does it mean? I guess it's kind of like...uh like 'amazing', like it just sort of emphasizes something. You know what I mean? Yeah. It's like a lot of emphasis on something it's epic, it's not just s- – you know ordinary, it's epic. I don't know, maybe it's rooted from the actual word epic where you know, like, I don't know the Odyssey? Who knows? Who knows. But yeah. Bye!

### [Epic \(C1442\)](#)

Like so many words whose meanings have evolved over time, *epic* is a common bugbear among prescriptivists – English language mavens who would rather the word were reserved only for Homer and Virgil. As alluded to by this speaker, *epic* hasn't always been a trendy word for something like 'really good' or 'extreme'; traditionally it's a genre of lengthy heroic poetry. Scholars have pointed out, however, that even this definition is fairly fluid – the meaning of *epic* has changed over time to cover both oral and written forms, and extends to novels and even movies (*Game of Thrones*, anyone?). Language change is inevitable, after all; it seems this new *epic* is just the latest iteration.



And we'd better get used to it: unfortunately for the pedants, a high level of objection usually correlates to a high level of usage. Judging from the number of internet rants against it, it's clear that *epic* is here to stay!

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## [Dialect Where You Least Expect It](#)

Jonnie Robinson, Lead Curator of Spoken English, writes:

The recent publication of fixtures for the 2017-18 hockey season may have escaped the attention of many sports fans in the frenzy of Transfer Deadline Day, but this week's friendly between [Southgate](#) and [Durham University](#) was a personal highlight as, with a daughter on each side, household bragging rights were at stake. A significant occasion for the family, of course, but surely not a source of professional interest: after all, hockey – in the UK anyway – is a predominantly middle-class sport so not, one might imagine, a likely focus for dialect research. Well you'd be surprised: the impressive thing about dialect is it can crop up virtually anywhere.

Take last season, for instance: watching one daughter play at Ben Rhydding I

was delighted to see post-match teas included the option of a *bread-cake* (not to mention a *chip buttie*).

✘ Regional variants for BREAD ROLL feature regularly in dialect surveys as noted in a previous [blog post](#) and, given the spectacular setting of Ben Rhydding Hockey Club, little more than a drag flick from Ilkley Moor and the famous Cow and Calf rocks, it's perhaps not surprising to find Yorkshire dialect in this context. However, watching my younger daughter play in a school tournament at Charterhouse – an exclusive boarding school – I was equally intrigued by the wording on a noticeboard next to the astroturf hockey pitch.

✘ This eminently sensible set of principles for parents and supporters includes in rule 8 an appeal to respect 'decisions made by *beaks* and coaching staff'. The [OED](#) records the term *beak* [= 'teacher'] from 1888 and includes four citations: two contain references to Eton College and two are by authors educated at Marlborough College. Its use is categorised as 'schoolboy slang', so not really an example of dialect then, although according to the OED dialect encompasses a '[m]anner of speaking, language, speech; esp. the mode of speech peculiar to, or characteristic of, a particular person or group'. While the distinction between dialect and slang can be a little blurred, it would be interesting to establish how widespread *beak* is within private schools – [this recording](#) explores the existence of a similarly idiosyncratic code at Harrow School, for instance.

So while *beak* might not be strictly comparable with the more overtly dialectal *bread-cake*, it offers a fascinating glimpse of boarding school parlance and demonstrates how localised and vernacular forms permeate even 'official' communication within a school and to its extended community. You would imagine, for instance, that Standard English is universally adopted by schools for written communication to parents, but as the new school term approaches and parents up and down the country check whether their children have the right school uniform it's fascinating to see how one essential item of PE kit varies from place to place. A quick online search of primary school websites in England confirms that school brochures, newsletters and websites differ in how they refer to SOFT SHOES WORN FOR PE.

✘ The four variants shown here from Francis Askew Primary School in Hull (*sand-shoes*), Wylde Green Primary School in Birmingham (*pumps*), Howard Primary School in Croydon (*plimsolls*) and Hullavington C of E Primary School in Wiltshire (*daps*) were among the many alternatives captured in the [BBC Voices](#) survey of 2004/5 and show how we all use and encounter dialect even in the most unexpected places.

