

# Nautical Trivia Booklet

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# A SHOT ACROSS THE BOWS ORIGIN

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## A SHOT ACROSS THE BOWS

Often used metaphorically in modern days, to fire a shot across the bows means to give someone a warning. Original it was common naval practice for a ship to fire a cannon shot across the bows of an adversary's ship to demonstrate they were ready for battle. The first mention in print can be found in a piece from the Wisconsin Democrat dated December 1939: 'In a very brief space we neared our victim, a large merchantman, whose appearance promised at once an easy conquest and a rich booty. At a signal from Stamar, a shot was fired across her bows to bring her to. She immediately hoisted a white flag.'

# ALL ABOVE BOARD ORIGIN

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## ALL ABOVE BOARD

The phrase used to describe something as being plain to see, with nothing to hide or as truthful stems from a bit of nautical trickery practiced by warships and pirates alike. With such large crews on board it was common for ships within view of another vessel's telescope to keep most of the men out of sight. At a distance they could possibly appear to be a peaceful merchant ship with only a small crew that offered no threat. All but a handful of the crew would be kept behind the bulwarks, or below the top deck. However a captain with nothing to hide would have all his crew in plain view 'above board.'

# ALL AT SEA ORIGIN

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## ALL AT SEA

Today the commonly used phrase 'All at Sea', meaning in a state of confusion, appears to make little sense. However it dates back to the early age of sail, before accurate navigational instruments were available. Once a ship was out of sight of land it was deemed to be 'at sea' and basically at risk of becoming lost. It was often used during the 18th when referring to ships that had not returned to port.

It is unsure exactly when the 'all' was added although the first literary reference comes from *Travel and Adventure in South-East Africa*, by Frederick C. Selous 1893: 'I was rather surprised to find that he seemed all at sea, and had no one ready to go with me.'

# ANCHORS AWEIGH ORIGIN

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## ANCHORS AWEIGH

Often misspelt 'anchors away' the term used when setting off on a journey or voyage does not mean getting away from the anchor. It is derived from the phrase 'weigh anchor' which refers to placing an anchor's weight on the rope of chain. Sailors were fond of adding 'a' to words – afloat, aboard, ashore, aground, adrift etc. The word aweigh was simply a continuation of the custom.

# AVAST YE VARLET ORIGIN

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## AVAST YE VARLET

The definitive cry of legendary ship's captains has been used in countless texts, plays and movies. Avast is a nautical command meaning to stop or desist. It is an Anglicised version of the Middle Dutch phrase 'hou vast', which translates as hold fast.

Varlet originates from Old French and is a variant of vaslet or valet – meaning attendant or servant. In medieval times it was used to describe a knight's page or knave. It became quite common in storytelling and folklore for knaves/varlets to be portrayed as rascals and scoundrels which in turn lead to the words becoming somewhat derogatory.

"Avast ye Varlet" therefore means "Hold fast you scoundrel". Whether anyone actually shouted it in real life is questionable. It tends to be used more for comic effect.

# BATTEN DOWN THE HATCHES ORIGIN

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## BATTEN DOWN THE HATCHES

When we are told to 'batten down the hatches' it generally means that we should prepare for trouble or find whatever means we can to protect ourselves. In the case of bad weather this often refers to the use of sheeting to protect property or goods.

However the original meaning is far more specific and originated in the early 19th century. A batten (as most of you will know) is a strip of wood. When a ship's crew were expecting bad weather they would use battens (and caulking) as added protection against water thrown onto the ships decks. This would prevent it running below deck via the hatches into their quarters. Early recorded uses of the term in print include:

'Domestic Amusements', John Badcock, 1823 - 'The severity of the climate having '  
'Chambers Journal' 1883 - 'Batten down the hatches - quick, men.'

# BILGE - ORIGIN

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## BILGE - ORIGIN

Bilge is the lowest point of a ship's interior. The first place that was going to show signs of leakage and considered to be the filthiest, dank and musty place aboard. Often the home of bilge rats the term 'bilge' has become a term used to describe people talking rubbish.

# BINNACLE LIST ORIGIN

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## BINNACLE LIST

The stand on which a ship's compass was mounted was called the binnacle. During the 18th Century a list of crew members unable to report for duty was given to the officer or mate on watch. The list was then kept at the binnacle. Hence the sick-list became The Binnacle List.

# BLACK BOOK ORIGIN

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## BLACK BOOK

Getting listed in someone's Black Book nowadays isn't a patch on what was written in them during the 1300s. Back then the Black Book of the Admiralty was a list of maritime laws and conduct, the punishment section of which proves very harsh reading indeed. For instance if you were caught repeatedly sleeping during a watch you could face drowning, starvation or, at best, marooning. Other punishments included whipping, clubbing and keel hauling. Blimey!

# BLACK SPOT - ORIGIN

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## BLACK SPOT

The original black spot was method by which pirates made death threats. Made famous in Robert Louis Stevenson's classic adventure novel *Treasure Island* it was simply a small piece of paper marked on one side with a black smudge, and often a specific threat written on the other side.

# BOOT CAMP ORIGIN

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## BOOT CAMP

The name for cadet training schools first came into use during the Spanish-American War. Sailor's leggings were known as boots which quickly became the nickname for a Navy or Marine recruit. So logically these rookies were trained in 'boot' camps

# BOWSPRIT - DESCRIPTION

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## BOWSPRIT

The bowsprit is a pole that extends from the front of a sailing vessel and is used as an anchor point for smaller navigational sails. Famously Blackbeard's head was hung from the bowsprit as a trophy.

# BROAD IN THE BEAM ORIGIN

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## BROAD IN THE BEAM

The somewhat derogatory phrase used to describe someone who has wide hips or buttocks originates from the nautical term for the widest point of a ship –the beam or beame.

Although the phrase dates back at least to the 1620's the figurative use did not come into play until the 20th Century as in an early citation from Hugh Walpole's Hans Frost, 1929, 'He stood watching disgustedly Bigges' broad beam.'

# BUCCANEER - ORIGIN

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## BUCCANEER

Buccaneers were originally hunters of pigs and cattle on the island of Hispanola but were driven off by the Spanish. They became privateers and fought against the Spanish in the Atlantic and Caribbean eventually resorting to piracy and gaining notoriety for hard drinking and cruelty.

# BY AND LARGE ORIGIN

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## BY AND LARGE

The phrase used to mean 'all things considered' has its roots in the days of sail. The word 'large' is used to describe the wind when it is blowing from a compass point behind the ship's direction of movement. When the wind blows in that direction the largest square sail can be set and the ship can travel in any downwind direction.

'By' was a term that sailors used to mean 'in the general direction of'. For instance to be 'by the wind' would mean the ship was facing into the wind or within six compass points of it. Sailing into the wind was facilitated by the use of triangular sails.

19th century windjammers like the Cutty Sark were required to be able to sail 'by and large' even in bad weather. The phrase eventually adopted the figurative meaning to describe a situation where all possibilities have been considered.

# CARRY ON THE ORIGIN

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## CARRY ON

The phrase used to mean continue with what you are doing stems from a nautical term used when ships were sail driven. The officer of the deck kept a constant eye on the weather so they could recognise the slightest change in wind conditions. The sails would be reefed or added as necessary ensuring the quickest headway. If a good breeze came along the crew were ordered to hoist every bit of sail the yards could carry or too 'carry on'.

# CHARLIE NOBLE ORIGIN

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## CHARLIE NOBLE

The nickname for the smoke stack of a ships galley originated around 1850. The story goes that when a British merchant captain Charles Noble discovered that the smokestack was made of copper he ordered that it be kept bright. The crew then began to refer to it as 'Charley Noble.'

# CHOCK A BLOCK ORIGIN

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## CHOCK A BLOCK

This has nothing to do with cramming blocks into a chocolate box. The term Chock a Block, meaning absolutely full to capacity, is derived from nautical term for a position when two blocks of tackle come together therefore allowing for no further movement.

# CLOSE QUARTERS ORIGIN

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## CLOSE QUARTERS

The phrase used to describe being in close contact or very close to, usually used when describing combat of some kind, stems from the term 'close fight'. During the 17th Century barriers were laid across the decks of ships to provide a safe haven from the enemy these were called 'close fights'. By the middle of the following century the term had changed to 'close quarters' which actually meant 'closed dwellings'. However the association with hand to hand fighting led to 'close quarters' being used as it still is today.

# COME ABOUT - ORIGIN

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## COME ABOUT.

Yet another everyday phrase that has its origins in nautical terminology. Coming about was often used tactically during naval conflict. It is actually a technical term used when sailing against the wind but was adopted by sailors in combat when a ship was heading away from the enemy and turned back to face them. This was a surprise tactic. The phrase eventually became the norm when describing something that has happened which is unexpected.

# CORSAIR

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## CORSAIR

The term corsair was used between the 16th and 19th centuries for Christian and Muslim privateers in the Mediterranean. The Barbary Corsairs came from North African States and were often hired by Muslim nations to attack Christian vessels. The Christian Corsairs, also known as The Maltese Corsairs, took their orders from the Knights of St. John and were mainly involved in attacks against the Turks.

