A

Aback: To take aback

Acid: The acid test of something

Adams: Fanny Adams

Alec: A smart Alec

Apple pie: Apple pie bed

Apple pie order

Apple: The apple of your eye

Arm: To chance your arm

Aunt: My giddy aunt

Axe: You have an axe to grind

B

Bacon: To bring home the bacon

To save one's bacon

Badger: To badger someone

Bag: To let the cat out of the bag

In the bag

Baker: A baker's dozen

Ball: To be on the ball *

Balloon: When the balloon goes up

Bandwagon: To climb on the bandwagon

Bandy: To bandy words

Barge: To barge in *

Barking: Barking up the wrong tree

Baron: A baron of beef

Barrel: To have someone over a barrel

Bat: To bat an eyelid

To do something off your own bat *

Bay: To keep danger at bay

Beam: On your beam ends

Bean: To have a bean feast

Beans: To spill the beans

Bear: A bear garden

J

Jack: Jack Tar, Jack of all trades etc. See Tar

Jeopardy: In jeopardy

Jiffy: Done in a jiffy

Jot: I don't give a jot

Jug: In jug

K

Keep: Keep it up

Kibosh:

Knuckle: To knuckle under; to knuckle down, etc

L

Lam: On the lam *

Large: At large

Lark: To lark about

Law: Possession is nine points of the Law

Lead: To swing the lead

Leg: Pull my leg

Show a leg

Level: To do your level best

On the level

Level pegging

Lick: To lick into shape

To go at a great lick *

Lily: Lily livered

Limelight: In the limelight

Line: My job is on the line

Toe the line

What's your line?

Lines: To read between the lines

Hard lines *

Loaf: Use you loaf

Bee: To be the bees knees
Beef: To beef about something
Bell: Saved by the bell
Bend: To go round the bend
Bib: To wear ones best bib and tucker
Bill: The Old Bill
Billio: Going like billio
Billy: Silly Billy
Bird: To get the bird
A little bird told me
Biscuit: To take the biscuit
Bitter: To the bitter end
Black sheep: The black sheep of the family
Black: To black ball someone
To blacklist someone
To be in someone's black book
To be a black leg
Black over Bill's/Will's mother *
Blackguard: He's a blackguard (blaggard)
Blank: Point blank
Blanket: He's a bit of a wet blanket
Block: Chockablock
Blue murder; see Murder
Board: Above board
To go by the board
Bob: Bob's your uncle
Bone up: To bone up something
Bonfire:
Book: To bring to book
Boot: I'll give you that, to boot
The boot's on the other foot
Bootleg: Bootleg liquor *
Bottle: He's lost his bottle
Boycott: To stage a boycott
Brand: Brand new
Lock: Lock, stock and barrel
Loggerheads: At loggerheads
Long: So long
Lurch: To be left in the lurch

M

Madcap: He's a bit of a madcap
Mainbrace: To splice the mainbrace *
Main chance: To have an eye to the main chance
March: To steal a march on someone
Marines: Tell it to the marines
Mark: He doesn't come up to the mark
McCoy: He's the real McCoy:
Mettle: To be on your mettle
Mickey: To take the mickey
Mickey Finn: To give someone a Mickey Finn *
Mockers: To put the mockers on *
Molly coddle
Money: see pin
Monkey: To freeze the balls from a brass monkey
Moon: Over the moon *
Mouth: Mealy mouth
Mud: Here's mud in your eye
His name is mud
Mum: To keep mum
Murder: Blue murder
Music: Face the music
Mustard: To cut the mustard *

N

Nail: Pay on the nail
To nail a lie

Brass: As bold as brass

A brass neck

Brass Monkey: see Monkey

Break: To give someone an even break

Breath: With bated breath

Brick: He's a regular brick

Bristol: Shipshape and Bristol fashion

Brown: Browned off

In a brown study

Brush: To get the brush off

Tarred with the same brush.

Buck: To pass the buck

Bucket: To kick the bucket

Bucket shop

Bugbear: It's a bit of a bugbear

Bull: Cock and bull story

Bullet: To chew or bite on the bullet

Bully: Bully for you

Bunkum: It's a load of old bunkum

Burton: To go for a Burton

Bush: Beating about the bush

Butt: To be the butt of a joke *

By: By and Large

By and by

C

Cake: To take the cake

Can: To carry the can

Candle *: He's not fit to hold a candle to him.

The game is not worth the candle.

To sell by the candle.

To hold a candle to the Devil.

Cap: A feather in your cap

Carpet: To carpet someone

I'll nail you for that

Namby-Pamby: He's a namby-pamby

Neck crop: To fall neck and crop

Neck: In my neck of the woods

Nellie: Not on your nellie

Nest: Mare's nest

Nest egg

Newt: Drunk as a newt *

Nick: In the nick of time

Nincompoop:

Ninepence: As right as ninepence

Nines: Dressed to the nines

Nip Tuck: To race nip tuck

Nitty gritty:

Nod: On the nod

Nose: On the nose

To pay through the nose

It's no skin off my nose

Notch: Top notch *

Nutshell: In a nutshell *

O

OK:

Oar: To put an oar in

Offing: In the offing

Ointment: A fly in the ointment

Onions: To know your onions *

Ox: My giddy ox

P

Paid: To put paid to

Pains: To undertake painstaking research

Paint: To paint the town red

Pale: Beyond the pale

Pan out: I hope it will all pan out

To give someone the red carpet *

Cart: To be in the cart

To upset the apple cart

Cat: Not enough room to swing a cat

To let the cat out of the bag

Catch: Catch 22

Chalk: By a long chalk

Changes: To ring the changes

Cheap: Cheap at half the price *

Cheerio:

Cheese: Cheesed off

Chestnut: That's an old chestnut

Chew: To chew the fat/rag *

Chips: You've had your chips

ChockaBlock

Choke: To choke someone off

Chop: To Chop and Change

Clap: To clap ones eyes on

Clapped: Clapped out

Clink: To be sent to clink

Cloud nine: To be on cloud nine

Coals: To haul over the coals

Cobblers: What a load of cobblers

Cockles: To warm the cockles of your heart

Cock up:

Cock: see Bull

Cock: To be cockahoop

Codswallop: What a load of codswallop

Coil: Shuffle off this mortal coil

Cold: To have cold feet

Colours: To come through with flying colours *

Comb: To go through something with a fine tooth comb *

Cook: To cook the books.*

Pan: A flash in the pan

Pander: To pander to someone

Parcel: Part and parcel

Park: To park a car *

Pat: Off pat

Patch: Not a patch on

Pear shaped: To go pear shaped *

Peg: To peg out

To take down a peg

Pell Mell: to run pell mell

Penny: The penny has dropped

In for a penny, in for a pound *

Petard: Hoist with his own petard

Peter: To peter out

Phoney:

Pie: It's all pie in the sky

Pig: A pig in a poke

Pigeon: That's not my pigeon

Pikestaff: As plain as a pikestaff

Pillar: From pillar to post

Pillar of the Establishment

Pin: Pin money

Pink: In the pink

Pip: To give someone the pip

Pipe: Pipe down

A pipe dream

Piping: Food is piping hot

Plain sailing: It's all plain sailing

Play fast and loose:

Plug: To plug a song

Plum: A plum job

Point: To stretch a point

Poke: Pig in a poke

Pole: Up the pole

Post: Pillar to post

To cook someone's goose *

Copper bottomed: A copper bottomed guarantee

Corker: What a corker

Cotton: To cotton on

Course: In due course

Coventry: Sent to Coventry

Cox: Box and Cox

Creek: Up the creek

Cropper: To come a cropper

Cross: Criss-cross

Crows: Stone the crows *

Cuckoo: Cloud cuckoo land

Cuff: To speak off the cuff

Curry: To curry favour

Cut: To cut and run

To cut no ice

To cut to the quick

Cut out: To have your work cut out *

D

Dab: To be a dab hand *

Dam: A Tinker's dam

Dampers: To put the dampers on something

Dander: To get your dander up

Deadline: To work to a deadline

Dekko:

Devil: The devil take the hindmost

The devil to pay

Between the devil and the deep blue sea

Dicey: It's a bit dicey *

Dickens: There will be the dickens to pay

Die: The die is cast

Straight as a die

Pot: Pot luck

Gone to pot

Potty: To drive someone potty

Ps Qs: To mind one's Ps and Qs

Pup: To be sold a pup. See let the cat out of the bag

Purple: To have a purple patch

Q

Queer street: To be in queer street

R

Rabbit: To rabbit on

Rain: To rain cats and dogs

As right as rain

Rap: It's not worth a rap

Rat: To smell a rat *

Red: In the red

Red letter day:

Red tape: It's a load of red tape

Rigmarole: What a rigmarole

Riley/Reilly: To live the life of *

Ringer: A dead ringer *

Rise: To take the rise out of someone

River: Sold down the river

Sent up the river *

Rob: To Rob Peter to pay Paul

Robinson: Before you can say Jack Robinson

Rocker: Off his rocker

Rope: It's money for old rope

Ropes: To learn the ropes *

S

Sack: To get the sack

Salad days: *

Dog: Dog days

The hair of the dog

Top dog

A dog in a manger:

To see a man about a dog

Dogs: He's gone to the dogs *

Dogsbody:

Doolally:

Doornail: As dead as a doornail

Dot: On the dot

Double: To do at the double

Dozen: Nineteen to the dozen

Drum: To drum up support

Duck: A lame duck

Dutch: e.g. "Dutch courage", "Dutch treat"

Dyed: e.g., A dyed in the wool Tory

E

Ear: Made a pig's ear out of

Earmark: To earmark something

Ears: Wet behind the ears

Eavesdropping:

Egg: To egg on

A curate's egg

Eggs: As sure as eggs is eggs

Elephant: A white elephant

Ends: At loose ends

To make (both) ends meet

Eyewash: It's a load of eyewash

F

Fagged out: To be fagged out *

Fall: To fall foul of

Feather: see Cap

Fed up: To be fed up *

Salt: Worth his salt

Below the salt

With a pinch of salt

Sandboy: As happy as a sandboy

Sausage: Not worth a sausage *

Scapegoat:

Scarum: Harum scarum

Scot: Scot free

Scotch: Scotch a rumour

Scott: Great Scott

Scrape: To get in a scrape

Scratch: To start from scratch

To come up to scratch

You scratch my back and I'll scratch yours *

Screwed: To be screwed *

Seamy side of life

Settle: To settle terms, etc.

Shakes: He's no great shakes

Shambles: It's a bit of a shambles

Sheets: Three sheets to the wind *

Shirty: To get shirty with someone *

Short shrift: He'll get short shrift

Shot: Not by a long shot

Shoulder: To give the cold shoulder

Sixes and Sevens

Skid: To be on Skid Row

Skinflint: He's a bit of a skinflint

Slap up: A slap up meal *

Sleep: To sleep tight *

Sleeve: To laugh up one's sleeve *

Slope: To slope off

Slush fund

Snook: To cock a snook at someone

Soap opera

Fettle: In fine fettle

Fiddle: On the fiddle

Fit as a fiddle *

Fiddlesticks: It's all fiddlesticks

Field day: To have a field day *

Fig: I don't give fig

Finger: To pull your finger out *

Fired: To be fired *

First rate:

Fish: A pretty kettle of fish

Fits: To go by fits and starts

Flat out: To go flat out

Flea: To be sent off with a flea in the ear *

Fly: To fly in the face of

Fob: To fob off someone

Fogey: An old fogey

Foot: To foot the bill *

Footing: On a good footing

Fork: To fork out

Foul: see Fall

Frog: To have a frog in the throat

G

Gab: The gift of the gab

Gaff: To blow the gaff

Gammy: To have a gammy leg

Gamut: To go the whole gamut

Gauntlet: To run the gauntlet

George: By George

Gerrymander:

Gibberish:

Gingerbread: Take the gilt off the gingerbread

Gingerly: To go gingerly *

Gist: To get the gist of

Sock: Put a sock in it

Soldier: To come the old soldier *

Song: Going for a song

Sorts: Out of sorts *

Soup: In the soup

Spell: A spell of duty

Spick and span: All spick and span

Spoils: Spoils of war

Spoke: To put a spoke in your wheel

Spoon: To get the wooden spoon

Spots: To knock spots off

Spout: Up the spout

Spruce: All spruced up

Spurs: To gain one's spurs *

Square: A square meal

All fair and square

To stand four (?fore) square

Back to square one

Stake: To have a stake in

At stake

Stave: To stave off

Steep: That's a bit steep

Stick: To get hold of the wrong end of the stick *

Stickler: He's a stickler

Sticks: To up sticks *

Stiff necked: He's stiff necked *

Stops: To pull out all the stops

Strait laced:

Strapped: strapped for cash

Straw: A man of straw

Last straw *

Strike: To go on strike

Stroppy: To get stroppy *

Stump: To stump up with the cash

Goat: To get your goat

Gooseberry: To play gooseberry

Gooseberry bush

Goose: To cook someone's goose *

Grandfather: Grandfather clock

Grapes: Sour grapes

Grapevine: To hear something on the grapevine

Grass: To grass on someone

Greenhorn: To be a greenhorn *

Gubbins: A load of gubbins

Gum: He's up a gum tree

Gun: Son of a gun

H

Half: Going off half cocked

Ham: Ham actor

Hand: To get the upper hand *

Handle: To fly off the handle

Hands down: To win hands down

Hang out: Where do you hang out

Hanky panky: To get up to some hanky panky

Hard up: I'm hard up

Harp on:

Hat: At the drop of a hat

Throw your hat into the ring

Knocked into a cocked hat

It's old hat

Hatchet: Bury the hatchet

Hatter: Mad as a hatter

Havock: To cry havock

Haywire: To go Haywire

Hector: To hector someone

Heath Robinson: A Heath Robinson solution *

Stumped: To be stumped *

Suck up: To suck up *

Sway: To hold sway *

Swim: In the swim

Swoop: Fell swoop

T

T: To fit to a "T"

Tab: To run (up) a tab *

Tables: To turn the tables on

Tacks: Brass tacks

Tar: To spoil a ship for a ha'porth of tar

Tears: Crocodile tears

Teeth: By the skin of your teeth

Tell off: see Tick *

Tenterhooks: On tenterhooks

Thick: As thick as thieves

Thread: To thread one's way

Thunder: To steal someone's thunder

Tick: To have something on tick

Tick off: To tick off someone *

Ticket: That's the ticket

Time: A high old time

Tip Top: To be in tip top condition*

Tinker: To give a tinker's dam (or cuss)

Toady: He's a toady

Toast: To drink a toast

Tod: To be on your tod *

Tom: Tom fool or foolery

Tommy rot: That's a load of tommy rot

Tongs: Going at something hammer and tongs

Top: To sleep like a top *

Touch: It was touch go

Out of touch

Hedge: To hedge one's bets
Hem & Haw *
Hep: Hepcat
Herring: A red herring
Hiding: A hiding to nothing
Hijack:
Hippie:
Hobnob:
Hobo:
Hobson: Hobson's choice
Hog: To go the whole hog
Hollow: To beat someone hollow
Hook: By hook or by crook
Hookey: To play hookey *
Hoop: To go through the hoop
Horseplay:
Horse: Never look a gift horse in the mouth
A dark horse
Humble: To eat humble pie
Humbug: You're full of humbug

I

Image: Spitting image
Iron: To strike while the iron is hot
Irons: To have too many irons in the fire
Traces: To kick over the traces
Truck: To have no truck with
Truth: The naked truth
Turkey: To talk turkey
Twig: To twig on to something

V

V sign:

W

Wall: To go to the wall
Washout: It's a washout
Weasel: Pop goes the weasel
Weather: Under the weather
West: To go west
Wheeling: Wheeling and dealing
Whipping boy: To be a whipping boy
Whistle: As clean as a whistle
To blow the whistle on someone
You can whistle for it
Wig: A big wig
Wild goose: A wild goose chase
Wire: Down to the wire *
Wonder: A nine day wonder
Wool: To pull the wool over the eyes*
To be wool gathering *

Y

Yarn: To spin a yarn *
Years: Donkey's years

*=additions (see Introduction)

Aback: To take aback, means to be suddenly taken unawares or to have "the wind taken out of one's sails". This is one from a nautical background. A sudden change of wind could catch a ship's sails on the wrong side, flattening them back against the mast and bringing the ship to a standstill, or even driving her backwards.

Acid: When something passes the acid test it indicates that it is genuine and can be relied on; as "good as gold". Unlike most metals, gold is particularly resistant to digestion with almost all types of acid. Application of acid to a substance suspected of being gold, if not resulting in digestion, could therefore confirm the presence of gold. Thus, by extension, any test of character or quality came to be considered an "acid test".

Adams: Sweet Fanny Adams; In 1867, a little 8 year old girl called Fanny Adams was murdered; her body was dismembered and badly mutilated. At about this time the Royal Navy was first issued with tinned mutton; this was not of good quality and became jokingly known as "Fanny Adams". This term then was applied to any product regarded as poor or worthless and, eventually, came to mean "nothing at all".
The grave is in Alton's cemetery (Alton, Hampshire, England). It's well maintained. A website, with a picture of the grave and a related poem, is at http://www.johnowensmith.co.uk/fanny.htm

Alec: A smart Alec is regarded as a somewhat conceited person. The saying goes back to the 19th century and the Alec is said to be short for Alexander, but why the name Alexander features at all I cannot find. However, a possible explanation was offered by Dom Pleasance in the Q&A section of The Times on 9th May 2002.
"The phrase "Smart Alec", meaning a conceited know-it-all, dates back to mid-19th century America. Regarding the identity of "Alec", most American dictionaries point to Alec Hoag, a notorious pimp and thief who operated in New York in the 1840s. He operated a trick called "The Panel Game" where he would sneak in via gaps in the walls and steal the valuables of his sleeping or unwary clients. The reputation he generated for not getting caught earned him the nickname Smart Alec.

Apple pie: Apple pie bed; this is a practical joke type bed in which the bottom sheet is folded back upon itself, thereby making it impossible for the occupant to stretch out his or her legs. The phrase is an Anglicised version of the French "nappé pliè" - a folded sheet.

Apple pie order; probably from the same origin as "apple pie bed" i.e. a folded sheet in French. Such sheets are neat and tidy.

Apple: When someone is the apple of your eye then they are really special. Sight has always been regarded as something special; this same appreciation applied equally to the pupil. In ancient times the pupil was supposed to be round and solid like a ball, i.e. like an apple. By extension the phrase was then applied to anything or anyone being especially precious.

