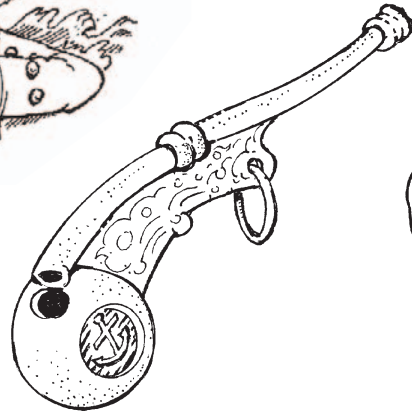
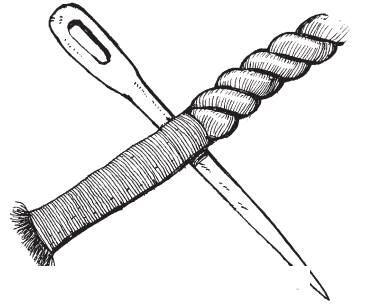
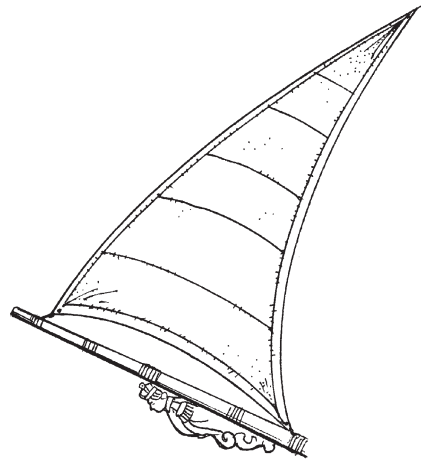
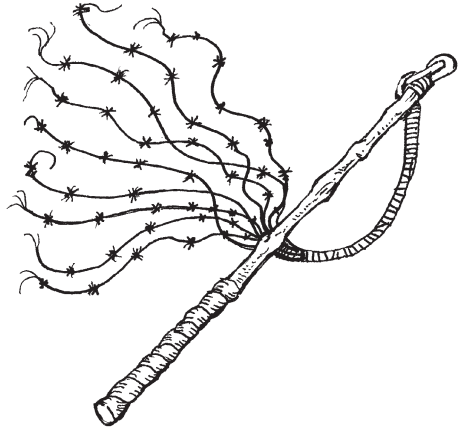


2

A Sailor's Life

Whether out of poverty, patriotism or ambition, thousands of England's young men went to sea in Nelson's heyday. Their life had a language all its own – and it has seeped right through ours.



Well, I never knew that . . .

. . . you couldn't bottle it up, even after a lousey day

Edward Vernon was an unpopular admiral who commanded the British fleet in the West Indies in the mid-18th century. He was well known for wearing a coat made from a mixture of silk, mohair and gum called 'grogam', which earned him the nickname Old Grog. At one point he ordered that the twice daily issue of neat rum served to his crew should be diluted, with a pint of water to a quarter of a pint of rum. This inevitably made him even less popular with his crew, and before long he was recalled to Britain. The weaker and less desirable alcoholic drink gained the name of GROG – though the word is now used of undiluted alcoholic drinks as well. Grog, by the way, was still issued to sailors as late as 1970!

When the alcohol rations were issued at certain points in the day, some sailors would try to save theirs in a bottle and hide it away until night-time, so that they could then drink a whole day's rations in one go and get drunk. This could lead to

fighting in the evening, and so it was against the rules to BOTTLE IT UP. If someone did bottle up his rations and then drink the lot in one go and fall asleep (or pass out), when he came round he would be described as feeling GROGGY.



The old English word *mes* meant a 'dish', and in particular a communal dish from which comrades would eat. Thus the officers' canteen on a ship came to be called the OFFICERS' MESS.