# COXSWAIN THE ORIGIN

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*Provided by Harbour Guides - [www.harbourguides.com](http://www.harbourguides.com)*

## COXSWAIN

Today a coxswain refers to the helmsman of any boat but this wasn't always the case. The name dates back to at least 1463 and was originally 'cockswain'. It meant the first swain (servant boy) in charge of the small cockboat (or cock) that was used to row the captain to and from the ship.

# CRANKY THE ORIGIN

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*Provided by Harbour Guides - [www.harbourguides.com](http://www.harbourguides.com)*

## CRANKY

The word used to describe someone as being irritable stems from a mispronunciation of the Dutch word 'krenkd' or 'crank'. A crank was an unstable ship or sailing vessel. Usually the problem was down to bad design, imbalanced cargo or a lack of ballast. This would cause the vessel to heel too far to the wind.

# CROSSING THE LINE ORIGIN

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*Provided by Harbour Guides - [www.harbourguides.com](http://www.harbourguides.com)*

To cross the line or 'go too far' actually has nothing to do with the legendary rut scratched in the dust with a boot heel during a confrontation. It is in fact based on an ancient nautical ritual that is still practiced today. When a sailor, crew member or passenger crossed the equator for the first time it was traditional to hold a ceremony to which King Neptune and various other mythological characters participated. Today the pagan trimmings have all but been dispatched and have been replaced by a booze fuelled celebration that inevitably ends with a very bad hangover indeed.

# CUT OF HIS JIB DEFINITION

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*Provided by Harbour Guides - [www.harbourguides.com](http://www.harbourguides.com)*

## CUT OF HIS JIB

The slang term to describe a person's facial appearance or personality is derived from the eighteenth century method for determining the nationality of a ship from a distance. This was done by checking the number and shape of its jib sails. For instance French ships often had two small jibs whereas Spanish ships had one small jib or none at all.

Jib was also sailors slang for face and therefore someone saying 'I dont like the cut of his jib' could mean they were suspicious of them.

# DEAD IN THE WATER

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*Provided by Harbour Guides - [www.harbourguides.com](http://www.harbourguides.com)*

Pretty obvious that this term has nautical origins. The phrase used to describe a project that is going nowhere or has come to a standstill is derived from the phrase used by mariners to describe being becalmed. When there was no wind to fill the sails the ship was said (and still is today) to be 'dead in the water'.

# DEAD RECKONING ORIGIN

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*Provided by Harbour Guides - [www.harbourguides.com](http://www.harbourguides.com)*

## DEAD RECKONING

The phrase to described estimating a course of events or position stems from the sixteenth century when mariners would plot a course based on the last known position, time, compass course and present speed. However this method did not allow for unknown variables such as wind speed and direction, currents and drift. Of course this meant continued use of the process produced cumulative errors.

Originally the method was called 'deduced' reckoning which became 'de'd', 'ded, and eventually 'dead'.

# DOGWATCH ORIGIN

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*Provided by Harbour Guides - [www.harbourguides.com](http://www.harbourguides.com)*

## DOGWATCH

Dogwatch takes place between 4 and 6pm and 6 and 8pm. They are only 2hrs long so the same crewmen are not on duty at the same time each afternoon. There are several theories about the origins of the name including: that it is a corruption of 'dodge watch' and that it is associated with the term dog-sleep used to describe the fitful sleep of sailor as the watch is a stressful one. What we do know is that the term has been used since at least 1700.

# DRESSING DOWN ORIGIN

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*Provided by Harbour Guides - [www.harbourguides.com](http://www.harbourguides.com)*

## DRESSING DOWN

To give someone a dressing down generally means a reprimand or telling of for inefficiency or poor behaviour leading to some kind of failure. As always with phrases featured in this section of the site the term is of nautical origin and refers to the temporary repair of sails that had worn thin. To increase their efficiency they were treated with wax or, as it was called in bygone days, 'dressed down'.

# DRIFTER ORIGIN

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*Provided by Harbour Guides - [www.harbourguides.com](http://www.harbourguides.com)*

## DRIFTER

The term used for someone who is essentially homeless and spends his/her life wandering from place to place comes from the Middle English word *drifte* meaning to float. Sailors used the word to describe things that had gone missing overboard or had come undone from its mooring. The modern version of *drifte* is, of course, *adrift*.

# DUFFLE BAG THE ORIGIN

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*Provided by Harbour Guides - [www.harbourguides.com](http://www.harbourguides.com)*

## DUFFLE BAG

The name given to Sailor's personal effects is derived from the Flemish town of Duffel, near Antwerp where they made rough woollen cloth which was used to in the manufacture of sailors clothing. Hence the bags that sailors used to carry their belongings were named Duffel Bags or Duffle Bags.

# FATHOM OUT ORIGIN

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*Provided by Harbour Guides - [www.harbourguides.com](http://www.harbourguides.com)*

## FATHOM OUT

The term used to describe working something out from the facts is derived from the use of the measurement 'fathom' which was the distance from finger tip to finger tip (approx 6ft). To ascertain the depth of the water below a ship a weighted rope was used with knots tied at six feet intervals. This simple method of calculation was known as 'fathoming out'.

# FILIBUSTER THE ORIGIN

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*Provided by Harbour Guides - [www.harbourguides.com](http://www.harbourguides.com)*

## Filibuster

The political term to delay or obstruct the passage of legislation by hijacking parliament by relentless speech making is actually derived from the old English name for Buccaneers. It came from the Dutch word for freebooter 'vrybouter' which was then translated into French as 'flibustier' which in turn was mispronounced by the English as filibuster.

# FITS THE BILL ORIGIN

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*Provided by Harbour Guides - [www.harbourguides.com](http://www.harbourguides.com)*

## FITS THE BILL

The phrase used to describe something that is just what is required is derived from the Bill of Lading. This was an inventory of goods received and a promise to deliver in the same condition signed by the captain of a merchant ship. When the ship reached its destination the cargo would be confirmed according to the bill.

# FOULED ANCHOR ORIGIN

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## FOULED ANCHOR

The subject of a million and more tattoos, the fouled anchor is possibly the most iconic nautical image in the world. The insignia of an anchor entwined in rope or chain has been used for over 500 years and has its origins in British naval Service traditions.

In the late 16th Century the fouled anchor was adopted as the official seal of Lord Admiral Charles Lord Howards of Effingham. It had already been used by the Lord High Admiral of Scotland a hundred years earlier. The anchor itself was used as a heraldic device in ancient British coats of arms and more recently made famous by 20th century cartoon icon Popeye whose forearms adorned ink impressions of anchors.

# FREEZE THE BALLS OFF A BRASS MONKEY

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*Provided by Harbour Guides - [www.harbourguides.com](http://www.harbourguides.com)*

There's absolutely no denying the fact that we've reached that time of year when the mornings feel cold enough to freeze the balls of a brass monkey. Ouch! It does sound painful doesn't it? In reality if the balls were frozen off a brass monkey it could have well proved painful. That's if you were standing too close to one when the balls fell off and broke your foot.

As with so many old sayings this one doesn't quite translate into modern language. That's because the phrase has nothing to with the freeze-dried emasculation of some surreal (or indeed extinct) alloy species of simian. A brass 'monkey' was in fact a rack used on gun ships during the Napoleonic wars to store cannon balls. When the temperature dropped to around freezing the brass would contract thus causing the cannon balls to fall onto the gun deck.

Go tell that to a Viz reader.

# GET A WORD IN EDGEWAYS ORIGIN

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## GET A WORD IN EDGEWAYS

This expression (also 'edgewise') was first coined in the 19th century and was derived from the nautical practice of proceeding edge first or making small tacking movements to make progress. So naturally when someone is hogging a conversation or debate the best way to get your own point across is to proceed carefully, taking advantage of the smallest of opportunities to speak.

An early example of its use appears in the one-act play *Twelve precisely!* or, *A night at Dover*, 1821: "Curse me, if I can get a word in edgeways!"

# GET CLUED UP ORIGIN

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*Provided by Harbour Guides - [www.harbourguides.com](http://www.harbourguides.com)*

## GET CLUED UP

Apparently this oft used phrase has little to do with any cerebral stimulation to gain insight. The word 'clue' is actually derived from the name for the corner of a sail 'clew'. There was a brass ring in the clew to which a clew line was fastened to hold the sail in place. If the clew became damaged then the ship had to remain where it was until the damage was repaired. Hence – get clued up.

# GET DOWN TO THE NITTY GRITTY ORIGIN

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*Provided by Harbour Guides - [www.harbourguides.com](http://www.harbourguides.com)*

## GET DOWN TO THE NITTY GRITTY

The most accepted origin of the phrase used to describe getting down to the harsh realities or the bottom of an issue remains disputed and somewhat controversial. Which is understandable as it is associated with the British slave trade of the 18th century and was first used at the ports of Liverpool and Bristol. It even became the centre of media debate following a tabloid report following the 'equality and diversity' course for Bristol Council employees in 2005 which led to a proposal that Penny Lane in Liverpool (named after slave-trader James Penny) should be renamed.