Arm: To chance your arm is to risk something. This was firstly of military origin. Badges of rank, such as stripes, were worn on the arm. If the wearer offended against Military regulations then there was a risk of being demoted with consequent loss of some or all badges - hence such offences "chanced the wearer's arm".
An alternative explanation comes from Ireland. A couple of centuries ago two families had a feud. One eventually took refuge in St Patrick's Cathedral in Dublin. They then wished to make peace, but were afraid for their lives if they ventured out; in consequence they cut a hole in one of the Cathedral's doors and put out an arm - the worst that could have happened was that an arm was lost. The hole is present to this day. Sadly, the feud took place in 1492 and the saying is first recorded only in the 1880s!

Aunt: My giddy aunt is an expression used to denote surprise. The "giddy" in this instance is probably unrelated to a sense of spinning around but rather to an alternative meaning of the word indicating "impulsive" or "scatterbrained" (Old English gydig meant "mad, frenzied, possessed by God").

Axe: If someone has an axe to grind then they have an ulterior motive to pursue. This saying comes allegedly from the US diplomat Benjamin Franklin. He told the story of the young man who wanted his axe ground.

The smith agreed to do it provided the man turn the grindstone himself. He soon tired and gave up having bitten off more than he could chew. This story was published early in Franklin's career in an article entitled "Too much for your Whistle", but the actual phrase does not seem to have been used until about 20 years later, in another story called "Who'll turn the Grindstone?", written by Charles Minter. This story was clearly based on Franklin's tale, and did include the phrase ".....that man has an ax to grind". It seems that Charles Minter was the likely author of the phrase.

Bacon: To bring home the bacon is to triumphantly achieve some plan or object, perhaps by winning a prize or race. There are two possible origins to this saying. The first goes back several hundred years to the village of Dunmow in Essex where, it is said, in AD 1111 a noble woman offered a prize of a side of bacon, known locally as a flitch, to any man from anywhere in England who could honestly say that he had had complete marital harmony for the preceding year and a day. In over 500 years there were only eight winners. The prize was re-established in the mid 19th century (1858) but ceased to be offered with the closure of the local bacon factory in the 1980s.
An alternative explanation comes from the ancient sport of catching a greased pig at country fairs. The winner kept the pig.

To save one's bacon indicates that a situation has been rescued. This has little to do with the bacon that was brought home above: rather the word

here could derive from Baec which is Old Dutch and Anglo-Saxon for "back". However, like many sayings, there are other suggestions as to the origin. The most likely of these is that, in the early 17th century "bacon" was thieves' slang for "escape".

Badger: To badger someone, means that a person is being harried or annoyed incessantly. This comes from the cruel "sport" of badger baiting. The unfortunate animal was placed in an upturned barrel and dogs were then released to drag it out. When the animals emerged the badger was separated from the hounds and then put back into the barrel to start all over again until the inevitable occurred.

Bag: To let the cat out of the bag; see "Pig in a Poke".

In the bag means that all is certain; the outcome is beyond doubt. This is almost certainly derived from the House of Commons, along with "On the nod" and "Toe the line". "In the bag" means: a bag of petitions behind the Speaker.
An alternative origin says that the bag is one which holds birds and other small game which have been shot and are on their way home to the cooking pot.

Baker: A baker's dozen; This expression meaning thirteen of something, is many centuries old. It goes back to the days when bread was the staple diet of the populace and it was illegal to sell it underweight. In order to make certain that they did not incur a heavy penalty for selling underweight, many bakers gave 13 loaves to the dozen, just to make sure. This extra loaf was called the "vantage" loaf.

Ball: To be on the ball means to be on top of a situation, in control. The 'ball' in this instance is a baseball and the 'on' is the spin which the pitcher applies to the ball in order to make it curve during flight. On a good day there will be lots of spin and curve to confuse the batter. The pitcher is said to be 'on the ball'. The expression first appeared in print in 1912 and was clearly in use before then.

Balloon: When the balloon goes up is a phrase used to imply impending trouble. This relates to the use of observation balloons in the first World War. The sight of such a balloon going up nearly always resulted in a barrage of shells following soon after. The expression was re-inforced during WW2 when the hoisting of barrage balloons was part of the preparations for an air raid.

Bandwagon: To climb on the bandwagon is to join in something that looks as if it will be a success, often with a view to gaining some sort of personal benefit. This goes back to the southern USA custom of bands playing on a wagon in front of a religious or political rally. Supporters would jump on board in order to show their enthusiasm. Although the practice is of some age, the saying itself is first recorded about the Presidential campaign of William Jennings Bryan early in the 20th century.

Bandy: To bandy words, means to argue or quarrel. "Bandy" originated from an Old French word "Bander", which was used in an early form of tennis and meant to "hit a ball to and fro". Later, in the early 17th century, "Bandy" became the name of an Irish team game from which hockey evolved. The ball was "bandied" back and forth between players. The crooked shape of the stick with which the game was played has produced the modern expression "bandy-legged".

Barge: To barge in is a term used when someone rudely interrupts a situation. The origin goes back to the awkward steering characteristics of river barges - they often banged into other boats and objects. By the late 1800s schoolboys used barge to mean "to hustle someone". To barge in came into the language in the early 1900s.

Barking: Barking up the wrong tree. This saying implies something similar to "getting hold of the wrong end of the stick". It comes from the USA and originates in the practice of racoon hunting. Raccoons are partly nocturnal animals and are hunted with dogs. The raccoons often take sanctuary in trees. When the dogs spot them up a tree they stand at the base and bark; occasionally, in the dark, they get the wrong tree.

Baron: A baron of beef; a Baron of Beef is a large double slice of meat not separated at the backbone. Half a Baron is called a sirloin and it from this half that Baron gets its name. Sirloin is a an anglicised version of the French "sur" (over) and "longe" (loin). By inference and humour, since a "Sir", or Knight is lower than a "Baron" then the double version was so called.

Barrel: To have someone over a barrel; in the past a recognised treatment for someone who had been rescued from drowning was to place them over a barrel in order to drain water from their lungs. Such people were not really able to act for themselves and were totally reliant on their rescuers. In the same way, someone who is having business or other problems and is in the hands of third parties can be said to be "over a barrel".