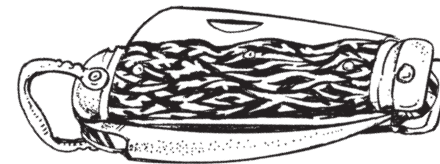
It was important that hammocks were rolled up tightly every day so that if there was a battle they did not take up unnecessary space. Every hammock had to be passed through a standard-size metal ring before it was stowed away to prove it had been rolled properly. From this idea came a phrase associated with passing a test. It has evolved over time into

the idea of a person's body going through a ring like a hammock, to mean having to meet various criteria: *PASSING THROUGH THE HOOPS* or *JUMPING THROUGH HOOPS*.

Head lice were very common in the cramped and generally insanitary conditions on board a galleon. If you discovered that you had the little parasites, you would say that it had been a *LOUSEY DAY* – or 'lousy day' as we now spell it. Sailors used to wear their hair long, tied in a pony-tail at the back of their head. To keep this in place and to discourage lice they would dip it in tar. Hence they were called *TARS*. The common version of the name John was often applied generically by aristocrats to commoners whose names it was not worth remembering. This certainly applied to sailors, and hence the generic name for a sailor came to be *JACK TAR*. (By the same principle, a man who worked high up on churches was called a *STEEPLEJACK* and a tree feller a *LUMBERJACK*.) Before the 20th century and the use of steam-powered machinery on board fighting ships, manpower was in constant demand. Sailing a ship and firing the guns were very manually intensive (for example, *Victory* herself had a standard crew of 850 in a ship

only 200 feet long). Everyone on board was expected to do whatever was needed – so, for example, marines would help push the capstan to raise the anchor, sailors would scrub the deck and sew sails and mend ropes. Hence the expression for someone who is multiskilled and capable of doing many different things: *JACK OF ALL TRADES*.

Sailors were always working with rope and needed their own knives, but they had to be sure the blades would be safe while they were moving about the rigging. Hence they developed a knife with a hinged blade that could be folded safely away into the handle. The name of this knife has been used in more modern times to describe the motion when an articulated lorry gets out of control by likening it to the motion of the blade when it is closing: *JACK-KNIFE*.



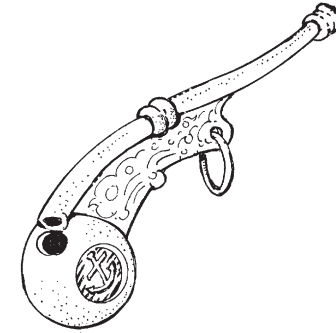
Soldiers were often collectively referred to by the weapons they used, such as bayonets or rifles: for example, one might talk about 'a hundred rifles'. In the same way, as sailors were constantly working with ropes they were referred to collectively as HANDS.

Four hundred years ago a word for a man in charge of something was 'swain'. So the man in charge of a ship's boat was called the BOATSWAIN or BO'SUN. The boat that the captain used would usually be stored on top of the main deck and, using the old word 'cock' meaning 'sticking up', this boat was called the COCKBOAT. The person in charge of this would be called a COCKSWAIN or COXSWAIN. This has now been shortened even further, so that the person who steers a rowing boat is called a COX.

Well, I never knew that . . .

. . . if you wanted food piping hot, you wouldn't loaf around

The bo'sun took orders from an officer and communicated them to the crew using a special whistle. These whistles gave



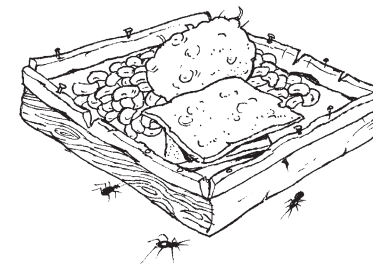
a piercing sound that could be heard even in battle and bad weather. In fact the correct name for it – the bo'sun's 'call' – comes from its purpose of calling for the attention of the crew. Each instruction would have its own series of notes, called a 'pipe'. For example, if an important person such as the captain or admiral came on board they would be PIPED ON BOARD. Also, mealtimes would be announced with a particular 'pipe'. Those crew members who would get to the mess tables first would get the food while it was still hot from the stove – PIPING HOT. Another command was to order sailors to go below decks, douse the lights and stop talking: hence the phrase PIPE DOWN. (Once 'pipe down' had been sounded, the actual ringing of the bells to mark the stages of each watch was stopped until the next morning.)