The term 'nitty gritty' allegedly referred to the 'unimportant' debris left at the bottom of slave ships after the human cargo had been removed. It has been suggested that the term was extended to refer to the slaves themselves; in particular those that were left below board because they were considered worthless to traders, meaning they were sick or dead. It is also suggested that 'nitty gritty' was a nautical variation of the word 'nigger' used by sailors on slave ships from different countries.

# GIVE SOMEONE A WIDE BERTH ORIGIN

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*Provided by Harbour Guides - [www.harbourguides.com](http://www.harbourguides.com)*

## GIVE SOMEONE A WIDE BERTH

The phrase for keeping your distance from someone for whatever reason is derived from the practice of positioning ships at anchor with enough space between them so as to prevent them colliding if they swung in high winds or strong currents. Hence the saying 'To give someone a wide Berth'.

# GO BY THE BOARD ORIGIN

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*Provided by Harbour Guides - [www.harbourguides.com](http://www.harbourguides.com)*

## GO BY THE BOARD

Dating back to the 17th century the 'board' referred to here is the decking of a ship. Things that had fallen 'by the board' had generally crossed the deck to do so rather than simply fallen, or been thrown, overboard. For example: 'In this fight their Reare-Admirals Maine Mast was shot by the boord.' John Taylor's 'Works'. 1603.

This appears to be confirmed in 'The Sailor's Word-book: An Alphabetical Digest of Nautical Terms', 1865: 'By the board. Over the ship's side. When a mast is carried away near the deck it is said to go by the board.'

The figurative use of the word meaning 'finished with' originated in the early to mid 19th century as is confirmed in this citation from The 'Gettysburg Republican Compiler', November 1837: 'Those banks that do not resume speedily will go by the board.'

# GOING OVERBOARD ORIGIN

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*Provided by Harbour Guides - [www.harbourguides.com](http://www.harbourguides.com)*

## GOING OVERBOARD

It's not entirely clear when the phrase 'going overboard' took on its figurative meaning but it was first cited in the 1930's by New York writer Damon Runyon, which makes sense. To associate extreme enthusiasm for something with abandoning ship fits his world perfectly. Basically 'going overboard' means risking economic, domestic or social suicide. In the world of fast living that the author wrote about it was par for the course. But it's certainly not recommended.

# GOOD DEAL ORIGIN

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*Provided by Harbour Guides - [www.harbourguides.com](http://www.harbourguides.com)*

## GOOD DEAL

Today's interpretation of the word deal stems from card playing a good deal is connected with potential cash rewards. Originally the word 'deal' referred to a length of timber cut for ship building. Timbers used for this purpose had to be perfect. Any defect rendered a plank a potential hazard. Planks that were free of knots, cracks or rotten areas were branded "good deals". Hence a good deal means something of quality that will do the job properly rather like a decent hand in poker.

# HAND OVER FIST ORIGIN

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*Provided by Harbour Guides - [www.harbourguides.com](http://www.harbourguides.com)*

## HAND OVER FIST

Usually used in reference to making money quickly the term 'hand over fist' stems from the original phrase 'hand over hand' which is clearly associated with pulling or climbing ropes. The term dates back to at least the start of 18th century and an early citation can be found in the Royal Society's 'Philosophical Transactions' 1736: "A lusty young Man attempted to go down (hand over hand, as the Workmen call it) by means of a single Rope."

However 'hand over fist' seems to have been used as a more figurative version with allusions to speed as in William Glascock's 'The naval sketchbook' 1825: "The French ... weathered our wake, coming up with us, 'hand over fist', in three divisions." Probably the earliest citation to use the term in reference to making a fast buck can be found in Seba Smith's 'The Life and Writings of Major Jack Downing' 1833: 'They... clawed the money off of his table, hand over fist.'

# HARBOUR GUIDES NAUTICAL TRIVIA

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*Provided by Harbour Guides - [www.harbourguides.com](http://www.harbourguides.com)*

## OVER THE BARREL

Many moons ago the most common form of punishment aboard a ship was flogging. The Sailor receiving the punishment would quite often be tied over the barrel of a deck cannon obviously in an uncompromising position. Hence the phrase "you've got me over a barrel"

## SON OF A GUN

When ships were in port and the crew of sailors was confined to the boat for lengthy periods of time, wives and ladies of easy virtue were permitted to stay aboard with their fellers. Occasionally children were born on the ship and one of the most convenient places to give birth was between the guns on the gun deck. If the father of the child was not known the entry on the ships log would read "Son of a gun"

If you have any bits of trivia, funny sailing stories or sailing news that you would like to send us, please do and we will credit you with them

# HARD AND FAST ORIGIN

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*Provided by Harbour Guides - [www.harbourguides.com](http://www.harbourguides.com)*

## HARD AND FAST

The phrase used to describe a rule that is rigidly adhered to or a truth that is beyond doubt or debate originates from the nautical term used to describe a ship that is firmly beached on shore. In other words a ship that is essentially immovable. By the early 19th century it had taken on its figurative meaning and entered into popular use.

# HARD UP DEFINITION

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*Provided by Harbour Guides - [www.harbourguides.com](http://www.harbourguides.com)*

## HARD UP

The term for describing someone's financial distress has nothing to do with money whatsoever. It stems from phrase used to describe the position of a ship's helm when turned windward. Thus immense stress upon the vessel caused by this was referred to as being hard up

# HIGH AND DRY ORIGIN

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*Provided by Harbour Guides - [www.harbourguides.com](http://www.harbourguides.com)*

## HIGH AND DRY

Pretty self explanatory this one and means exactly what it says on the tin. Saying that someone or something is 'high and dry', meaning stranded with little hope of help or recovery originates from the term used to describe ships that were beached. The use of the word 'dry' suggests they had been out of the water for some time and would probably remain so.

The phrases first reported use in print was in the 'Ship News' column of The Times in August 1796:

"The Russian frigate Archipelago, yesterday got around the Nore at high water, which; when the tide ebbed, left her nearly high and dry."

# HOLY STONE ORIGIN

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*Provided by Harbour Guides - [www.harbourguides.com](http://www.harbourguides.com)*

## HOLY STONE

The name given to soft sandstone is not, as many believe, due to its use in the construction of primitive places of worship. It is in fact a bit of nautical slang with a double barrel origin.

Soft sandstone was often used to scrub a ship's deck, a much despised task which meant that sailors were forced to kneel as if in prayer for long periods... they would of course joke that they were praying that the task would end. The stone was also full of holes a property that help to enhance the joke and surely caused many a sailor to forget his aching back in favour of aching sides from laughing.

# HOOKER ORIGIN

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*Provided by Harbour Guides - [www.harbourguides.com](http://www.harbourguides.com)*

## HOOKER

It has nothing to do with predatory ladies of the night. Indeed this term for a female employed in the oldest trade in the world is derived from an eighteenth century Dutch fishing boat. These tubby little boats were robust working boats that tended to look somewhat worse for wear or 'well used'. Hence British sailors adopted the name to describe prostitutes who although they had been around for a good while was still 'serviceable'. Nice.

# IN THE DOGHOUSE ORIGIN

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*Provided by Harbour Guides - [www.harbourguides.com](http://www.harbourguides.com)*

## IN THE DOGHOUSE

Being in the dog house dates back to the days of slave trading. The holds of ships carrying human cargo from Africa to the USA were modified to become enormous dormitories. This left little if any room below deck for crew members to sleep. This was solved by building kennel style huts (dog houses) on the deck for sailors to use as bunks. Of course sleeping on the upper deck in these hot humid and somewhat air-free hutches was very unpleasant. Hence getting into an uncomfortable situation became referred to as being in the dog house.

# IN THE OFFING ORIGIN

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*Provided by Harbour Guides - [www.harbourguides.com](http://www.harbourguides.com)*

## IN THE OFFING

When something is likely to happen soon it is said to be 'in the offing'. The origin for this phrase is relatively straight forward and, as all things Harbour Guides is a nautical term. The 'offing' refers to the sea just beyond the shoreline that stretches to the horizon. Look outs on the shore would first catch sight of approaching ships when they were 'in the offing'. They were usually expected to reach dock before the next tide hence their arrival was inevitably going to be very soon.

# JERRY BUILT DEFINITION

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*Provided by Harbour Guides - [www.harbourguides.com](http://www.harbourguides.com)*

## JERRY BUILT

There are a few explanations for this phrase. Mostly stem from a mythological ship builder or ship building company based on Merseyside during the 19th century. The most probably origin comes from the term 'jury' which meant temporary or makeshift as in 'jury-mast'. A Jury mast was constructed as a means to getting back to port when a ships mast was damaged. Maybe it was down to the French this time mispronouncing and English phrase!

