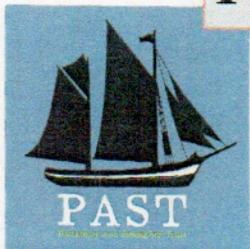


FREE

*A wee bit
of maritime
history... 5*



Everyday sayings from the sea

You may know more than you think!



Once upon a time in a land of Green Fiddlers, where the guests were chock-a-block¹, and there was not even room to swing a cat², I overheard a conversation that made me think that not only does the sea shape our lives, our land, and our livelihoods but also our language!

It will only take a minute to read through the conversation on the next page; and then see how many phrases you can identify.

(My thanks go to all I consulted in researching this piece.

David Saunders)

"Well, you son-of-a-gun³ you; for one who's always quite footloose⁴ and ready with a tune for a jig, you and your fiddle are looking really listless⁵ and in the doldrums⁶!" I cannot seem to fathom⁷ what is the matter? Are you under the weather⁸?"

"I'm just back from an orchestra audition" came the reply. "I made my way there at a rate of knots⁹, as I was so confident. I was sure that I would fit the bill¹⁰ and sail through with flying colours¹¹. I was so determined to make a career and stay with them for the long haul¹² that it was not a long shot¹³ at all. You know I am first rate¹⁴, don't you?"

"You certainly are, young man! So what happened?"

"Well, we all played, and it had gone well, when this pompous president, really only a figurehead¹⁵ for the orchestra, entered and told us all to pipe down¹⁶ as he had a decision to impart. He announced that the applicant before me had been successful - his nephew, would you believe! He'll have the devil to pay¹⁷ if I have my way!"

"So, what's in the offing¹⁸ now?"

"I sit here, feeling more and more groggy¹⁹, three sheets to the wind²⁰, and desperately in need of a square meal²¹, as I think back to 'Master and Commander,' and realise that the days of getting a midshipman's berth because your uncle knows the captain never really go away"

"So you'll be back here with one of your fiddles from the case in Fiddlers Green tomorrow then?"

"Aye, aye sir! I'll toe the line²² and show my true colours²³!"



Well, how many did you recognise?

Here's some help.

- 1 When raising sails with block and tackle, all the blocks lifting the sails will come together with no room for further movement, ie crammed.
- 2 A "cat" was a cat o' nine tails, or scourge. All hands had to be on deck to witness the punishment, and would crowd the bosun so that his whip arm could be slightly curtailed for the benefit of their shipmate.
- 3 A child could be conceived, or even born, in the shelter of the guns on a gun deck, and often the father was unknown. So the baby simply became known as a son-of-a-gun.
- 4 When the bottom sheets of the sails were left loose, they would fly about as though dancing.
- 5 A ship which did not list (ie there was no wind to make her list over and make way) would stay motionless and lack energy.
- 6 The Doldrums are an area near the Equator where there are often no winds and ships could be becalmed or stagnate for weeks.
- 7 The depth of water would be worked out in fathoms (lengths of 6 feet) by using weighted rope. When the number was known it had been fathomed.
- 8 The worst place to be on watch on ship was on the side where the weather and waves hit hardest and poured over the sides (ie under the weather) At the end of the watch a seaman would be soaked and often took ill or even died.
- 9 A weighted rope with knots at 6 foot intervals with a log attached was thrown over the stern of a ship and the number of knots were counted over a period of time as it paid out. This allowed the speed to be calculated, and why knots are still used as a measurement of speed on water.
- 10 The cargo on a ship had to be checked on loading and unloading against a Bill of Lading, so to fit the bill was to make sure that all was in order and suitable.
- 11 A ship in action that came through a battle with its flags (colours) intact can be assumed to have been successful.
- 12 Something that lasts a long time - the playing out and coiling of a lot of rope needed for the task.

- 13 Firing long guns or cannons at sea was not very reliable, and thus it was usually necessary to get close (think of a broadside). The chances of being lucky with a long shot were not great.
- 14 Naval ships were rated by the number of long guns they carried, from about 20 to over 100. The latter were First Rate, ie the best.
- 15 This was the figure of a person on the prow of the ship which had to look good but had little practical use.
- 16 The call from the bosun at the end of the day allowing the crew to go below to rest, sleep and by extension be quiet.
- 17 The "devil" was the longest seam in the wet and smelly bilges of the ship. The "pay" was another word for pitch or tar. The job of paying the devil was one of the worst on a ship.
- 18 The "offing" is the part of the sea which is visible from land, and a ship shortly due to arrive in port would be "in the offing."
- 19 Groggy comes from grog of course, ie inebriated. Admiral Vernon, who initiated the practice of issuing rum and water, wore a coat made of grogram, so was given the nickname Old Grog.
- 20 The three sheets on a three-masted ship are the ropes that control the sails. If they are all loose in the wind the ship will be uncontrollable.
- 21 On a good day without wind and rain the ship's hands would be served their meal on deck on a simple square wooden board.
- 22 When on parade, the ship's company would be expected to stand in a perfect line. To make this easier they stood with their toes on one of the lines of planking on the deck.
- 23 Sometimes when at war a ship would sail into an attack with an enemy's colours showing (an accepted *ruse de guerre*) to get closer. However before opening fire the captain would be expected to show his true colours.

How many did you get? Hundreds more on the internet!



This leaflet is produced
by **Portaferry and
Strangford Trust.**
Find out more at



www.portaferryandstrangfordtrust.org