Bat: To bat an eyelid describes a blink or wink. Why bat? The word derives from the now obsolete bate in turn from the Old French "batre" meaning "to beat the wings: to flutter". See Breath.

To do something off your own bat means to do something on your own initiative, without help, or even without permission. Why 'bat'? This is said to be an analogy with cricket, where a batsman scores runs 'off his own bat'.

Bay: To keep danger at bay. In ancient times the bay tree was regarded as having great protective powers. This was due to the fact that it never seemed to be struck by lightning. Both Greeks and Romans wore its leaves as protection during thunder storms in an effort to keep the lightning "at bay". During the great plague of London many citizens did the same, in the hope that they would be spared the disease, but it didn't help.

Beam: On your beam ends; when life is bad and all resources are low or absent then that is when you are said to be "on your beam ends". The saying is nautical in origin and refers to the supporting cross beams in old wooden ships. In shipwrecks the ships often ended up on their sides i.e. "on their beam ends".

Bean: To have a bean feast means to have a good time. In times past it was customary for employers to hold an annual dinner for their employees. It is thought that a regular part of the menu was bean-goose, so called from a bean shaped mark on the beak. It is also possible that the menu also contained a dish consisting mainly of beans. Whatever the menu, such dinners were often rowdy and high-spirited, just like a modern "bean feast". Incidentally, a shortened version of the expression also passed into common usage. This is why we have a "Beano".

Beans: To spill the beans indicates that a secret has been revealed. The suggested origin of this one is similar to, but older, than that of to "black ball". The ancient Greeks were very fastidious about who they would let into membership of their many secret societies. A common voting method was for members to drop either a white or a black bean into a jar. White meant acceptance and black rejection of the new application. It only needed a few black beans for total rejection. The precise numbers of white and black votes were meant to be secret but, occasionally, the jar was knocked over and the beans were spilt. This splendid suggested origin is somewhat marred by the fact that the saying only came into general use in the 1920s; however I know of no better explanation.

Bear: A bear garden. Today this saying implies a state of near chaos, turmoil and confusion in a room or some other similar situation, e.g. a particularly noisy and crowded pub. It comes from the time of Henry VIII when bear baiting was popular, so much so that gardens were actually set aside for the "sport". They were, of course, very noisy and rowdy places.

Bee: To be the bees knees; i.e. to be first class at something. There are a couple of explanations for this one, neither of which I find convincing, but which are all that I can find. The first refers to the delicate and precise way that bees knees bend when they clean off pollen from their bodies and transfer it to the sacks on their back legs. The second, and more likely, origin is one of rhyme and animal association. It was fashionable in the 1920s to coin this type of phrase, not all of which rhymed but all of which had animal connotations; other examples are "the cat's pyjamas" and "the eel's heel". Several of the sayings have died

out, but "bees knees" survives.
In December 2003 another possible origin was sent to me by Kerry Pitman, as follows:
Another explanation of "the bees knees" is that it derives from Clara Bow. She seems to have been known as "The Bee" because of her "bee stung lips". She was also known for showing off a rather nice set of knees. I don't remember where I first ran across this explanation but I searched Google with "clara bow"+"the bee" and verified that linkage to her name seems true. I also checked by searching "clara bow"+"knees" and verified that she was also known for showing off a first rate set of knees.

Beef: To beef about something, means to complain or moan. I have found only one explanation for this expression and it is another that I find less than convincing; never-the-less, here goes. It allegedly comes from the London criminal underworld, well known to be full of cockney rhyming slang. The traditional shout of "stop thief!" was mocked by being replaced by "hot beef, hot beef" in criminal circles who thought that the shouters of "stop thief" were making an unnecessary fuss. The 1811 Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue defines Beef as: "to cry beef; to give the alarm", thereby supporting the above suggested origin.

The phrase was discussed on the SHU web site (see Appendix) in October 2000. An alternative origin goes as follows:
"In order to get them from their ranges to railroads, herds of beef cattle were once forced to trot for day after day in all kinds of weather. Residents of railhead cow towns didn't need to be told when a rancher and his cowpokes were getting close - the noise made by the 'beef' could be heard for miles. Cattle drives are long gone, but a person who is loud in finding fault is still said to beef or bellow like a tired and thirsty steer". From "Why You Say It" by Webb Garrison (Rutledge Hill Press, Nashville, Tenn., 1992).

Bell: To be saved by the bell suggests a rescue at the last minute. I always thought that this was derived from the Boxing Ring, but this is not the only explanation. Another goes as follows: A guard at Windsor Castle in the Victorian times was accused of being asleep on night duty.

He vigorously denied this and, in his defence, said that he had heard Big Ben (which could be heard in Windsor in those days before traffic and Heathrow Airport) chime 13 at midnight. The mechanism was checked and it was found that a gear or cog had slipped and that the clock had indeed chimed 13 the previous night. He was truly Saved by the Bell.
An alternative explanation relates to the bell mentioned under 'Ringer'.

Bend: someone is said to be round the bend when it's felt that they are a little mad. The bend here is the curve always placed in the entrance drive of Victorian mental hospitals. Straight drives were the characteristic of stately homes and bent ones of asylums to screen the inmates from view and vise versa.

Bib: To wear ones best bib and tucker: This saying conjures up a picture of someone dressed in their Sunday best. In the 17th century bibs of all sorts were worn by adults to protect their clothes. At the same time women also wore "tuckers"; these were made of lace or muslin and were tucked into the top of low cut dresses and ended in frills at the neck. On special occasions people wore their best "bib and tucker" and, over the passage of time, it has been forgotten that only women wore tuckers.

Bill: The Old Bill, i.e. the Police. I have come across several possible explanations for this expression. One suggests that "Bill" comes from the vehicle registration number plates of the Metropolitan Police in London in the 1920s. It is alleged that many of the police cars had numbers associated with the letters "BL" and were thus easily recognised. Why "old" in this context, I'm afraid, eludes me.
Another origin suggests association with "Old Bill", a WW1 cartoon character, since many of the post WW1 policemen wore "Old Bill" moustaches.
A further possibility suggests a link back to "Constables of the Watch" who each carried a weapon called a Bill.
Another theory that it is cockney slang for old 'bill and coo'- boys in blue.
Whatever the origin, the phrase has gained general popularity only since the early 1960s, perhaps due to the influence of TV.