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## Mr Tickle in a Newcastle accent

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

At the *Evolving English* exhibition at the British Library (2010-11), we asked visitors to submit recordings of their voices in specially designed telephone booths. Around 15,000 speakers took part, and the outcome is the [Evolving English VoiceBank](#) and [WordBank](#) – a collection of accents and dialect words from over the UK, and all around the world.

One of the things we asked participants to do was to read us a story, so that we could compare different voices saying the same thing. We went for Roger Hargreaves' *Mr Tickle*; it's a useful text because it includes plenty of words that give us clues as to where people are from, like *fast* and *laugh*, for instance (do you say yours with a short or a long 'a'?). We also hoped its light-hearted tone would put the readers at ease so that they wouldn't change their 'normal' voice too much, since sometimes reading out loud can cause people to switch into a more formal register.

In [this recording](#), however, the speaker was so at ease that he put on a performance, exaggerating features of his Newcastle accent to give us the full Geordie experience. He even 'translates' some of the words into dialect terms, such as 'starving' for 'hungry,' 'pack it in' for 'stop it,' and 'arms as long as you'd like' to refer to Mr Tickle's 'extraordinarily long arms.' Then there's 'out for the count' instead of 'fast asleep,' and 'upset' for 'terrible pandemonium.' And of course the speaker adds 'man' at the end of a few sentences for good measure.

Our Newcastle speaker also beautifully demonstrates some Geordie vowel sounds for us. Notice the way he pronounces words like 'house,' 'out,' and 'down' – this 'oo' sound is where the Toon gets its nickname from! There's the 'oo' in 'book,' too, and the characteristically Newcastle vowel sound in 'long' ('lang'). You can find out more about Newcastle English on the [Sounds Familiar](#) website.

Perhaps the theatricality of this reading task makes it inauthentic in some way – it's hard to say whether the participant really speaks like this in everyday life. But, we have more 'natural' recordings elsewhere of these features (check out this other Geordie example in the [VoiceBank](#)), so we know they can be 'real Newcastle' too. What's more, recordings like this can be incredibly useful to us as sociolinguists, because they tell us something about the dialect words and features that are most salient to speakers as markers of their local identity. And, of course, they are evidence of the delight and pride speakers take in their linguistic heritage.

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## [Recording of the week: bringing Batwa voices back to life in Uganda](#)


*This week's selection comes from Dr Janet Topp Fargion, Lead Curator of World and Traditional Music.*

Dr Peter Cooke has been researching music in Uganda since the 1960s. In 1968 he was in the Kisoro area in western Uganda where he recorded a few songs performed by members of the Batwa community. The recordings now form part of his collection at the British Library (BL reference: [C23](#)) and can be listened to on the [British Library Sounds](#) website.

In 1991, the Batwa in Uganda were evicted from their historic homelands and their presence in the country was decimated. In 2006-7 Christopher Kidd, then an anthropology PhD candidate at the University of Glasgow who had been working amongst the Batwa communities, took the Cooke recordings back and played them to local colleagues at the offices of the [United Organisation for Batwa Development in Uganda](#). On hearing them, one of the staff members was able to identify his own grandfather, a man called Kiyovu, as the sole performer of these two songs. Furthermore, he reported that Kiyovu's only surviving son, Jeremiah Bunjagare, was still living in the area although he had been relocated, as part of a development project, to Gitebe beside Echuya Forest.

Dr Kidd went to Gitebe and played the recordings to Jeremiah. He immediately picked out his father's voice and was visibly emotional at hearing his father after all these years. With much pride he explained that the man they were listening to was a man who sat beside kings [Kiyovu was indeed a performer for Mwami Rubugiri, the king of Rwanda]. Later he danced to show his thanks for bringing his father back into his life. Dr Kidd reported: "Listening to these recordings was a time when Jeremiah and other Batwa remembered not their powerlessness but a time in which they 'sat beside kings' and were respected as a people and a culture."

[Urwasabahizi\\_Innanga zither song performed by Kiyovu](#)

 Jeremiah Bunjagare listening to recording of his father from 1968 – Photo Chris Kidd 2007

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