Despite all the efforts of ships' cats, the storage holds of galleons would often be infested with rats. If the ship were to sink these would scuttle to the surface and be seen clinging onto anything that floated. This gave the impression that they too were abandoning ship, giving rise to the expression LIKE RATS DESERTING A SINKING SHIP. (It then became legend that if a rat was seen to be leaving ship in port it was because the rat knew the ship was going to sink.) This tendency to resort to self-interest under duress also led to the phrase used of someone who switched loyalty and passed on confidential information, TO RAT ON SOMEONE. By analogy with a pig, there is a similar expression TO SQUEAL.

In 1753 a medical paper was presented to the Admiralty showing that lemon juice could prevent scurvy, a serious illness caused by lack of vitamin C that was common among sailors on long voyages, who had little or no fresh food while at sea. Initially lemons were purchased from the Mediterranean, but it was then discovered that lime juice could also be used. One of the senior admirals owned a lime plantation in the Caribbean and before long it was limes that

were used primarily throughout the British navy to prevent crews getting scurvy. Other countries did not immediately copy the British, and so British ships and their crews became known as LIMEYS – an expression still used by Americans for British people today.

Personal equipment for the crew was very basic on these ships. Plates were made simply by taking a plank of wood and cutting off a section, so that the sailor would have a SQUARE MEAL. (The squares made for easier stacking and more efficient storage.) Small pieces of wood called 'fiddles' would be nailed around the edges of these plates to stop the food slopping off onto the decks. Often a sailor would cheat by making his bigger so that he could take more food than the



others. He would be ON THE FIDDLE. Bread would typically be collected from the bakery by one sailor for everyone on his mess table. The bakery would be a warm room, and in cold weather the messenger might be tempted to hang around there. Hence an expression developed meaning taking one's time: LOAFING AROUND – or, as they still say in the navy, GOING FOR LOAF – meaning bunking off.

Galleons would set sail with barrels full of salted meat which would be used up through the voyage. When a barrel was empty of meat there would still often be remnants of fat at the bottom which would then be used in cooking. Hence SCRAPING THE BOTTOM OF THE BARREL.

When meat was boiled, the grease that rose to the surface was called 'slush'. This was skimmed off and used to waterproof rope. The cook would keep some for himself, which he sold to other sailors to waterproof their clothes. The money he received as a result of this private trading was called a SLUSH FUND.

French adventurers who used Caribbean islands as bases or repair grounds became used to the local style of cooking food on frames called 'boucans' which were held over open fires. This gave rise to a nickname for such pirates: 'BOUCANEERS' OR BUCCANEERS.



There were many protocols to be observed on board ship. For example, if an officer was wearing a hat he had to be saluted, and it was considered insubordination not to do so. If he was holding his hat, however, he did not need to be saluted. An officer had to wear his jacket on deck and could remove it only when he retired below decks to the room where officers ate their meals. Here there would be a wardrobe where they could hang their coats. Hence the officers' mess on board a ship was called the WARDROOM. The captain of a ship traditionally eats alone and can enter the wardroom only at the request of his officers.

A device was developed in the French navy for situations where the crew had a dispute with an officer but where no one person was prepared to act as leader or spokesman for fear of punishment. The people involved would get a ribbon (*ruban* in French) or some other piece of parchment or cloth and join the ends so that it formed a continuous loop. They would then all sign it and deliver it to the captain so that it contained everyone's name, but without any one name being at the top of a list. The stratagem was adopted in the British navy, using a round piece of cloth or paper which the crew signed around the edge – again avoiding any one name appearing at the top of a list. The French name for this device, *rond ruban*, mutated into the English term ROUND ROBIN – though it is now more commonly used for any letter sent to many people.

Well, I never knew that . . .

*. . . when there was enough room to swing a cat, the holy trinity
would leave its mark*

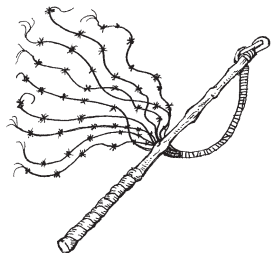
Soldiers on board ship, as opposed to the sailors who manned the vessels, were named after the Latin word for sea, MARINES.

