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IDIOTIC IDIOMS - 4

WHERE DOES THE EXPRESSION "EAVESDROP" COME FROM?

IT BEGAN IN ANGLO-SAXON ENGLAND. THE WORD ORIGINALLY REFERRED TO THE AREA AROUND A BUILDING THAT WAS LIABLE TO BE WETTED BY WATER FLOWING OFF THE PROJECTING EAVES (EDGES) OF THE ROOF ABOVE (GUTTERS HADN'T BEEN INVENTED YET). THERE WAS AN ANCIENT CUSTOM THAT STOPPED A LANDOWNER FROM BUILDING WITHIN TWO FEET OF HIS BOUNDARY, BECAUSE THE WATER CASCADING OFF THE EAVES (EDGES) MIGHT CAUSE PROBLEMS FOR HIS NEIGHBOUR.

BY THE END OF THE MEDIEVAL PERIOD, THE WORD EAVESDROPPER HAD BEEN INVENTED FOR SOMEBODY WHO STOOD WITHIN THIS STRIP OF GROUND, UNDER THE PROJECTING EAVES AND CLOSE TO THE WALLS OF A BUILDING, IN ORDER TO LISTEN SECRETLY TO THE CONVERSATIONS WITHIN. THE VERB TO EAVESDROP IN THE SAME SENSE CAME ALONG ABOUT A CENTURY LATER.