http://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/nautical-phrases.html

Nautical phrases

Many phrases that have been adopted into everyday use originate from seafaring - in particular from the days of sail. Eg. The term POSH means 'Port out, starboard home'. When the ship sailed out from Europe towards the east, she kept close to the shores of France, Spain, Italy, Greece and Egypt. On he way out these place were on her port side and when she returned westward they were on her Starboard side. The First class passengers got cabins on the port side when east bound and changed to starboard side when westbound getting the best of both voyages. They were the POSH passengers.

Activities at sea have been scrupulously recorded over the centuries, in insurance records, newspaper accounts and, not least, in ships' log books. The term log-book has an interesting derivation in itself. An early form of measuring a ship's progress was by casting overboard a wooden board (the log) with a string attached. The rate at which the string was payed out as the ship moved away from the stationary log was measured by counting how long it took between knots in the string. These measurements were later transcribed into a book. Hence we get the term 'log-book' and also the name 'knot' as the unit of speed at sea.

The list below are phrases that have documentary evidence to support the claim of a nautical origin:

A shot across the bows

Meaning

A warning shot, either real or metaphorical.

Origin

Bow: is the fore-end of a ship

'A shot across the bows' derives from the naval practice of firing a cannon shot across the bows of an opponent's ship to show them that you are prepared to do battle.

All at sea

Meaning

In a state of confusion and disorder.

Origin

This is an extension of the nautical phrase 'at sea'. It dates from the days of sail when accurate navigational aids weren't available. Any ship that was out of sight of land was in an uncertain position and in danger of becoming lost.

Batten down the hatches

Meaning

Prepare for trouble.

Origin

Climate change is providing plenty of opportunity to reinforce our property against bad weather. The securing of property, especially the covering with protective sheeting, is called 'battening down'. That's not how the phrase originated, although it's not far away in terms of meaning. It has a nautical origin and 'battening down' was done on ships when bad weather was expected.

A batten is a strip of wood. Caulking is the filling of gaps with oakum of similar, to prevent leaking. That's 'battening down' in a general sense.

Between the Devil and the deep blue sea

Meaning

In difficulty, between two dangerous alternatives.

"Devil - the seam between the deck planking and the topmost plank of the ship's side".

This seam would need to be watertight and would need filling (caulking) from time to time. On a ship at sea this would presumably require a sailor to be suspended over the side, or at least stand at the very edge of the deck. Either way it is easy to see how that might be described as 'between the devil and the deep sea'.

Incidentally, another term for filling a seam is paying. Those that like nautical origins also give this as the source for the Devil to pay, although the evidence is against them on that one.

Broad in the beam

Meaning

Having wide hips or buttocks.

Origin

This phrase derives from the nautical term beam - the widest point of a ship.

The figurative use of beam referring to people's hips came into being in the 20th century. An early citation of that comes in Hugh Walpole's *Hans Frost*, 1929:

"He stood watching disgustedly Bigges' broad beam."

By and large

Meaning

On the whole; generally speaking; all things considered.

Origin

To get a sense of the original meaning of the phrase we need to understand the nautical terms 'by' and 'large'. 'Large' is easier, so we'll start there. When the wind is blowing from some compass point behind a ship's direction of travel then it is said to be 'large'.

When the wind is in that favourable large direction the largest square sails may be set and the ship is able to travel in whatever downwind direction the captain sees fit.

'By' is a rather more difficult concept for landlubbers. In simplified terms it means 'in the general direction of'. Sailors would say to be 'by the wind' is to face into the wind or within six compass points of it.

To sail 'by and large' required the ability to sail not only as earlier square-rigged ships could do, i.e. downwind, but also against the wind. At first sight, and for many non-sailors I'm sure second and third sight too, it seems impossible that a sailing ship could progress against the wind. They can though. The physics behind this is better left to others. Suffice it to say that it involves the use of triangular sails which act like aeroplane wings and provide a

force which drags the ship sideways against the wind. By the use of this and by careful angling of the rudder the ship can make progress towards the wind.

The 19th century windjammers like Cutty Sark were able to maintain progress 'by and large' even in bad wind conditions by the use of many such aerodynamic triangular sails and large crews of able seamen.

Chock-a-block

Meaning

Crammed so tightly together as to prevent movement.

Origin

This term is old and has a nautical origin.

Chock:

The derivation of chock isn't entirely clear but the word is thought to have come from *chock-full* (or choke-full), meaning '*full to choking*'.

This meaning was later used to give a name to the wedges of wood which are used to secure moving objects - *chocks*. These chocks were used on ships

"Chock, a sort of wedge used to confine a cask or other weighty body..when the ship is in motion."

