

TO THE BITTER END

Fold Here

MODERN MEANING: TO THE VERY END OF SOMETHING,
NO MATTER HOW UNPLEASANT

NAUTICAL ORIGIN: THE CLEAT, OR POST, ON WHICH A
ROPE OR ANCHOR LINE IS ATTACHED WAS OFTEN
KNOWN AS THE 'BITT'. WHEN THE LINE HAD BEEN
LET OUT TO THE FULLEST EXTENT, WITH NO
MORE AVAILABLE SLACK, IT WAS SAID TO HAVE
REACHED THE 'BITTER END'.

Cut Here



DRESSED TO THE NINES

Fold Here

MODERN MEANING: DRESSED TO PERFECTION; WEARING THE MOST FASHIONABLE OR FANCY CLOTHES

NAUTICAL ORIGIN: TO CELEBRATE VICTORIES, RETURNING SHIPS WOULD APPROACH THEIR HOME PORTS 'DRESSED' IN BUNTING AND FLAGS. AS MANY OF THE CREW AS POSSIBLE WOULD LINE UP ON THE NINE PRIMARY YARDS OF THE DECK AS A SALUTE TO THEIR MONARCH, THUS THE SHIP WAS 'DRESSED TO THE NINES'.

Cut Here



FATHOM IT

Fold Here

MODERN MEANING: UNDERSTAND THOROUGHLY OR COMPLETELY; OFTEN USED IN THE NEGATIVE AS 'CAN'T FATHOM IT'.

NAUTICAL ORIGIN: SAILING VESSELS OFTEN NEEDED TO MEASURE THE DEPTH OF WATER AS THEY NEARED LAND. TO DO THIS THEY LET OUT A LEAD-WEIGHTED ROPE, WHICH SANK. ONCE IT REACHED THE OCEAN/SEA FLOOR, THEY WOULD HAUL THE ROPE OUT AND MEASURE IT BY ARM'S LENGTHS (NOW STANDARDIZED AT 6 FEET), CALLED FATHOMS. 'CAN'T FATHOM IT' THEREFORE MEANS 'UNABLE TO FIND THE DEPTH (OF MEANING)' IN SOMETHING.

Cut Here



HOLY MACKEREL!

Fold Here

MODERN MEANING: EXPRESSION OF SURPRISE OR WONDER

NAUTICAL ORIGIN: BECAUSE MACKEREL IS A FISH THAT SPOILS QUICKLY, FISHING VESSELS WHO RETURNED TO PORT ON SUNDAY WERE ALLOWED TO SELL THEIR CATCHES TO MERCHANTS AND THEY TO THEIR CUSTOMERS. THIS CONTRADICTED THE 17TH CENTURY ENGLISH 'BLUE LAW' THAT FORBADE MERCHANTS TO SELL ON SUNDAY BECAUSE IT WAS THE HOLY DAY.

Cut Here



PIPE DOWN

-----Fold Here-----

MODERN MEANING: BE STILL OR KEEP QUIET

NAUTICAL ORIGIN: THE BOATSWAIN WOULD KEEP TRACK OF SAILORS' SHIFTS. AT THE END OF A SHIFT, HE WOULD BLOW HIS WHISTLE (OR PIPE) AND THE OFF-DUTY CREWMEN WOULD GO BELOW DECKS TO EAT, SLEEP AND ENJOY THEIR DOWN TIME.

Cut Here



POOPED

Fold Here

MODERN MEANING: TIRED OR EXHAUSTED; DRAGGED DOWN

NAUTICAL ORIGIN: THE SWAMPING OF THE AFT DECK (THE RAISED 'POOP' DECK) WHEN SAILING DOWNWIND IN HIGH SEAS.

Cut Here



MIND YOUR P'S AND Q'S

Fold Here

MODERN MEANING: BE POLITE OR ON YOUR BEST BEHAVIOR;
ALSO MIND YOUR MANNERS

NAUTICAL ORIGIN: SAILORS WOULD GET 'CREDITS' IN PORT UNTIL THEY WERE PAID. THE BARKEEP WOULD TRACK EACH SAILOR'S DRINKS ON A CHALKBOARD BEHIND THE BAR. A MARK WAS MADE UNDER 'P' FOR 'PINT' OR 'Q' FOR 'QUART'. ON PAY DAY, THE SAILORS OWED FOR EACH MARK BY THEIR NAME AND WERE THUS FORCED TO MIND (OR PAY) THEIR P'S AND Q'S.

Cut Here



TIDE OVER

Fold Here

MODERN MEANING: USING STOP-GAP MEASURES TO SLOW OR TEMPORARILY RESOLVE AN ISSUE.

NAUTICAL ORIGIN: IN THE ABSENCE OF WIND TO FILL THE SAILS, FLOAT WITH THE TIDE; FROM IT HISTORICAL CONTEXT “TO TIDE OUER TO A PLACE, IS TO GOE OUER WITH THE TIDE OF EBBE OR FLOOD.” THE IDEA OF TIDING OVER ‘HERE AND THERE’ WAS REPLACED BY THE IDEA OF RIDING A TIDE OVER AN OBSTACLE. THIS LED TO THE CURRENT MEANING OF GETTING OVER A PROBLEM.

Cut Here