These soldiers were used not just to kill enemies but also to control the crew, many of whom would have been convicted criminals or in the navy against their will, having been press-ganged. Discipline was very severe.

A particularly grim punishment was to be hung over the side of the ship by your hands tied together, and then have another rope tied to your feet and run under the ship and up the other side. This latter rope would then be pulled, dragging you down one side of the hull, under the ship and up the other side. Not only was there clearly a danger of drowning in the process, but the bottoms of these ships attracted razor-sharp barnacles and other crustaceans, so that your body, arms, legs and face would be lacerated as you went – all of course in salt water – ouch! No wonder a double dose of this punishment was considered equivalent to a death sentence. As the person being punished would have to be hauled over the keel at the bottom of the hull, the ordeal was called KEEL HAULING – a term now used to describe a very severe punishment that in career terms is potentially fatal.

When Swedish sailors were punished they would be made to run, naked, down a 'corridor' formed by two ranks of sailors, who would beat them with knotted rope as they went. This punishment, whose name came from two words, *gata*, meaning a way or passage, and *lopp*, meaning a course, was adopted by other countries, and in England by the Royal Navy, where the unfamiliar Swedish words mutated into a similar-sounding English term. Thus the practice became known as making someone RUN THE GAUNTLET.

Probably the most common punishment was flogging. Whips were made of several strands of rope or leather, often with a small piece of metal tied into the tip of each strand to cause even worse wounds. The wounds caused by these whips were similar to deep claw marks and so the whips were called CATS. Some cats had three tails, representing the Trinity of God the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost. When used on land, this



instrument was sometimes referred to as a 'scourge'. However, it was considered far more efficacious in terms of both religion and punishment to have an even more holy *trinity of trinities* – hence the more usual naval whip, the CAT O' NINE TAILS.

In the days of the sailing ships, life below decks was very cramped. Even though men of the 18th century were on average about 4 inches shorter than we are today, they could not stand up straight below decks. Therefore if there was a punishment whipping it had to take place up on the open deck because down below there was NOT ENOUGH ROOM TO SWING A CAT. The cat was always stored in a bag of a particular colour – red, to hide the bloodstains. If a crime on board a ship was discovered and it was likely that it would result in a flogging, the sailors would say 'THE CAT IS OUT OF THE BAG'. After a flogging, salt would usually be put on to the wounds. Clearly this would be excruciatingly painful and therefore continue the punishment. It also acted as an antiseptic and meant the wounds would heal more quickly, enabling the sailor to return to full duties as soon as possible. From this

practice we get the phrases RUBBING SALT INTO THE WOUND, making a bad situation worse, and 'DON'T RUB IT IN', meaning things are bad enough without any more aggravation; also 'THERE'S THE RUB', referring to a further disadvantage of a course of action. Incidentally, sailors had to pay for the salt used to treat these wounds. So there was a double whammy after a flogging: not only the pain of the salt, but also the pain of having to pay for it!

For a ceremonial flogging where the whole crew would be forced to watch, the sailor would be manacled to a vertical board to hold him still while being flogged. On other occasions, he might simply be tied in position lying on top of a barrel. Hence when someone is helpless and at someone else's mercy, we say they have him OVER A BARREL. For very serious offences, where an example was to be made to deter any other sailor from repeating the crime, the sailor would be flogged in turn in front of the crew of every ship in the fleet – FLOGGED AROUND THE FLEET. This was essentially a very painful death sentence.

Some captains were particularly fond of using the cat to keep discipline and during a journey of several months or even years would preside over many floggings. In these cases the person giving the flogging on one occasion might be concerned that he would suffer the same fate next time around. This might make him hold back the full force of the whip, and also refrain from the technique of whipping his hand back at the last moment to accelerate the ends of the whip so that they would lacerate the victim's back as much as possible. This holding back was known as 'scratching', although in practice this would still cause very bloody and painful cuts; the deal among the sailors was 'I'LL SCRATCH YOUR BACK IF YOU SCRATCH MINE.'