# JETTY - ORIGIN

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*Provided by Harbour Guides - [www.harbourguides.com](http://www.harbourguides.com)*

## JETTY - ORIGIN

Jetty refers to a variety of structures (usually made of timber but can also be built of stone or concrete depending on purpose) used in rivers, estuaries, lakes, docks and maritime works. They can be used for directing currents or accommodating vessels. Also known as wharfs they project out from the shore into deeper waters often to form a pathway at the end of which boats can be moored to enable easy boarding or transfer of goods and cargo.

The term jetty is derived from the French word 'jetée' which means thrown or projected ie; something that has been thrown out into the water.

# JURY RIG - ORIGIN

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## JURY MAST/ JURY RIG - ORIGIN

Jury mast or rig refers to a replacement mast of makeshift repairs made to a mast when it has been damaged. The word 'jury' is thought to have derived from the Old French word 'ajurie' meaning 'help' or 'relief'. What is certain the term 'jury rigged' has been used at least since 1788 whilst 'jury' has been used in reference to being makeshift or temporary since at least 1616 when it appeared in John Smith's 'A Description of New England'.

# KEEP YOUR SHIRT ON ORIGIN

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*Provided by Harbour Guides - [www.harbourguides.com](http://www.harbourguides.com)*

## KEEP YOUR SHIRT ON

In bygone days shirts were a pretty expensive item of clothing. When a sailor decided to fight someone he would always take his shirt off prior to the commencement of fisticuffs. Hence a phrase used by those attempting to calm the situation was 'keep your shirt on.' The phrase has long since become common-place for meaning to keep calm and under control.

# KNOW THE ROPES ORIGIN

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*Provided by Harbour Guides - [www.harbourguides.com](http://www.harbourguides.com)*

## KNOW THE ROPES

A pretty straightforward one this. The phrase commonly used to describe someone as knowing his job or being skilled at something is derived from seasoned seamen. The first thing that sailors were taught at sea was how to deal with rigging. They would be shown the various knots etc. This was called learning the ropes. Hence when a sailor was accustomed to the business of rigging he was said to 'know the ropes'.

Simples x

# LANDLUBBER - ORIGIN

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## LANDLUBBER

The term used, often insultingly, to describe a person more at home on dry land than at sea is often, and mistakenly, thought to be a distortion of 'land lover.' In truth 'lubber' is an old slang word that means clumsy or uncoordinated. Hence 'land lubber' really means someone who is awkward or uncomfortable at sea.

# LET THE CAT OUT OF THE BAG

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*Provided by Harbour Guides - [www.harbourguides.com](http://www.harbourguides.com)*

## LET THE CAT OUT OF THE BAG

To be truthful I don't get the relevance of this phrase to its modern interpretation. Letting the cat out of the bag basically means revealing a secret. The 'cat' refers to the cat o' nine tails, which was the ships whip, used to flog unruly sailors. Said 'cat' was kept in a cloth bag that was brought on deck for the floggings. So it was hardly a secret. Maybe it is all about sailors who were on the verge of becoming mutinous or the like and began plotting. Went on to talk to the wrong guy and were subsequently dobbed in. Hence the 'cat' was let out of the bag... That makes sense to me. Nasty though it is.

# LETTER OF MARQUE - ORIGIN

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## LETTER OF MARQUE

A Letter of Marque was a document given to a privateer or corsair that gave them amnesty from piracy laws if the plundered vessels were of an enemy nation. Of course the plunder was then eligible for tax but, nonetheless, the privateers still earned an awful lot more than any sailor serving in any Navy. It was a risky business but highly profitable. Today the term is usually associated with businessmen, politicians, bankers who manage to legitimise dodgy dealings via wily lawyers and spin.

# LONG CLOTHES - ORIGIN

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## LONG CLOTHES

'Long clothes' was a derogatory term for a landlubber. Sailors clothing had to be reasonably tight to ensure it didn't get in the way whilst climbing the rigging or hauling ropes and chains (and especially during battle). Landsmen could quite happily wear baggy trousers, coats and stockings. Officers also were also quite a liberty to enjoy this luxury but those who did were not respected by the crew hence the traditional portrayal of bad ships captains and pirates in flamboyant dress.

# MIZZEN MAST - ORIGIN

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## MIZZEN MAST – ORIGIN

The mizzen mast is the third mast from the bow on a ship that has three or more masts. It is also the after and shorter mast of a yawl, ketch or dandy. The name is derived from several sources - Middle English mesan, from Old French misaine, Old Spanish mezana or Old Italian mezzana, all ultimately from Latin medianus meaning 'of the middle'.

# NAIL ONES COLOURS TO THE MAST ORIGIN

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*Provided by Harbour Guides - [www.harbourguides.com](http://www.harbourguides.com)*

.Commonly used when describing someone who is determined to get what he or she wants make that intention very clear, nailing one's colours to the mast means exactly what it says on the page. During battle it was traditional for enemies to attempt to seize flags or 'colours' from each other's ships. Therefore flags were often literally nailed to the mast to make them difficult to extricate and symbolize the crew's resolve never to surrender.

# NAUTICAL SAYING FLY BY NIGHT

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*Provided by Harbour Guides - [www.harbourguides.com](http://www.harbourguides.com)*

## FLY BY NIGHT

Most people think that the term 'fly by night' means someone who will turn up to do something only to have disappeared by nightfall, usually after being paid for a job half finished. May be so but a fly-by-night was also a large sail used only in specific wind conditions. The fly-by-night was employed instead of the usual collection of smaller sails, making it easier to manage. It could also only be used when sailing downwind and, more or less, the only time it would be used was during the night when most of the crew were asleep below.

# NAUTICAL SAYINGS (DUTCH COURAGE)

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*Provided by Harbour Guides - [www.harbourguides.com](http://www.harbourguides.com)*

## IT WAS THE DRINK!

The phrase 'Dutch courage', which as we all know means alcohol induced bravery, was originally considered rather insulting. It came into use in the 17th Century during the Anglo-Dutch wars along with other similar phrases such as 'go Dutch', 'Dutch uncle' and 'double Dutch'. Based on British propaganda circulated at the time it was claimed that Dutch sailors and troops were cowards and could only be coaxed into fighting through the administration of large amounts of schnapps. Of course history has shown that many famous battles have been fought and won by armies and navies fired up on strong liquor... quite a few of them by the British actually!

# NAUTICAL SAYINGS (JACK TAR)

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*Provided by Harbour Guides - [www.harbourguides.com](http://www.harbourguides.com)*

I bet you have asked yourself this question countless times. 'Why on earth are sailors referred to as Jack Tar? The answer is. There is no straight answer although it does seem to have something to do with tar. During the years of the British Empire the name Jack Tar was widely used by landlubbers and seamen alike. It was certainly not derogatory.

The easy bits 'Jack' because like the name John, Jack has been used down the years as a name for someone of unknown identity. Basically something you can call anyone. Obviously it isn't done as much today as we call everyone mate (but that's another nautical story)

As for the tar part. Well it's true that tar was used extensively aboard wooden ships as a sealant and general waterproofing material. So there we have a connection. Seamen often used tar to waterproof their clothes prior to setting sail. They also used to soak rigging rope in tar as it was made from hemp and tended to rot in damp conditions. They would end their days with their hands covered in the stuff. Both these explanations sound plausible. But by far the most common is that, in the absence of a ships barber, sailors would plait their hair and smear it with high grade tar to prevent it getting caught in a ships equipment. This practice was still carried on during the early 20th century.

Nowadays they just make seamen get their hair cut.

# NAUTICAL SAYINGS (TRUE COLOURS)

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*Provided by Harbour Guides - [www.harbourguides.com](http://www.harbourguides.com)*

## THE TRUTH ABOUT COLOURS

According to Cyndi Lauper 'true colours are beautiful like a rainbow.' As we all know the phrase is rarely used in the context of something beautiful. Indeed it usually refers to the discovery of something unsavoury or dark about an individual. And the alleged origins of the saying be more in accordance with the latter.

Ships of old, in particular warships often had on board flags of many nations as a means of deception. However the rules of engagement called for all vessels to fly their true national emblem before they were permitted to open fire on an enemy. More underhand captains would sometimes have the flag of their enemy flying whilst entering a war zone and as soon as they were within firing range they would swap the flag for their true national colours. Hardly a beautiful thing to do.

Cyndi you live in a fantasy world!

# NAUTICAL SAYINGS (WHAT A STITCH UP!)

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*Provided by Harbour Guides - [www.harbourguides.com](http://www.harbourguides.com)*

We all love to put a complicated job to bed. There is something distinctly satisfying about getting something well and truly finished or 'all sewn up' as we like to say. But to be honest I'm not sure any of us would actually like to have to finish the job that that seemingly straightforward phrase 'All Sewn Up' is derived from. You guessed it... we are not talking tailors!

'All sewn up.' harks back to the days when it was distinctly unhealthy to keep the dead bodies aboard a ship, especially in warmer climates. Burial at sea was the norm more for health and safety reasons than anything our latter day rituals would suggest. It was far more gruesome.

