

# **A Glossary of Britishisms for American Readers**

*written by Simon Boswell*

## **BRITISH ENGLISH v. AMERICAN ENGLISH**

It's extraordinary how few differences there are between the 'standard' forms of British & American English, even after a separation of two and a half centuries across the expanse of the Atlantic Ocean. True, there's always been plenty of exchange between us: literature, theatre, films, popular music, academic research, etc. But even so, it's quite amazing that the match is still almost perfect. Fortunately, very few people nowadays would argue that one version is 'better' than the other. In general, the British & American variants are treated as equal alternatives (alongside, for example, Australian English).

## **SPELLINGS**

There are some (not many) divergences in the way that Brits & Americans write the English language. Here are a few examples:

analyse = analyze  
anaesthetic = anesthetic  
diarrhoea = diarrhea  
driving licence = driving license  
foetal = fetal  
fulfil/fulfilment = fulfill/fulfillment  
judgement = judgment  
metre/centre/spectre = meter/center/specter  
to practise/some practice = to practice/some practice  
rancour/humour/colour = rancor/humor/color  
sceptic/sceptical = skeptic/skeptical  
traveller/travelled = traveler/traveled

## **VOCABULARY, SLANG & IDIOMS**

The version of English I have adopted in *The Elgar Enigmas: A Musical Mystery* is (not surprisingly) British, being British born and educated myself; but also because the story is set in Britain. In the dialogue especially, there are a number of 'local' words and expressions that might be unfamiliar to American readers. I've listed below as many as I'm aware of for your reference. If you notice any other items that need explaining, please e-mail me (simon.boswell@siba.fi), and I'll add them to the list:

Asian (person) in UK usage primarily refers to somebody either  
from the Indian subcontinent or with an ethnic connection to  
the Indian subcontinent

bill = US (restaurant) check

biscuit = US cookie

breeze block = US cinder block

Brum = Birmingham (UK)

Camberwell beauty (butterfly) : US name 'mourning cloak'

catch somebody out = notice somebody's attempts at hiding their  
secrets, mistakes or dishonesty

chip fat = deep fat for frying French fries [*i.e. Br. 'chips'*]

C of E = Church of England

dish out = distribute

double Dutch = incomprehensible language or speech

foot the bill = pay the cost or charge

GBH = Grievous Bodily Harm (legal) = serious physical assault

gen = short for 'general information'

get up somebody's nose = seriously irritate somebody

HRH = His/Her Royal Highness

lark = harmless piece of mischief

lay-by = additional parking space beside a road

lorry = US truck

MP = Member of Parliament

off-putting = disconcerting, disturbing, distracting

platform = US (train station) track number

prise off = US pry off

queue = US stand in line

rabbit on = talk incessantly [*Cockney rhyming slang:*  
*'rabbit & pork' >> 'talk'*]

restaurant car = (railroad) dining car

scatty = absentminded, empty-headed, flighty

sponge (cake)

sussed = caught out [*see above*], detected

toffee-nosed = snobbishly pretentious and supercilious

UWE = University of the West of England

wellies = Wellington boots = rubber boots

windscreen = US windshield