Sometimes the victim of a flogging would die. In some cases this was actually intended, but often it was not and would be seen as a pointless and ultimately unproductive exercise of the kind we mean when we talk of FLOGGING SOMETHING TO DEATH.

Incidentally, use of the 'cat' has never been abolished in the Royal Navy, only suspended!

Another treatment for flogged sailors – and a common treatment for injuries and diseases of all sorts – was the application of vinegar as an antiseptic, along with brown paper laid over the area to reduce bleeding. So common was it, in fact, that it appears in a well-known nursery rhyme – although the childish verses are not quite what they seem! At this time “tumbling down” was a euphemism for sex, and “breaking a head” (or sometimes crown) was a euphemism for losing one’s virginity. “Head” was also used as a nickname for the male member (and still is in some phrases). Hence the real meaning of the rhyme is to tell how a boy has a liaison with a more experienced girl, loses his virginity, catches a venereal disease, and then needs to get treatment from the local crone. The girl, meanwhile, returns home, pleased with her conquest, only to be chastised by Jack’s mother . . .

*Jack and Jill went up the hill,
To fetch a pail of water
Jack fell down and broke his crown
And Jill came tumbling after.
Up Jack got and home did trot*

*As fast as he could caper,
To old dame dob who patched his nob,
With vinegar and brown paper.
When Jill came back, she did grin
To hear of Jack’s paper plaster.
So his mother whipped her across her knee
For causing Jack’s disaster.*

The third line of the second verse has changed over time to disguise the sexual nature of the poem and is often given as “*he went to bed to mend his head*” – although even here the reference to his “head” is kept. Given how unlikely it is that anyone would fetch water from *up* a hill, it shows that the pair’s naïve attempt to disguise their liaison was very transparent.

In 1789, the crew of a ship off the coast of Tahiti had to decide between sailing all the way back to Britain under the harsh and cruel regime of a tyrannical captain to deliver their cargo of fruit or to stay in the tropical island paradise and settle in with the beautiful local girls. Understandably they chose the

latter, and so they marooned the captain and his officers in a boat in the middle of the ocean. The crew then successfully hid on the volcanic Pitcairn Islands for over 20 years before being discovered. In fact, the descendants of these original mutineers and the wives they took with them from Tahiti still live on the island – although the population is often no more than 50 individuals. Incredibly, the captain survived 3,500 miles at sea to make landfall in Java. The incident came to be known as *THE MUTINY ON THE BOUNTY*, after Captain Bligh's ship.

Well, I never knew that . . .

*. . . snotties and reefers might hail from good families who
couldn't make ends meet*

The younger sons of country gentry would sometimes choose, or be sent by their families, to become trainee naval officers. These boys – often not even teenagers – would be stationed in the middle of the ship's deck when on duty so that they could quickly get to anywhere they were needed. As a result they were called *MIDSHIPMEN*. Clearly, youngsters standing out in the elements would often have had runny noses – hence

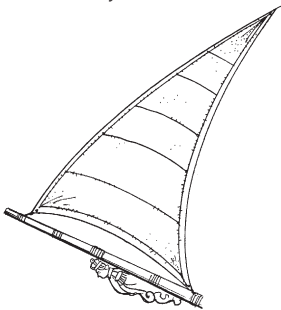


their nickname *SNOTTIES*. To discourage them from wiping their noses on their arms, the uniform had buttons sewn on the lower sleeves. One of the duties of midshipmen was to supervise the 'reefing in' of the topsails, and so they were also known as *REEFERS*. They could not carry out this task in the full long-tailed coats usually worn by officers as these would have been too cumbersome aloft. Instead, they wore a short, heavy woollen coat that gave them more flexibility. This style of coat subsequently became known as a *REEFER JACKET*. (Incidentally, the resemblance of self-rolled marijuana cigarettes to furled topsails has also given rise to the street name *REEFERS*.)