The bodies of sailors unfortunate enough to die from disease or get killed on the high seas were invariably sewn into a length of sail canvas. The canvas was stitched from toe to head with the final stitch piercing the deceased's nose. They were then unceremoniously dispatched to the briny with cannonballs attached to the makeshift shroud to make sure they sank thus replicating a decent burial.

Nice!

# NAUTICAL SAYINGS - DOGS BODY

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*Provided by Harbour Guides - [www.harbourguides.com](http://www.harbourguides.com)*

## IT'S A DOGS LIFE – SORT OF!

With the world recession and the credit crunch putting thousands out of work, for many the unfortunate victims even a job as a general dogsbody may start to seem appealing. But hang on a minute. What actually is a 'dogsbody'? We all know it refers to someone who works menially so why would they be called a dog's body?

Apparently in bygone days aboard passenger carrying ships, leftovers from meals were often mixed with ships biscuits to feed the lowliest staff. The mixture was nicknamed dogsbody. The knock on effect was that not only were these poor wretches underpaid and undernourished they were also nicknamed dogsbodies after the slop they were fed.

# NAUTICAL SAYINGS - NIPPER

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*Provided by Harbour Guides - [www.harbourguides.com](http://www.harbourguides.com)*

The slang term for a young lad has nothing to do with the fact he may move about annoyingly quickly or bite and pinch when he gets into a fight. 'Nipper' was a name used aboard ships for young boys who were employed to weave together anchor cables. Basically on larger vessels the cables were too thick to bend around a capstan. To solve the problem a thinner, messenger line would be attached. The process of fastening the cables together was called 'nipping' and the lads who did it subsequently became known as 'nippers.'

# NAUTICAL SAYINGS A CLEAN SLATE

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*Provided by Harbour Guides - [www.harbourguides.com](http://www.harbourguides.com)*

## CLEAN SLATE

Often thought to stem from early school practices when children were issued with slate to write on in class the phrases 'clean slate' and 'wipe the slate clean', meaning a fresh start, actually stem from nautical practice. During each watch aboard a ship a record of relevant details would be made by the watch keeper –courses, distances, speeds, tacks and any problems. These would be written on slate tablets with chalk. If, at the end of his watch, there were no problems to report the tablets would be wiped clean ready for the next watch

# NAUTICAL SAYINGS A SQUARE MEAL

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*Provided by Harbour Guides - [www.harbourguides.com](http://www.harbourguides.com)*

## SQUARE MEAL

To be honest the dietary needs of a sailor a couple of hundred years back was not afforded much concern. Food aboard ship was sparse throughout the day with only the main meal in the evening being substantial. This was served on a square tray /plate as round plates were impractical at sea. Hence the phrase used to describe a hearty and nutritious repast is a square meal.

# NAUTICAL SAYINGS CHEWING THE FAT

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*Provided by Harbour Guides - [www.harbourguides.com](http://www.harbourguides.com)*

## CHEWING THE FAT

It sounds like a metaphor for friendly analysis of problems or things discussed at length. And it is. Or is it? It's a bit of a baffler this one. The origins of 'chewing the fat' are based in the days of pre-refrigeration, when meat was preserved by salting it. A staple of a sailors ration was salted beef and pork and, as we all know, curing with salt means that the moisture is drawn out of the flesh. Most food contaminations rely on water to flourish. As efficient as salting was, it actually rendered the meat virtually inedible unless it was chewed over a long period of time. What this has to do with today's interpretation of the phrase 'chewing the fat' is a bit of a puzzle to me, unless talking with your mouth full for a couple of hours was not only acceptable back then but almost expected.

# NAUTICAL SAYINGS CLEAN BILL OF HEALTH

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*Provided by Harbour Guides - [www.harbourguides.com](http://www.harbourguides.com)*

## CLEAN BILL OF HEALTH

Although there is a connection, this is not actually a piece of doctor's advice saying that someone is fit and well. It was in fact a method damage control by which ships tried to prevent the spread for infections and diseases from port to port. Before setting sail the captain would be issued with a certificate giving details of infections etc in that port. This was then handed over at the next destination before the ship was allowed to dock. A clean bill of health stated there were no infections

# NAUTICAL SAYINGS CLEAN SWEEP

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*Provided by Harbour Guides - [www.harbourguides.com](http://www.harbourguides.com)*

## CLEAN SWEEP

No it has nothing to do with brooms! The phrase often used to describe a complete change and in more recent years an overwhelming victory is derived from a term used following rough weather at sea. Sometimes waves swept over the decks of a ship, washing things overboard and basically shifting about anything that was not secured. This was referred to as a 'clean sweep'! Geddit?

# NAUTICAL SAYINGS COPPER BOTTOMED

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## A TRUSTY SOLUTION TO A BORING PROBLEM

Today you could quite expect one of the UK's increasingly young subculture known as 'chavs' to think that referring to someone as being copper bottomed meant they were a 'hard ass'. Hence it is probably a phrase one should only use in more mature and literate company when describing a fellow, lady or item that is solid and trustworthy.

As nearly always in these cases the term has a nautical history that dates back to timber built ships and a problem with wood boring molluscs. To prevent this potentially very damaging and dangerous nuisance in the mid eighteenth century they came up with the idea of sheathing the hulls of ships with copper thus protecting the vessels and all who sailed on them.

# NAUTICAL SAYINGS CUT ME SOME SLACK

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*Provided by Harbour Guides - [www.harbourguides.com](http://www.harbourguides.com)*

## GIVE ME SOME SLACK

Still very much in use today and probably thought by most people as being relatively modern in origin, the phrase 'give me some slack' or 'cut me some slack' (meaning make allowances to complete something) is actually hundreds of years old. Tying a ship to a pier was no easy feat and took two teams of men armed with mooring lines. As one line was pulled to haul the ship closer the other line was released or 'given slack'. The process would go on until the ship was properly aligned.

# NAUTICAL SAYINGS DOWN THE HATCH

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*Provided by Harbour Guides - [www.harbourguides.com](http://www.harbourguides.com)*

## DOWN THE HATCH

A traditional form of toasting with an alcoholic drink, 'down the hatch', first came into use during the eighteenth century. Cargoes and more specifically rum barrels were stored below deck aboard ships and were lowered by cranes through hatches on the deck giving the impression that the ship was actually consuming them.

# NAUTICAL SAYINGS FALL FOUL OF

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*Provided by Harbour Guides - [www.harbourguides.com](http://www.harbourguides.com)*

## FALL FOUL OF

Again, this has nothing to do with the game of football in any form. Foul was an oft used nautical term to describe things that were considered awry. It began as a word to describe two ships colliding, something likely to cause damage to the vessels. A 'foul anchor' meant that the cable was tangled and a 'foul bottom' described a seabed where there was little if any provision for an anchor to grip. If a vessel's hull was over run in barnacles it was described as a 'fouled ship'. Eventually the term stretched to 'foul up' which meant to make a mistake through bad judgment and, logically, to 'to fall foul of' meaning to clash with another or fall out of favour with someone.

# NAUTICAL SAYINGS FEELING BLUE

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*Provided by Harbour Guides - [www.harbourguides.com](http://www.harbourguides.com)*

## FEELING BLUE

Popular belief would have us believe that feeling blue had something to do with a form of early to mid 20th century African American popular music. Not so. The blues as a metaphor for feeling down or sad actually is derived from a obsolete navy tradition. Ships returning to home-port that had lost any officers during the voyage would do so flying blue flags and have a blue line painted around the hull as a mark of respect to the deceased

# NAUTICAL SAYINGS FEELING GROGGY?

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*Provided by Harbour Guides - [www.harbourguides.com](http://www.harbourguides.com)*

It's virtually a tradition that I start the week feeling slightly groggy. But hang on a minute what does that actually mean? The word groggy came into use during the mid 18th century. Admiral Edward Vernon became concerned about his crews state of persistent drunkenness so in 1740 he began to dilute their daily rum ration. Soon the entire navy was doing likewise. Vernon's favourite coat was made of grogram, a course weave of wool, mohair and silk stiffened with gum Arabic and his, understandably disgruntled crew nicknamed the admiral as 'Old Grog.' Eventually the name was transferred to the diluted rum itself. A sailor who had drunk too much 'grog' was said to be 'groggy'.

# NAUTICAL SAYINGS FOOTLOOSE

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*Provided by Harbour Guides - [www.harbourguides.com](http://www.harbourguides.com)*

## FOOTLOOSE

No it has nothing to do with a certain 1984 Hollywood coming together of actor Kevin Bacon, musician Kenny Loggins and movie director Herbert Ross, although it is annoyingly difficult to get that damn song out of your head once you hear the word. And boy howdy Kev could move back then.

The well used phrase for being free-spirited derives from a ships sail. Or more specifically, the bottom of a ship's sail, which was called the 'foot'. I bet you can tell where this one's going. The 'foot' was attached to mooring lines called 'foot lines'. When the foot lines came loose the sail began to flap freely and was said to be 'footloose.'