Block:

This is where seafaring enters into the story. A *block and tackle* is a pulley system used on sailing ships to hoist the rigging. It might be expected that '*chock-a-block*' is the result of wedging a block fixed with a chock.

The phrase describes what occurs the system is raised to its fullest extent - when there is no more rope free and the blocks jam tightly together.

Chock-a-block also spawned an abbreviated version in the 20th century - *chocka* (or chocker).

"Chocker, this is the sailor's way of saying he is fed up or browned off."

Close quarters

Meaning

Close contact with, especially in a military context - close contact with the enemy.

Origin

This term has a nautical origin. In the 17th century hand-to-hand skirmishes onboard ships were known as close-fights. The term appears to have been applied both to those fights and to the barriers that sailors erected to keep the enemy at bay.

By the mid 18th century that confined defensive space was also called 'close quarters', i.e. the quarters (dwellings) where close fights were conducted.

'Close quarters' was in wide use as a military by both sailors and soldiers for two centuries or more before it began to be used in a figurative sense in other contexts.

Copper-bottomed

Meaning

Genuine - something that can be relied on.

Origin

It is unusual for an idiomatic phrase to have such a literal derivation as this. 'Copper-bottomed' originally described ships that were fitted with copper plating on the bottom of their hulls. The process was first used on ships of the British Navy in 1761 to defend them against wood-boring insects and to reduce infestations by barnacles.

It wasn't long before the phrase began to be used figuratively, to refer to anything that was reliable and trustworthy.

Cut and run

Meaning

Run away.

Origin

This term is the shortened form of the earlier phrases 'cut and run away' and 'cut and run off'. It has been suggested that it has a nautical derivation and that it refers to ships making a hasty departure by the cutting of the anchor rope and running before the wind.

It could be that 'cut' doesn't relate to rope actually being cut. It may just be that word was chosen with the allusion to cutting in the sense of passing straight though.

Get underway

Meaning

Begin a journey or a project.

Origin

We are familiar with this little expression but, like other idioms that we absorb without question when learning the language, it doesn't make much literal sense. Why 'under'? Why 'way'? It turns out that a confusing of several seafaring words had a bearing on the coining of this nautical phrase.

'Way' doesn't mean here road or route but has the specifically nautical meaning of 'the forward progress of a ship though the water', or the wake that the ship leaves behind. Way has been used like that .

This usage continued into the 20th century and was also used in aviation as well as shipping.

The term 'under sail' and 'underway' appear at first sight to be quite similar. The former seems easy to interpret, as sailing ships are literally under the sails when in motion, but what are we under in 'underway'? That is easier to understand when we know that this 'under' was originally 'on the'. Knowing that, 'on the way' makes sense. 'On the way' migrated to 'underway', probably due to the influence of the Dutch word 'onderweg', which translates into English as 'underway' but to 17th century sailors must have sounded more like 'on the way'.

More confusion enters with doubts over the phrase's spelling. The term 'weigh anchor', and the fact that when ships are loaded with cargo and ready to sail they are weighed down, has lead to the phrase being written as 'under weigh'.

The word 'way' is now flourishing as the converse of 'no way', but as 'a ship's progress' it is all but defunct.

A wide berth

Meaning

A goodly distance.

Origin

'Wide berth' is most commonly found in the phrases 'keep a wide berth of', 'give a wide berth to' etc. It was originally a nautical term. We now think of a ship's berth as the place where the ship is moored. Before that though it meant 'a place where there is sea room to moor a ship'. This derives in turn from the probable derivation of the word berth, i.e. 'bearing off'. When sailors were warned to keep a wide bearing off something they were being told to make sure to maintain enough sea room from it.

Go by the board

Meaning

Finished with, as in thrown overboard.

Origin

The board is the side of a ship. Most of the early references to this phrase relate to masts of sailing ships which had fallen 'by the board'..

Hand over fist

Meaning

Quickly and continuously.

Origin

This is probably of naval origin.

The allusion in this phrase is to the action of hauling on a rope.

The term is now used to suggest speed and profusion, especially in financial dealing, e.g. 'making money, hand over fist'.

The 'making money hand over fist' figurative use is a clear allusion to grabbing handfuls of money and pocketing it.

Hard and fast

Meaning

Rigidly adhered to - without doubt or debate.

Origin

This is a nautical term. A ship that was hard and fast was simply one that was firmly beached on land.

High and dry

Meaning

Stranded, without help or hope of recovery.

Origin

This term originally referred to ships that were beached. The 'dry' implies that, not only were they out of the water, but had been for some time and could be expected to remain so.

In the offing

Meaning

Imminent - likely to happen soon.

Origin

Another of the many phrases with a nautical origin. This one's quite simple once you know what 'the offing' is. It's the part of the sea that is most distant from the shore but is still visible..