Billio: Going like Billio meaning furious and fast activity has, again, several possible likely origins. Going like Billio meaning furious and fast activity has, again, several possible likely origins. The first suggests comparison with Stephenson's, William Hedley 1814 designed, steam engine, the "Puffing Billy", as the basis. (The term "billypot" was well established in the 19th century for a can or pot used to boil water over an open fire; perhaps this is where Stephenson's engine got its name?) Another implicates an Italian soldier at the time of Garibaldi. His name was Lt Nino Bixio - pronounced Biglio in his native Genoese dialect - and it is said that he would enter battle encouraging his men to follow him and "fight like Biglio". I prefer the "Puffing Billy" version.
There is a third, unlikely origin, based on the Puritan 17th century divine Joseph Billio. He allegedly exhorted his followers to great acts of zeal. However, the expression didn't enter the language until long after his death and it seems improbable that he was the cause.

Billy: Silly Billy. This is what people are called if they are thought to be a bit stupid about a particular matter - 'don't be a silly Billy'. This comes from a nickname given to King William IV (b1765: 1830-37). There is also an element of rhyming in the words.

Bird: To get the bird. Another one of undiscovered cause but at which I can guess. The saying brings up a picture of a music hall act being jeered and whistled off the stage. The whistling could well be compared to the chirping and tweeting of birds, hence the comparison.

A little bird told me. This "little bird" implies a secret or private source of knowledge. Most authorities believe in a Biblical origin, found in Ecclesiastes 10:20 which includes "for a bird of the air shall carry the voice, and that which hath wings shall tell the matter". There is an alternative explanation involving King Solomon. All the birds of the air were summoned to him but the Lapwing did not appear. Later the Lapwing explained that he had been with the Queen of Sheba and that she had indicated that she intended to visit Solomon. The King began to make preparations for the visit; in the meanwhile the Lapwing flew to the Queen and told her that the King had a great desire to see her. As history records, such a meeting did take place, but the role of the

Lapwing is less clear.
The Arabic version of this story is apparently a little different. A rare bird, the Hoopoe, was missing. Another bird was sent to find it and bring it back to Solomon. On return, the Hoopoe said that it had been with the Queen of Sheba and that she was planning to visit. Same theme, but only one journey.

Biscuit: To take the biscuit; see "cake".

Bitter: To the bitter end. Again a nautical origin, having nothing to do with a bitter taste. On a sailing ship the last piece of a hauling or anchor rope was made fast to the bits, or cleats near deck level. When the rope was nearing its end it had a coloured rag on it to indicate that it was coming to a finish and could be let out no further. When the final part was reached it had come to the "bitter end".

Black sheep: The black sheep of the family; This description is applied to someone who doesn't conform to their family's ideals, a bit of a rogue out of step with the rest. The expression goes back at least as far as a 1550 ballad where it states that "the blacke shepe is a perylous beast". Shepherds of those times thought that a black sheep disturbed the rest of the flock. Furthermore black wool cannot be dyed to different colours and is therefore less valuable than white wool.

Black: To black ball someone, implies that a person is not acceptable, usually as a member of a group or club. The expression indeed goes back to the days of 18th century clubs. New applications for membership were examined by the ruling committee; secret votes were then cast by putting balls into a container. Red balls meant acceptance and black ones rejection. It only needed one black ball for the application to fail.

To be in someone's black book or to be on a blacklist; these expressions both meaning to mark someone as out of favour, have the same basic origins. Black books were common in medieval times and seem at first to have been records of laws and customs of the times. In Henry VIII's time the books were considered as records of supposed corruption by the monasteries and were used as a basis for their dissolution. At about the

same time merchants began to keep records of bad debts and black books were created of persons who had gone bankrupt. Later still Oxford and Cambridge Universities as well as Army Regiments kept black books and lists of persons guilty of misconduct; such persons could not then advance in their careers. This is the definition given in the 1811 dictionary but, today, although the expressions are in common usage, the most common use is that found in the Trade Union movement where "to black" has replaced the full phrases.

To be a black leg is used to describe someone who is considered to be out of step with opinions held by his peer group; a workman who continues to work when others are on strike. This is another where I haven't found an origin, but the 1811 dictionary says: "a gambler or sharper on the turf or in the cock-pit: so called, perhaps, from their appearing generally in boots; or else from game-cocks whose legs are always black". These all describe people who are a bit different from most others, hence a possible analogy.

A blackguard (= blaggard) on the other hand is a rogue or scoundrel. The only origin I found was, again, in the 1811 dictionary; it says: "A shabby, mean fellow; a term said to be derived from a number of dirty, tattered roguish boys who attended at the Horse Guards and Parade in St James' Park, to black the boots and shoes of the soldiers, or to do any other dirty offices. These, from their constant attendance at about the time of guard mounting, were nick-named black-guards.
However, on Michael Quinlon's World Wide Words web site there's more background to the saying.
"The earliest recorded use, by a few years, was in 1535. Then it referred to low menials in a royal or noble household. They were the ones who looked after the pots and pans and other kitchen utensils: the scullions or kitchen-knaves. Nobody knows for sure why they were said to be black - perhaps the colour of the pots literally or figuratively rubbed off on them. A slightly later sense is of the rabble that followed an army about: the servants, camp-followers and general hangers-on (here "black" presumably has its common derogatory sense). There seems to be a third sense, which refers to a guard of attendants or soldiers who were dressed in black; it's possible that there really was a Black Guard - so called - at

Westminster about this time (there are account records that refer to them, but nobody has any idea who they actually were)."

Black over Bill's/Will's mother. Eric Partridge, in "A Dictionary of Catch Phrases American and British," uses the variant ". . . Bill's mother." Partridge goes on ..."Applied to dark clouds looming--in no matter what quarters of the sky. The phrase is very common, later C20, in the East Midlands, but is by no means limited to that region, for I have heard it also from a Scotsman in Sussex, where also I heard the variant 'it's a bit brighter over . . .'"
The matter has been debated on the Phrase Finder message board (http://www.phrases.org.uk/); no one knows who Will/Bill was, who his mother was or where they lived! Until the early 2000s I had never heard of the phrase but now it seems to come up regularly, with Bill more common.

