

# So many of the **ENGLISH PHRASES** have come **FROM DAYS OF SAILING SHIPS**



The devil seam was the curved seam in the deck planking closest to the side of the ship and next to the scupper gutters. If a sailor slipped on the deck, he could find himself between the devil and the deep blue sea. **The Devil to Pay**

To pay the deck seams meant to seal them with tar. The devil seam was the most difficult to pay because it was curved and intersected with the straight deck planking. Some sources define the "devil" as the below-the-waterline -seam between the keel and the adjoining planking. Paying the Devil was considered to be a most difficult and unpleasant task. **Rummage Sale**

From the French "arrimage" meaning ship's cargo. Damaged cargo was sold at a rummage sale. **A Square Meal**

In good weather, in the crews mess, warm meal served on square wooden platters. **Son of a Gun**

When in port, and with the crew restricted to the ship for any extended period of time, wives and ladies of easy virtue often were allowed to live aboard along with the crew. Infrequently, but not uncommonly, children were born aboard, and a convenient place for this was between guns on the gun deck. If the child's father was unknown, they were entered in the ship's log as "son of a gun".

## **Let the Cat Out of the Bag**

In the Royal Navy the punishment prescribed for most serious crimes was flogging. This was administered by the Bosun's Mate using a whip called a cat o' nine tails. The "cat" was kept in a leather or baize bag. It was considered bad news indeed when the cat was let out of the bag. Other sources attribute the expression to the old English market scam of selling someone a pig in a poke (bag) when the pig turned out to be a cat instead. **Overbearing**

To sail downwind directly at another ship thus "stealing" or diverting the wind from his sails. **No Room to Swing a Cat**

The entire ship's company was required to witness flogging at close hand. The crew might crowd around so that the Bosun's Mate might not have enough room to swing his cat o' nine tails. **Taking the wind out of his sails**

Sailing in a manner so as to steal or divert wind from another ship's sails. **Start Over with a Clean Slate**

A slate tablet was kept near the helm on which the watch keeper would record the speeds, distances, headings and tacks during the watch. If there were no problems during the watch, the slate would be wiped clean so that the new watch could start over with a clean slate. **Taken Aback**

A dangerous situation where the wind is on the wrong side of the sails pressing them back against the mast and forcing the ship astern. Most often this was caused by an inattentive helmsman who had allowed the ship to head up into the wind. **At Loggerheads**

An iron ball attached to a long handle was a loggerhead. When heated it was used to seal the pitch in deck seams. It was sometimes a handy weapon for quarreling crewmen. **Fly-by-Night**

A large sail used only for sailing downwind and requiring rather little attention. **No Great Shakes**

When casks became empty they were "shaken" (taken apart) so the pieces, called shakes, could be stored in a small space. Shakes had very little value. **Give (someone) a Wide Berth**

To anchor a ship far enough away from another ship so that they did not hit each other when they swung with the wind or tide.

## **Cut of His Jib**

Warships many times had their foresails or jib sails cut thinly so that they could maintain point and not be blown off course. Upon sighting thin foresails on a distant ship a captain might not like the cut of his jib and would then have an opportunity to escape.

## **Garbled**

Garbling was the prohibited practice of mixing rubbish with the cargo. A distorted, mixed up message was said to be garbled.

## **Press into Service**

The British navy filled their ships' crew quotas by kidnapping men off the streets and forcing them into service. This was called Impressment and was done by Press Gangs. **Touch and Go**

This referred to a ship's keel touching the bottom and getting right off again.