# NAUTICAL SAYINGS GONE BY THE BOARD

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*Provided by Harbour Guides - [www.harbourguides.com](http://www.harbourguides.com)*

## GONE BY THE BOARD

It may sound like it but it has nothing to do with been sacked off by those attending a high-powered business meeting. The phrase gone by the board is an old sea term referring to the then traditional method of waste disposal and, on occasion, accidental loss at sea. The board is the side of a ship. There for anything that went 'by' it (i.e. overboard) was either unwanted or lost.

# NAUTICAL SAYINGS HUNKY DORI

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## TRIVA – HUNKY DORY

No the phrase for describing something as more than satisfactory does not derive from a large masculine looking female. All though if that's what floats your boat it could probably have a connection. Hunky Dory is actually a mispronunciation of a street frequented by sailors visiting the port in Yokohama, Japan. Honki-Dori was a virtual cornucopia of 'forbidden' pleasures of the mind and body. I bet they didn't feel particularly hunky dory the next morning.

# NAUTICAL SAYINGS LOOSE CANNON

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## LOOSE CANNON

We all know someone like this. But many people think that the term loose cannon, meaning someone who is unpredictable, has something to do with men who carry guns. This is because the phrase is used so often in westerns and crime movies etc. The phrase actually has nautical roots. Cannons aboard a ship were very heavy and dangerous. They had to be properly secured or else they could either become thrown around the deck during rough weather or cause injury due to the massive recoil action during firing.

# NAUTICAL SAYINGS MONEY FOR OLD ROPE

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## MONEY FOR OLD ROPE

At last one of the few sayings with its basis in nautical history that is a quite literal translation. The phrase used to describe financial gain for doing very little, actually derives from a fact that. In old times, if a sailor landed in port short of cash he would sell lengths of old rope that would otherwise have been discarded.

# NAUTICAL SAYINGS NO GREAT SHAKES

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*Provided by Harbour Guides - [www.harbourguides.com](http://www.harbourguides.com)*

## NO GREAT SHAKES

Another bizarre and baffling phrase. It really doesn't make sense. Unless you know that 'shakes' were the staves and hoops of a barrel, which on their own are worthless. With storage space so limited aboard old ships, once a barrel was empty it was 'shaken', meaning dismantled so it took up less room. The pile of staves and hoops that built up during a voyage were referred to as 'the great shakes'.

# NAUTICAL SAYINGS PIPING HOT

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## PIPING HOT

When something is served piping hot it basically means it has come more or less straight from the hob or oven. So why 'piping'? It is basically a reference to an old fashioned ship's form of dinner bell or gong. Rather than ring a bell or banging a gong the boatswain would pipe a signal to announce that meals were being served.

# NAUTICAL SAYINGS ROUND ROBIN

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*Provided by Harbour Guides - [www.harbourguides.com](http://www.harbourguides.com)*

## ROUND ROBIN

The origin of the name given to a tournament where every competitor plays each other in turn comes from seventeenth century France. If a petition was raised and it was preferred that the first signee was not identifiable they would use a ruban rond (round ribbon) that the petitioners would sign and attach to the document. British sailors adopted a similar method when petitioning about grievances. The document would be signed in a way that resembled the spokes of a wheel radiating from the hub. That way any ringleaders would be anonymous.

# NAUTICAL SAYINGS THE DEVIL TO PAY

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*Provided by Harbour Guides - [www.harbourguides.com](http://www.harbourguides.com)*

## DEVIL TO PAY

As always, Old Nick has nothing to do with this well known phrase meaning to bring about seriously bad consequences. The original saying was 'the devil to pay and no pitch hot'. 'Pay' was an old nautical term that meant to seal a ship's seams with tar. As regular readers will already know the 'devil' was the name of the longest seam of a ship, which ran from stem to stern and supported the gun deck. It was also the most difficult seam to reach and when repairing a ship in dry dock sailors had to squat in the bilges to pay the devil.

# NAUTICAL SAYINGS-BROUGHT DOWN A PEG OR TWO

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*Provided by Harbour Guides - [www.harbourguides.com](http://www.harbourguides.com)*

The phrase 'to take somebody down a peg or two' is one of those baffling, almost surreal sounding sayings that everyone understands but never thinks about what it actually means. If you do it doesn't seem to make any sense. But the Harbour Guides crew refuse to let anything lie and welcome any puzzle with great enthusiasm.

To be honest the explanation for this one is pretty straightforward.

An admiral's standard was always flown at the highest point on a ship's mast. It was hauled up by a rope that was tied to one of a series of pegs. If a more senior admiral was to come aboard then his flag would be flown in its place and the original flag would be taken down a peg or two, which was often prone to hurt the resident admiral's pride.

# NAUTICAL SAYINGS-CUT AND RUN

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*Provided by Harbour Guides - [www.harbourguides.com](http://www.harbourguides.com)*

## CUT AND RUN – NO LEGS INVOLVED

As so many of these nuggets of trivia that Harbour Guides bring you, the phrase 'Cut and Run' is often thought to have some relationship to the escape of livestock, working animals or even prisoners. In so much, people wrongly interpret it as meaning the cutting or snapping of some kind of tether or restraining device that allows the animal or prisoner to leg it quickly.

In fact it is a phrase that refers to ships necessitating a hasty exit or retreat from some kind of ocean hotbed. Be it overpowering odds during attack, a visit by marauding pirates or a fast approaching storm. In circumstances such as these the captain would have no alternative but to order the anchor cable to be cut to enable a hasty getaway. Later uses include the cutting of ropes around furled sails for much the same purpose.

# NAUTICAL SAYINGS-THE WHOLE NINE YARDS

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## THE WHOLE NINE YARDS

No nothing to do with football played on either side of the Atlantic. Nor indeed any form of sport whatsoever. The phrase used to describe giving it your everything is derived from square sailed ships. The sails were supported at the top, centre and bottom by wooden 'yards' that were attached at right angles to the masts. When a three-masted ship sailed with all three sails unfurled it was described as 'going the whole nine yards'

# ON THE FIDDLE

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*Provided by Harbour Guides - [www.harbourguides.com](http://www.harbourguides.com)*

## ONCE AGAIN THE DEVIL'S NOT TO BLAME

Many people mistakenly assume that the phrase 'on the fiddle' has musical connotations. They associate it with the favourite instrument of Old Nick himself – the violin or fiddle. Hence being on the fiddle means gaining by corrupt means or quite literally dancing to the devils music. But it's a load of rubbish.

The fiddle was actually the name given to a rim around the square wooden plate used by sailors. It was designed to help prevent slopping over in rough seas and has been used on round porcelain plates to varying degree since. But the sailor's fiddle didn't just prevent spillage it was also a means of portion control. It marked the limit of how much each crewmember was entitled to. Anyone found with food that crossed the boundary was said to be 'fiddling' or 'on the fiddle' – translated as depriving fellow crew of food. With the strict rationing necessary in the glory days of oceanic discovery it was considered a crime punishable by flogging. I'll bet no one ever winked at the chef as he dished up the slop, no matter how hungry they were.

# ON YOUR BEAMS END ORIGIN

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## ON YOUR BEAMS END

When you are either hard-up or in a bad situation you are said to be 'on your beams end' a nautical phrase that dates back to the 18th century. The beams referred to are the horizontal transverse timbers of a ship. Subsequently if a ship is said to be on its beams end the beams will be touching the water and it is in imminent danger of capsizing.

One of the earliest recorded citation comes from a 1773 issue of The Gentleman's Magazine 'The gust laid her upon her beam-ends.'

By the early 19th century the phrase was being used figuratively for instance in 'The King's Own' Captain Marryat 1830: 'Our first-lieutenant was..on his beam-ends, with the rheumatiz.'

# OUT FOR A JOLLY - ORIGIN

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## OUT FOR A JOLLY - ORIGIN

A jolly boat was a light boat carried at the stern of large sailing ships. It is thought that the name is derived from the Danish Yawl or Dutch Jolle which means a small bark boat. They were generally between 16 and 18 feet long and had four or six oars. They were used to ferry the captain and ships officers ashore for some r and r. Hence the term 'going for a jolly' as in a night out on the town.

# PANIC STATIONS ORIGIN

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## PANIC STATIONS

Although it sounds like a phrase used merely for dramatic, often comic, effect 'panic stations' dates back to the early 20th Century and was an actual command in the vein of 'action stations.' It was usually used as a precursor for the command to 'abandon ship.' This can be backed up by a report published in the Times, November 1918 and entitled 'Behind the Veil': "Alarm gongs had already sent the guns' crews to their invisible guns and immediately after the explosion 'Panic stations' was ordered, followed in due course by 'Abandon ship'."

# PARROTS AND MONKEYS ORIGIN

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## PARROTS AND MONKEYS

The phrase to describe the kit of servicemen is believed to have originated in India during British rule there. Parrots and monkeys were often brought home as pets when soldiers finished their service. The final command an old sweat would hear on a quayside before boarding a homeward bound troopship was, 'Pick up your parrots and monkeys and fall in facing the boat'. Today it has fallen into wider use and is often said before setting off on any journey when you have to take either belongings, sports kit, tools etc. as in 'Grab your parrots and monkeys, we're off!'