Trading ships encountering each other at sea would often sail close and hail each other, asking where the other came from and whether there was any news from that port. Hence the

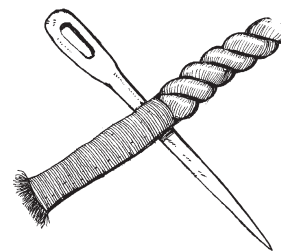
expression TO HAIL FROM somewhere, meaning to come from a place.

When the triangular ‘jib sails’ at the front of ships were adopted by European navies, different nations used different variants. This enabled lookouts to identify at least the nationality of a ship at a great distance. The captain could then assess whether an approaching vessel was likely to be hostile and decide what course of action was appropriate. By analogy, naval officers who had come to an instant view about someone simply by their dress and appearance would say: ‘I DON’T LIKE THE CUT OF YOUR JIB.’



Galleons had an enormous amount of rigging to hold the masts in place, to allow crew to climb up the masts and to

control the sails. On HMS *Victory* there were 26 miles of ropes in the rigging! These ropes quickly frayed and needed running repairs, especially at the ends. Whenever there was little else to do the crew would be set to work on mending these ropes, to keep them busy and so avoid unrest, fighting and the risk of mutiny. Thus having nothing of importance to do was called BEING AT A LOOSE END, and sorting out details that were not sufficiently important to demand attention when there were other priorities came to be known as TIDYING UP LOOSE ENDS. Repairing these ropes often involved twisting or even spinning the cords to make strong rope, and while doing this the sailors would tell each other stories, a habit which became known as SPINNING A YARN.



Small, useless bits of rope were known by a word that we still use today to describe old things that you have never got

around to throwing away: JUNK. Sailors would gather these small bits together, unpick them and then sell them to shipyards for use in caulking (making waterproof) the planking on decks or making paper boards. This was an easy (though illegal) way of making money – MONEY FOR OLD ROPE.

After a battle the crew would often be able to improvise a repair to a damaged rope, even if it had been shot through, by splicing in other, shorter pieces of rope left over from something else. From this we get a phrase associated nowadays with scrimping and saving, MAKING ENDS MEET.

Ropes often need to be repaired or joined together using a method called 'splicing'. This process involves unwinding the ends of two ropes and then rewinding them together so they are interwoven. This has given us a phrase originally used when a sailor was married: GETTING SPLICED. One of the most important ropes on a galleon was the rope (or 'brace') that held the main mast in place. This rope was very thick and kept very tight to withstand the enormous pressures of the wind blowing on the sails. Occasionally, usually after a battle, it was

necessary to replace this rope. Because this was a difficult and heavy job, which required the whole crew pulling to create the necessary tension, a tradition developed in the Royal Navy that the crew would have an extra rum ration after completing it. Hence the phrase now used outside the navy as well to mean having a celebratory drink – SPLICE THE MAINBRACE. Another word for this rope has given us a phrase to describe someone or something at the heart of a team: the MAINSTAY.

When sailors had to haul ropes in they would pull first with a hand on one side, then with the other hand on the other side – hence the phrase HAND OVER FIST. Due to the frequency of this activity on board a ship the expression came to mean 'easy but effective', especially applied to making money.

During long voyages, repairs had to be made to wooden sailing ships while they were still at sea. One such task was to ensure that the seals between the planks round the waterline were all secure. The main seam in this part of the hull was known as the 'devil', and when sailors hung on ropes over the

side to complete any running repairs they were said to be
BETWEEN THE DEVIL AND THE DEEP BLUE SEA.

Peier is the Old French word meaning to brush with hot tar (from the Latin *picare*, to cover with pitch), from which we get the naval term 'to pay' with the same meaning. If a ship was in need of attention in this area and there was no tar with which to do it, there would be trouble ahead – hence a phrase meaning just that: THE DEVIL TO PAY AND NO HOT PITCH (often shortened to simply 'the devil to pay').

The French word meaning 'to sing' is *chanter*, from which we get the word for rhythmical songs sung by sailors, designed to help them all heave together on the beat when pulling on ropes or around the capstan: a SEA SHANTY.