So, someone who was waiting for and watching out for a ship would first see it approaching when it was 'in the offing' and when it was expected to dock soon. Something that was 'in the offing' isn't happening now or even in a minute or two, but will inevitably happen before too long. The phrase has migrated from its naval origin into general use in the language and is now used to describe any event that is imminent.

Know the ropes

Meaning

To understand how to do something. To be acquainted with all the methods required.

Origin

There is some doubt about the origin of this phrase. Sailors had to learn which rope raised which sail and also had to learn a myriad of knots. There is also a suggestion that it comes from the world of the theatre, where ropes are used to raise scenery etc.

On your beam ends

Meaning

Hard-up - in a bad situation.

Origin

The beams here are the horizontal transverse timbers of ships. This nautical phrase came about with the allusion to the danger of imminent capsize if the beam ends were touching the water.

Plain sailing

Meaning

An easy, uncomplicated course.

Origin

This is a nautical phrase and originally had the literal meaning of 'sailing that is easy and uncomplicated'. It isn't clear whether the allusion is to the 'simple, uncomplicated' meaning of plain or whether it referred to an easy-to-navigate sea, in the 'level, flat' sense.

Ship-shape and Bristol fashion

Meaning

In first-class order.

Origin

In May 2005 there was a brief flurry in English newspapers concerning the origin of the term nitty-gritty. A company that had recently presented an 'equality and diversity' course in Bristol had suggested that this term was a reference to an ethnic slur and should no longer be used. Those English journalists with a seek and destroy mission against political correctness rubbed their hands when, much to their satisfaction, it turned out that the claim had no substance.

What wasn't picked up by many at the time was an additional claim that 'ship-shape and Bristol fashion' was also a derogatory description of black people who were ready for sale as slaves. This is

also unsupported by any evidence. The phrase has a perfectly sound derivation which is nothing to do with race.

'Ship-shape and Bristol fashion' isn't widely used outside the UK and even there less so than in earlier times, so a little background may be in order.

Bristol has been an important English seaport for more than a thousand years. The city is actually several miles from the sea and stands on the estuary of the River Avon. Bristol's habour has one of the most variable tidal flows anywhere in the world and the water level can vary by more than 30 feet between tides. Ships that were moored there were beached at each low tide. Consequently they had to be of sturdy construction and the goods in their holds needed to be securely stowed. The problem was resolved in 1803 with the construction of the Floating Harbour. There's no absolute proof that the term 'Bristol fashion' originates with that geography but the circumstantial evidence seems very strongly in favour of it.

Just as an aside, Bristol has another linguistic claim to fame. In earlier days the town was called Bristowe (or Brigstow). A quirk of the local spoken dialect is to add els to the end of words, hence Bristowe became Bristol. Another nice example of this is the name for the laminate sheeting used on worktops. You might call this Formica; in Bristol it is Formical.

'Ship-shape and Bristol fashion' is actually two phrases merged into one

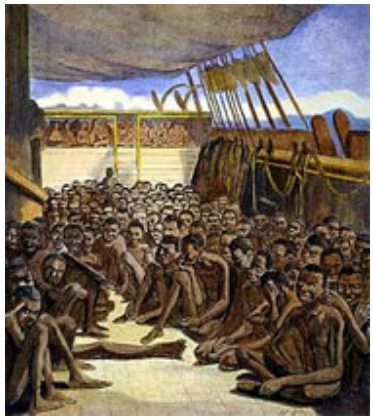
Nitty-gritty

Meaning

The heart of the matter; the basic essentials; the harsh realities.

Origin

Any turn of phrase that is suspected as being racist is subject to close scrutiny, especially in the USA; hence the euphemistic 'N-word'. Reports that a harmless word like picnic originated as the name of a lynching party only have to be voiced to be taken seriously and become part of folk-etymology.



In that context it has been alleged that 'nitty-gritty' is a derogatory reference to the English slave trade of the 18th century. The phrase is usually used with the prefix 'getting down to' and there is a sense that, whatever the nitty-gritty is, it is at the bottom of something. The suggestion is that it originated as a term for the unimportant debris left at

the bottom of ships after the slaves had been removed and that the meaning was extended to include the slaves themselves. That report became widely known following newspaper reports of an 'equality and diversity' course for Bristol Council employees in 2005. Had the firm that was conducting the training known that their claims were to reach so wide a public they may have chosen their words more carefully.

The general touchiness over language that might have had a racist origin is enhanced by the ongoing guilt felt by some communities that were formerly involved with the slave trade, for example the English sea-ports of Bristol and Liverpool. In July 2006, Liverpool Council debated the proposal that Penny Lane in Liverpool should be renamed to remove the association with the slave-trader James Penny. This was dismissed as ludicrous by many in the city, but the very fact that the suggestion was made indicates a degree of ongoing unease.