# PLAIN SAILING ORIGIN

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## PLAIN SAILING

The term used to describe things running smoothly stems from a simplified method of navigation where the earth's surface is assumed to be flat as opposed to Mercator's sailing when the curvature of the earth's surface is taken into account. The mathematical name for a flat surface is plane surface... hence the term 'plane' or 'plain' sailing.

# POOPED THE ORIGIN

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## POOPED

The word poop meaning the rearmost and highest deck of a ship is derived from the latin word 'puppis'. It is part of a large constellation called Argo Navis and represents the largest part of the Argo from when Jason's legendary ship was split into three parts. When the rear of a ship was overcome by a large wave it would often cause the vessel to slew around and present her broadside to the wind, thus becoming overwhelmed by the sea. The ship was said to have been pooped. Hence the modern use of the word to mean exhausted.

# PORT AND STARBOARD ORIGIN

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*Provided by Harbour Guides - [www.harbourguides.com](http://www.harbourguides.com)*

## STARBOARD AND PORT

The name for the right hand side of a ship or boat has its origins in Viking times. They referred to the side of a ship as a 'board' and the steering oar was called the 'star'. The star was placed on the right hand side of the ship, hence starboard. It was because of the practice of steering from the right that the left hand side became port side. Originally it was called 'larboard' but was deemed to similar in sound to starboard. Because of the steering oar ships were tied to port by the left hand side hence 'port-side'.

# POSH - ORIGIN

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## POSH - origin

According to legend the word posh is derived from a phrase printed the on tickets of P&O passengers during the days of the Raj – ‘Port Out Starboard Home’. Berths on the portside in the northern hemisphere were mostly shaded on the journey out and on the starboard side on the way in. Therefore the most expensive berths were deemed POSH. There is no evidence to confirm this. What is more it would actually have made little, if any, difference to the cabin temperature.

# QUARTER - ORIGIN

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*Provided by Harbour Guides - [www.harbourguides.com](http://www.harbourguides.com)*

## QUARTER - ORIGIN

In nautical terminology 'quarter' basically means shelter or mercy. To give no quarter meant that no one should be spared during battle. To give quarter was a show of respect to honourable losers.

# SCUTTLEBUTT

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*Provided by Harbour Guides - [www.harbourguides.com](http://www.harbourguides.com)*

The term scuttlebutt, meaning rumour stems from nautical origins. To scuttle is the act of putting a hole in a ship's hull to cause it to sink. A butt is a barrel used in the days of wooden ships to store drinking water. The barrel would obviously have a hole in the side and therefore became known as a scuttlebutt. The area around the scuttlebutt became a place where sailors would congregate and chat and often the seeds of rumours about the ship or voyage would be sewn there. Hence they were referred to as talk from the scuttlebutt and eventually just as scuttlebutt.

# SHAKE A LEG

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*Provided by Harbour Guides - [www.harbourguides.com](http://www.harbourguides.com)*

## SHAKE A LEG

The traditional wake up call used by armed forces was first used on board ships in port. The idea was to distinguish which hammocks were occupied by crew members and which were being used by lady guests or both. Basically everyone was told to show or 'shake' a leg. Those that were hairy were obviously sailors the smoother variety belonged to females, who were promptly rounded up and sent back ashore. Makes you wonder how many sailors might have taken to shaving their legs to get some extra shore leave.

# SHIP SHAPE AND BRISTOL FASHION ORIGIN

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*Provided by Harbour Guides - [www.harbourguides.com](http://www.harbourguides.com)*

## SHIP SHAPE AND BRISTOL FASHION

And important British port for over a thousand years, Bristol is actually located several miles from the sea on the estuary of the River Avon. Bristol's harbour had amongst the most variable tide flow in the UK with depth differing up to 30feet. This presented a problem with ships becoming beached. If they were not robust and in good condition (or 'ship shape') they could easily be damaged at low tide. In 1803 the problem was resolved by the construction of the Floating Harbour. The two phrases Ship Shape and Bristol Fashion are thought to have been merged soon after this and eventually became a standard phrase in the English language meaning in excellent order.

# SHIVER MY TIMBERS ORIGIN

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## SHIVER ME TIMBERS

The phrase made famous by Robert Louis Stevenson's iconic Long John Silver has a somewhat muddied history. Used as an oath or an expression of annoyance or surprise 'shiver my timbers' has nonetheless been accepted into modern language despite making little sense.

Shiver was often used of old as meaning to break into pieces, particularly in nautical circles, so this is by far the most acceptable origin. Certainly a ship's timbers falling apart would be the cause of much annoyance and surprise therefore the phrase may well have therefore been used as part of a oath as in "(or) shiver my timbers." Regardless of whether it is a literary invention or a bona fide piece of slang we think it should be revived.

# SKYSCRAPER

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*Provided by Harbour Guides - [www.harbourguides.com](http://www.harbourguides.com)*

Long before architects and building engineers came up with a solution to the lack available real estate in urban centres, sky scrapers were already doing pretty much what it says on the tin. The name skyscraper was the traditional term used to refer to the topsail of a ship. Whether the architects or whoever coined the phrase to describe tower blocks knew this is open to debate

# SLUSH FUND ORIGIN

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*Provided by Harbour Guides - [www.harbourguides.com](http://www.harbourguides.com)*

## SLUSH FUND

The phrase to describe money put to one side to be used at a later date quite often to influence or bribe stems from the practice by 18th Century ships cooks of saving the fat from boiled pork and salt beef in barrels to sell when they reached port. The money was eventually used to buy books etc for the crew thus keep them content. Hence the phrase became synonymous with savings.

By the late 19th century 'slush fund' acquired a much more underhand meaning and such savings became commonly associated with money's to aside to buy influence. In January 1894 the Congressional Record printed this: "[Cleveland] was not elected in 1888 because of pious John Wanamaker and his \$400,000 of campaign slush funds."

# SPLICE THE MAINBRACE - ORIGIN

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*Provided by Harbour Guides - [www.harbourguides.com](http://www.harbourguides.com)*

## SPLICE THE MAINBRACE

The order to issue a ship's crew with a drink stems from one of the hardest emergency repair jobs in the history of sailing. Brace's are the ropes that are used control the angle of the yards and are essential for steering a vessel.

During battle gunners would target an enemy ship's rigging to disable it. If the mainbrace was hit it was often necessary to repair it during the conflict. This was left to the most experienced able seamen because it was the largest section of running rigging and could not be fixed with knots as it had run through blocks. If it wasn't repaired the ship could not be manoeuvred. Splicing the thick hemp was strenuous work at the best of times and once the job was done the crew members involved were repaid with an extra ration of rum (around a third of a pint).

Inevitably the phrase 'Splice the Mainbrace!' became a euphemism for having a drink.

# STUCK BETWEEN THE DEVIL AND THE DEEP BLUE SEA

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*Provided by Harbour Guides - [www.harbourguides.com](http://www.harbourguides.com)*

Do I give up drinking completely or do I just not bother buying any Christmas presents this year? It's a seasonal dilemma that the credit crunch has thrust upon even more of us this year. We find ourselves in the unfortunate position of being stuck between the devil and the deep blue sea.

But hold your horses. Before you get all religious and start praying for some kind of financial salvation you'd be well advised to read on.

Yes you've got it. We aren't actually talking about Old Nick here. It's another one of those damn nautical sayings.

The 'devil' was in fact the name given to the longest seam of a ship. It ran from stem to stern along the beam that supports the gun deck. The seams were sealed by packing rope and tar into the gaps. You can imagine how it must have felt doing that job from a suspended plank. Precarious positioning indeed and literally what the phrase originally meant.

"Stuck between the devil and the deep blue sea"

# SUIT ORIGIN

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*Provided by Harbour Guides - [www.harbourguides.com](http://www.harbourguides.com)*

## Suit

Often mis-spelt as Suite this is a nautical term from the early 17th century meaning the outfit of a ship's sails. Following WWII the term was revived to describe the compliment of a Navy ship's electronic equipment as in 'electronics suit' and its total armament or 'weapons suit'.

# SUN OVER THE YARDARM - ORIGIN

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*Provided by Harbour Guides - [www.harbourguides.com](http://www.harbourguides.com)*

## THE SUN'S OVER THE YARDARM

The expression is believed to have originated in the north Atlantic where the sun would rise above the upper mast spars (yards) of square sailed ships around 11am. This coincided with the forenoon 'stand easy' when officers would go below and enjoy their first rum tot of the day. Eventually the phrase was adopted universally as meaning it is a suitable time to have an alcoholic beverage.

# SWING THE LEAD - ORIGIN

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*Provided by Harbour Guides - [www.harbourguides.com](http://www.harbourguides.com)*

## SWING THE LEAD.

When sailing close to shore it is important to keep an eye on the depth of the water. In the age of sailing ships this was done by dropping a line over the side of the ship with a lead weight fastened to the end. To swing the lead was considered an easy job and eventually became a term meaning one who is either avoiding hard work or taking an easy option. Hence in modern terms if you 'swing the lead' you are slacking off.