Blank: Point-blank, means close to or direct, such as "he was shot at point-blank range". The origin here is close to its present day use and comes from gunnery. Point-blank is when the line of sight of a cannon is parallel to its axis. Shot then flies direct to the target without a curve. Naturally such a target must be nearby. Point blanc is also French for the centre of a bullseye target and this may have had an influence in the phrase.

Blanket: To be a wet blanket, means to be less than enthusiastic about a project or an idea. I can't find a recorded origin of this one but it seems highly likely that it comes directly from fire fighting use where a wet blanket is an excellent means of quelling the start of a fire. I'm sure that "to put the dampers on something" has the same origin, but an alternative is given later. Political "Wets" are modern variants.

Block: Chock-a-block, indicates that something or somewhere is grossly over full. This is another of naval origin. It was used when two blocks of tackle were so hard together that they couldn't be tightened further. The modern colloquial "this room is chockers" and similar phrases are derived from this old saying.

Board: Above board; i.e. honest and legal. I have found two possible reasons for this saying - either: 1) keeping one's hands above the gambling table and thus being unlikely to cheat or, 2) the stowing of goods on a ship all properly above the boards, i.e. the deck and sides so that the Customs officers could easily check for contraband. I prefer number 2.

To go by the board means that circumstances are dire and that a situation is desperate. The board here is one on the side of a ship. If you fall overboard then the situation is indeed desperate and any means of rescue is welcome; finesse and proper behaviour are not relevant.

Bob: "Bob's your uncle" applied as a final clause to some proposition or other implies that all is fine and problem free - everything has been fixed. The origin here is not absolutely certain but I think the following is highly likely. It goes back to the 1890s and follows the appointment of Arthur Balfour as Secretary State for Ireland. The man who gave him the job was the then Prime Minister, Robert Cecil (Lord Salisbury), who also happened to be his uncle. If Bob was your uncle, then you got the job.

Bone up: To bone up something means to especially read about a subject, usually for exam purposes. The phrase is used mainly by students and goes back to one of the prime sources of pre examination last minute study - texts of literal versions of classic books produced by the firm of Bohn. Students had simply to "Bohn up".

Bonfire: This is not a phrase but a word. As such it really has no place in a book of phrases and sayings, but its origin I found sufficiently unusual as to warrant inclusion. The word goes back a lot further than Guy Fawkes and is derived from the ancient custom of lighting three fires to honour St John. These were lit on a special day in the year and the first fire was made of animal and human bones (from charnel houses) and was known as a bone-fire, the second of wood was known as a wood-fire; the third was of wood and bones and was called St John's fire. Our word comes from the "bone fire".

Book: To bring to book or to call someone to account. There is no one single book meant by this saying, rather any book (or other source of information) which can be consulted in order to verify a statement or claim made by a person or group of persons.

Boot: "I'll give you that, to boot", "boot" meaning "as well" in this instance. The saying has nothing to do with footwear, but rather Anglo Saxon English where the word "Bot" meant "advantage" or "profit". "To boot" survives in modern English only in this single phrase, other uses having died out in the 19th century.

The boot's on the other foot implies that there has been a reversal of circumstances in a situation. In this instance the "boot" is indeed an item of footwear. In the 18th century there was a major change in the method of making footwear; for the first time right and left sides could be made. Before that they were the same for both feet and if a boot was uncomfortable on one foot, it could be tried on the other, often with success. A total change came about when the boot was on the other foot.

Bootleg: He has some bootleg liquor is a way of saying that the liquor is illegal, has paid no tax. Why 'bootleg'? It was at first a literal term. In the days when horsemen wore long boots, their bootlegs were good places to hide things. The expression is first recorded in the US (Nebraska) in 1889. By extension it came to mean any hidden goods, especially alcohol. 'Bootlegger' came into use shortly after 'bootleg'.

Bottle: He's lost his bottle indicates that the "he" has lost his nerve, but where the saying comes from is far from clear. It was apparently unknown in the 18th and early 19th centuries. It may have arisen from the prize fighting world since one of the seconds in bare knuckle days was known as the "bottle man". He carried the water bottle and the water revived many a prize fighter. Without the water and the "bottle man" the fight would have ended, with associated allegations of cowardice.
An alternative explanation brings the origin well into the 20th century. It may be that rhyming slang is the basis. "Bottle and glass" could mean "class" or "arse". In either instance the implication is clear.

Boycott: To stage a boycott; i.e. to actively cease to support a person or a cause, and to encourage others to join in. There's no doubt about where this one comes from; it is directly derived from one Capt. Boycott a landlord's agent in County Mayo, Ireland. After a series of bad harvests the tenants were very poor. In spite of this Capped Boycott refused to reduce the rents. He even ordered anybody in arrears to be evicted. His servants walked out and people refused to work for him. This attitude soon spread to the whole local community and he was regarded as "the leper of old". In the end he fled back to England.

Brand: Brand new; this comes from the word "Brand", German for "fire" - i.e. something fresh from the forge fire and thus absolutely new.

Brass: If someone's as bold as brass then are full of self assurance even to the point of over confidence and arrogance. The saying surely has the same basis as to brazen out something. The word "brass" has many different meanings, such as a section of an orchestra, high ranking officers or as money; however I can find no reason why it is regarded as bold. The background here had defeated me, I'm afraid, but Judith Kay of Brighouse, West Yorkshire wrote in March 2002 that she thought she may have discovered an origin in 'Lock, Stock and Barrel' published by Past Times, the Oxford-based mail order company. The reference is to a London Magistrate, Brass Crosby. In the 1770s, it was against the law for the proceedings of Parliament to be published, but a London printer did just that and was brought before Brass Crosby. He let the printer off, but was then arrested for treason. There was a public outcry at this, and Brass was duly released; his bold stance against authority led to the term being 'as bold as Brass'.
In March 2004 Ian Harling offered the following: "Is there another possible origin of 'Bold as Brass'. Brass is, of course, slang for prostitute, so could the saying have originally read, 'Bold AS a brass?'".
I leave the choice up to the reader.

