

**Maritime Rescue Institute**  
**Coastal Notes – 18 October 2006**

Hear the word skyscraper and what springs to mind? Most likely tall modern buildings epitomised by the skyline of Manhattan or Taiwan's Taipei 101. Or what about moonraker? James Bond? The terms actually originate in our maritime past when the skyscraper was a small triangular sail set at the top of the mast on the old square riggers. This sail was only used in very calm conditions to maximise every breath of wind. The moonraker could be rigged above the skyscraper if things were really still.

Many words and phrases have their roots in the sea, which is hardly surprising given that we are an island with a strong maritime history. Some quite obviously come from the sea: go overboard, hit the deck, learn the ropes, plain sailing or bail out all clearly started in ships, and their modern meanings are strongly linked to their origins. A sailor would have had to learn all about the ropes on his ship; this would be a basic requirement for him to carry out his duties. Today it has moved from ships to anyone acquiring the basics skills of a job.

Not all the sayings are so obvious. It's quite common for someone facing an unpleasant task to say that they'll have to bite the bullet. It's a stark reminder of just how harsh life onboard could be, to realise that sailors would be given a bullet to bite on while they endured surgery or amputation without anaesthetic other than perhaps rum. This wasn't so unusual; injuries were common, whether in battle or accident and medicines were primitive or non-existent. Another unpleasant reminder of the conditions endured is to let the cat out of the bag – innocent enough today, but in days gone by it was a precursor to a flogging as the cat-o-nine-tails was taken from its bag.

Conditions were so harsh that mutiny was often plotted; sailors signing up to overthrow their captain would sign their names in a circle so that there would be no obvious ringleader. This became known as a round robin.

Why do we say we're feeling blue if we're sad? Supposedly it comes from the custom of flying a blue flag and painting a blue line along the hull of a ship whose master had died at sea.

Nobody would be pleased to be called stuck in the mud, but it's a lot better now than the early meaning, which comes from the early English custom of burying executed criminal seamen in the mud of the Thames.

'Holy Mackerel' today is a mild oath. Mackerel go off very quickly; in the 17<sup>th</sup> century merchants had special permission to sell mackerel on Sundays contradicting the strict laws of the day, hence 'holy mackerel'. So it could be argued that mackerel sellers were the forerunners of all the Sunday opening that we now take for granted.

We often speak of being in the black books of someone, meaning that we have annoyed or upset them. But, there really was a Black Book. It started back in the 1300's, and was a collection of all maritime laws and customs and became known as the Black Book of the Admiralty.

There are umpteen other examples – clear the decks, down the hatch, in the doldrums, mainstay (main stay), show your true colours, hit the deck are just a few. Our language has been enriched by our maritime past, and no doubt words and phrases that now relate to the offshore oil industry will continue the trend in the future.

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