# TAKE ON BOARD - ORIGIN

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*Provided by Harbour Guides - [www.harbourguides.com](http://www.harbourguides.com)*

## TO TAKE ON BOARD

One of the many common phrases with obvious nautical origins 'to take on board an idea' stems from the age old practice of checking cargo, belongings, luggage and livestock as it is loaded onto a ship. After it is checked and approved whoever is responsible is told to 'take it on board'. Officers and sailors adapted the phrase whilst advancing nautical technology and theory essentially bringing their ideas on board ships to be discussed, understood, tried and tested. It was inevitably picked up by landlubbers.

# TAKEN ABACK ORIGIN

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*Provided by Harbour Guides - [www.harbourguides.com](http://www.harbourguides.com)*

## TAKEN ABACK

When one is startled or surprised by a sudden turn of events we are said to be taken aback. It is probably the only use of the work 'aback' there is today. Sailors had a habit of joining words during the 15th century hence we ended up with 'around' and 'a part' etc. Originally aback referred to when a ship's sails were blown flat against the masts and spars. Thus when the wind changed suddenly and a ship was facing unexpectedly into it, the vessels was said to be 'taken aback'.

The figurative meaning first emerged in the early to mid 19th century, for instance, in this article from The Times printed in March 1831: 'Whigs, Tories, and Radicals, were all taken aback with astonishment, that the Ministers had not come forward with some moderate plan of reform.'

# TELL IT TO THE MARINES ORIGIN

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*Provided by Harbour Guides - [www.harbourguides.com](http://www.harbourguides.com)*

## TELL IT TO THE MARINES

Often thought to be of US origin, the phrase often used in response to an incredible story is in fact British. 'Tell it to the marines' dates back to at least the 1830s and refers to the Royal Marines. Marines were recruited from regular soldiers to serve on-board ships and were not considered to be on a par with hardened sailors. This led to the implication that they were also likely to be naive and believe far-fetched or patently untruthful stories. Hence when a sailor was told such a tale he would say scornfully "Tell it to the marines." Also if a sailor complained about a hardship to a senior officer he was likely to get the same response.

# THE HEAD SHIPS TOILET ORIGIN

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*Provided by Harbour Guides - [www.harbourguides.com](http://www.harbourguides.com)*

## HEAD (ship's toilet)

The use of the word 'head' as a name for a ship's toilet dates back to the early eighteenth century. However its origins go back as far as 1485 when the term referred to the bow of a ship. Toilets were usually positioned at the head towards the base of the bowsprit as the splashing water would clean the toilet area naturally.

# THE ORIGIN OF MAYDAY

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*Provided by Harbour Guides - [www.harbourguides.com](http://www.harbourguides.com)*

## MAYDAY

It has nothing to do with poles and ribbons, the rights of spring or bank holidays. The international voice radio signal for ships and persons in serious trouble at sea was actually made official in 1948. Mayday is an anglicized version of the French phrase 'm'aidez' which means 'help me'.

# THE ORIGIN OF RUMMAGE SALE

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*Provided by Harbour Guides - [www.harbourguides.com](http://www.harbourguides.com)*

## RUMMAGE SALE

Yet another anglicized French term, 'rummage' is derived from the word 'arrimage' which means 'the loading of cargo. In a precursor to the car boot sale occasionally damaged cargo would be sold off in special warehouse sales, run presumably by drunken British sailors who spoke French very badly.

# THE ORIGIN OF TO HAIL FROM

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*Provided by Harbour Guides - [www.harbourguides.com](http://www.harbourguides.com)*

## HAIL FROM

Hail was almost exclusively a nautical term until the mid 18th century. It was customary for passing ships to 'hail' each other. The information swapped usually included the name of the ports from which the ships were sailing. They were said to 'hail from' there. Eventually the term passed into everyday language to mean where a person was born or grew up.

# THREE SHEETS TO THE WIND ORIGIN

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*Provided by Harbour Guides - [www.harbourguides.com](http://www.harbourguides.com)*

No it's not got anything to do with losing bed linen in a gale. The phrase 'three sheets to the wind', meaning drunk as a lord, hammered, legless, rendered etc. has its historical roots in sailing. A sheet was in fact a rope used to trim a sail's angle to the wind. There were usually four to each sail. If one broke and the corner of a sail was left to flap about the sheet was said to be 'to the wind'. Of course the more sheets that got damaged or broken the harder it became to control the billowing sail. The term 'one sheet to the wind... two sheets...' and so on were used mockingly to describe various states of drunkenness amongst seamen. Three sheets meant a mariner was pretty much out of control!

# TIDE OVER ORIGIN

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*Provided by Harbour Guides - [www.harbourguides.com](http://www.harbourguides.com)*

## TIDE OVER

The phrase meaning do with whatever money or food you have left is one of those that is often misspelt (as in 'tied over') and therefore isn't immediately recognisable as having nautical roots. Originally it referred to the practice of floating with the tide in the absence of wind to fill a ships sails. Making slow headway was better than none. Hence to 'tide over'. The adoption of the phrase to mean coping with what you have is pretty logical when you think about it.

# TO GO ON ACCOUNT - ORIGIN

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*Provided by Harbour Guides - [www.harbourguides.com](http://www.harbourguides.com)*

## TO GO ON ACCOUNT - ORIGIN

A term used by Privateers to describe the act of becoming a pirate. The idea being that pirates considered themselves more 'freelance' and therefore were going into business for themselves. It was eventually adopted by anyone who worked for themselves or shopped at a regular store that could buy stock or goods and pay later... which the pirates never did of course.

# TO THE BITTER END

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*Provided by Harbour Guides - [www.harbourguides.com](http://www.harbourguides.com)*

## NOT NECESSARILY A MATTER OF TASTE

Times like they are it makes one think that our economy is reaching the bitter end and as such we will all be left with a nasty taste in our mouths. Well that may or may not be true. We really don't know. Neither would it seem do the experts, either financial or etymological. Let me explain. As true as it may be that the word 'bitter', meaning acrid or sour has been in use since around 8th Century it may well have little bearing of the phrase 'the bitter end'. According to Captain Smith's 17th century publication 'Seaman's Grammar' - 'A Bitter is but the turne of a Cable about the Bits, and veare it out by little and little. And the Bitters end is that part of the Cable doth stay within boord.'

If that is the case it would seem that the bitter end actually refers to a length of ship's rope or cable that has been run out to its end, at which point it would be tied to one of the many bits (meaning posts) on a ship's deck. In which case the phrase would mean that there was nothing left to use. Which it basically does... as well.

# TOE THE LINE ORIGIN

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*Provided by Harbour Guides - [www.harbourguides.com](http://www.harbourguides.com)*

## TOE THE LINE

The space between the planks of a ship's deck were packed with a material called oakum and sealed with tar creating long, straight lines roughly six inches apart. When the crew was asked to fall in they used the gaps as a marker with their toes touching the line. Also young crew members (ship's boys or young officers) who were deemed in need of punishing for minor offences were made to stand with their toes touching the line, without talking or moving, for hours at a time in all weathers. Hence the term 'toe the line', meaning to do as one is told or behave as expected.

# TURN A BLIND EYE ORIGIN

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*Provided by Harbour Guides - [www.harbourguides.com](http://www.harbourguides.com)*

## TURN A BLIND EYE

The term used to mean 'ignore something intentionally' has important historic significance. When Admiral Nelson was pounding the Spanish at the Battle of Copenhagen on 1801, the commander raised a flag signalling the bombardment to cease. Nelson held his telescope to his blind eye so he couldn't see the command and subsequently won the battle.

# WINDFALL - ORIGIN

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*Provided by Harbour Guides - [www.harbourguides.com](http://www.harbourguides.com)*

## WINDFALL - ORIGIN

During the golden age of wooden ship building many English landowners were forbidden to fell and sell timber as it was reserved for building ships for the Royal Navy. However there was a loophole. If a tree was blown down the landowner could use or sell the timber to whoever he wished. Hence the term 'windfall' meaning a financial bonus.

# YELLOW JACK - ORIGIN

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## YELLOW JACK.

As any seafarer will know a 'jack' is a flag and used to indicate a particular disposition of a vessel. In the case of the 'Yellow Jack' it was used to signify yellow fever. Basically it meant that the crew were sick and it was not advisable to board the ship. It was often used as a way of duping pirates into plundering prospective targets.

# YOU SCRATCH MY BACK ORIGIN

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## YOU SCRATCH MY BACK AND I'LL SCRATCH YOURS

Originally this meant nothing like the benevolent offer it now represents. The back scratching in question was delivered via the Cat o Nine Tails. Basically it was said by whoever was about to be whipped to the guy who had been given the job of doing the whipping. It basically meant that if the roles were reversed at any time in the future he would be guaranteed the same level of damage.

# About This Booklet

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