There is no evidence to support the suggestion that 'nitty-gritty' has any connection with slave ships. It may have originated in the USA as an African-American expression, but that's as near as it gets to slavery. It isn't even recorded in print until the 1950s, long after slave ships had disappeared, and none of the early references make any link to slavery.

Shake a leg

Meaning

Rouse yourself from sleep and get out of bed.

Origin

Shake a leg and *show a leg* are usually discussed together, but it isn't at all clear that they are in any way connected. Both phrases have more than one meaning. So what were their original meanings and which came first?

We now sometimes use *shake a leg* to mean 'hurry up'.

Show a leg means either 'make an appearance', usually by getting out of bed or at least showing willing by poking your leg out, or it means 'hurry along'. The second meaning isn't commonly used, nor is it old. It appears to be a confusion of the two terms 'show a clean pair of heels' and 'stretch your legs'. It may also have been confused with the 'hurry up' version of *shake a leg*. Whatever the source, that certainly isn't the original meaning of *show a leg*. Most commentators report that the phrase derives from the Royal Navy and that this was the order given to sailors to put a foot from their hammocks and get up.

An alternative version comes from the fact that women were allowed on board Royal Navy ships in the 19th century and that they were allowed to stay asleep after the sailors had been roused. The order of *show a leg* was supposed to have been given so that the shapely legged women could be distinguished from the hairy-legged sailors.

Shiver my timbers

Meaning

An oath, expressing annoyance or surprise.

Origin

One meaning of shiver, which is now largely forgotten, is 'to break into pieces'.

So, the sailor's oath *shiver my timbers*, is synonymous with (if so and so happens then...) *let my boat breaks into pieces*.

Taken aback

Meaning

Surprised or startled by a sudden turn of events.

Origin

'Aback' means in a backward direction - toward the rear. It is a word that has fallen almost into disuse, apart from in the phrase 'taken aback'.

'Taken aback' is an allusion to something that is startling enough to make us jump back in surprise. The first to be 'taken aback' were not people though but ships. The sails of a ship are said to be 'aback' when the wind blows them flat against the masts and spars that support them.

If the wind were to turn suddenly so that a sailing ship was facing unexpectedly into the wind, the ship was said to be 'taken aback'.

Tell it to the marines

Meaning

A scornful response to a tall and unbelieved story.

Origin

The US Marine Corps are probably the best-known marines these days and this American-sounding phrase is often thought to refer to them. This isn't an American phrase though and, although it has been known there since the 1830s, it originated in the UK and the marines in question were the Royal Marines.

The first marines were *The Duke of York and Albany's Maritime Regiment of Foot*, formed in 1664, in the reign of Charles II. They were soldiers who had been enlisted and trained to serve on board ships. The recruits were considered green and not on a par with hardened sailors, hence the implication that marines were naive enough to believe ridiculous tales, but that sailors weren't. Such a tall tale is often quoted as the source of this phrase.

[The commanding officer] if a soldier complained to him of hardships which he could not comprehend, would be very likely to recommend him to "tell it to the marines"!

The bitter end

Meaning

To the limit of one's efforts - to the last extremity.

Origin

Bitter has been an adjective meaning acrid or sour tasting since the year 725 AD at least. The word was in common use in the Middle Ages and Shakespeare uses it numerous times in his plays and poems, as do many other dramatists. The phrase 'the bitter end' would seem, fairly obviously, to come directly from that meaning.

A bitt is a post fastened in the deck of a ship, for fastening cables and ropes. When a rope is played out to the bitter end, it means there is no more rope to be used.

Cut of your jib

Meaning

One's general appearance and demeanour.

Origin

The jib of a sailing ship is a triangular sail set between the foretopmast head and the jib boom. Some ships had more than one jib sail. Each country had its own style of sail and so the nationality of a sailing ship, and a sailor's consequent opinion of it, could be determined from the jib.

Three sheets to the wind

Meaning

Very drunk.

Origin

To understand this phrase we need to enter the world of nautical terminology. Sailors' language is, unsurprisingly, all at sea and many supposed derivations have to go by the board. Don't be taken aback to hear that sheets aren't sails, as landlubbers might expect, but ropes (or occasionally, chains). These are fixed to the lower corners of sails, to hold them in place. If three sheets are loose and blowing about in the wind then the sails will flap and the boat will lurch about like a drunken sailor.

Sailors at that time had a sliding scale of drunkenness; three sheets was the falling over stage; tipsy was just 'one sheet in the wind', or 'a sheet in the wind's eye'