He has a brass neck implies that he's full of cheek; cock sure of himself. The use of "brass" in this case has again beaten me. However, in June 2003, I had the following possiblity sent to me by David McCallum:
"Whilst looking on your site, I came across the phrase 'brass neck' (a

favourite saying of my mother), but you said that the origin still eludes you. I hope I may be able to help in that regard, although this is only a theory of mine rather than gospel.
I remember as a child hearing a story about a highwayman who was 'strung up' - hoisted by the neck, rather than being dropped through a scaffold, the difference being that one would choke rather than die by broken neck. Anyway, this particular highwayman, before being strung up, managed to swallow a brass tube with a bit of wire on top. This lodged in his windpipe, and when he was strung up, his windpipe didn't get crushed and he was still able to breathe. All he had to do was wait for the crowd to disperse, and his accomplice cut him down and removed the tube. This would certainly fit in with the idea of someone having a 'brass neck' and being very sure of themselves"

Brass monkey: see Monkey

Break: To give someone a break meaning, now-a-days, to give someone a chance. This goes back to the fact that a "break" was an interruption in a street performer's act used to collect money from the crowd. The term was taken up by the underworld where it came to mean the money collected for a felon on release from prison - he was given a break. There is possibly a somewhat different origin for the apparently related saying "I've had a lucky break; in this instance it is likely that billiards or snooker is the basis.

Breath: If someone has bated breath they are holding their breath with suspense or fear. This use of bated is about the only example left in the English language; abate is much more common. Both words come from the Old French "abatre", to "beat down" or "fell". See Bat.

Brick: "You're a real brick" describes someone who is solid, supportive, reliable. The analogy here is used because a brick has these properties. The origin is said to go back to the King Lycurgus of Sparta, who was questioned about the absence of defensive walls around his city. 'There are Sparta's walls,' he replied, pointing at his soldiers, 'and every man is a brick.'

Bristol: Ship-shape and Bristol fashion means that everything is neat and tidy. This saying comes from two aspects of the old Bristol docks in the days before the Floating Harbour was established in the 1830s. Bristol had, and still has, one of the largest differences of water level between ebb and flood in the World, something like 10 metres. At low tide ships in the harbour, if not really properly constructed and laden, would either break their backs or their cargoes would shift. Because of this, Bristol ships were always first class in these respects, hence the saying. The Floating Harbour was constructed by Brunel in order to overcome the tide problem.

Brown: In a brown study, means to be in a mood of apparent concentration, often with melancholic overtones. This saying comes directly from the French phrase "Sombre rêverie". Sombre and brun (=English brown) both mean Sad, gloomy, dull. The expression is recorded in the 1811 dictionary.

Browned off, meaning "fed up", is a now somewhat dated expression, common in the second World War. Its origin is uncertain, but it seems probable that it is related to "brown study", since both imply a sense of sadness.
However an alternative offering goes back to London slang where a "brown" was a penny. To be browned off in this sense meant to be given a penny to go away and not be a nuisance.

Brush: To get the brush off means to be given a sharp rebuff. I can find no recorded suggestion for this one, but the actual act of brushing off some dust or hair from an article may be the simple basis. However this type of "brush off" is frequently more gentle than the act implied in the saying.

If someone is said to be tarred with the same brush then they are regarded as someone who shares the sins or faults of another. The reference is probably to the tarring of sheep. Owners of a flock of sheep, which can't be branded, used to mark their wool all in the same place with a brush dipped in tar to distinguish them from sheep of another flock. An alternative suggestion is that the phrase in some way relates to the 'tarring & feathering' punishment of the past. How, eludes me.

Buck: To pass the buck implies the passing of a responsibility on to someone. The original responsibility was that of dealing at poker. In order to remind a player that it was his turn to deal, a marker was placed in front of him. This marker was called a "buck" and is generally reckoned to have been a knife, but why "buck"? Some say that it was because the handle was made of buck horn. Others reckon that the marker was a silver dollar. Dollars have long been called bucks and this comes from the early 1800s practice of classifying skins as "bucks" or "does". Skins from bucks were generally larger and thus more valuable.

The very English, and now nearly obsolete expression " don't give me any of that old buck" has a very different origin. "Buck" here comes from the Hindi Bukh describing what British soldiers styled a "swagger walk".

To buck up your ideas seems of unrelated origin to any of the above. Maybe it's based on a bucking horse.

Bucket: To kick the bucket; when this occurs, then someone has died. The origin goes back to the time when meat came to the market, not in a refrigerated van, but on the hoof. The animals were killed in the market square and hung by their feet from a frame so that the blood could drain. The frame was called a "bucket beam", and, I guess, some of the animals were still having their dying agonies; some would bang against the frame, hence the expression.

A bucket shop is a term used to describe a shop where cheap tickets, usually airline ones, can be purchased. Before that it described an illegal brokerage house that often cheated its customers. The original Bucket shops were unsavoury bars where patrons could buy beer in buckets. In 1882 the Chicago Board of Trade prohibited grain transactions of less than 5000 bushels. Illegitimate trading houses continued to deal in smaller lots; larger houses, if they illegally wished to sell small amounts of grain, sent down to the illegal traders for a bucketful.

Bugbear: It's a bugbear is used to describe a burden or problem, often one producing fear or anxiety. In olden times a goblin was also known as a bug and the saying probably comes from the English folklore goblin (bug) who was said to be in the shape of a bear and who ate children.

Bull: A cock and bull story is a story full of probable make-believe and unlikely to be true. The origin here is likely to be nothing more spectacular than the fables and tales of old where animals were supposed to speak.
However, as is often the case, there is another possibility. This one goes back to the days of stage coaches. In Stony Stratford there were two coaching inns, the Cock and the Bull. London coaches changed horses at the Cock and the Birmingham coaches at the Bull. Both sets of passengers exchanged jokes and news, some of it doubtful. This banter gave rise to the saying.

Bullet: If someone is told to chew or bite on the bullet then they are advised to accept their punishment. The Bullet in this instance was a real one. It was a point of honour in some regiments that soldiers never cried out when under the discipline of the cat o'nine tails. In order to remain quiet, they literally chewed a bullet. If they did sing out, then they were termed a "nightingale". An alternative explanation comes from the time of the Indian Mutiny. Cartridges at that time came in two parts, the missile part inserted into the base and held there with grease. This grease was either pork or cow fat. In order to prime the bullet the two parts had to be bitten apart and the base filled with powder before re-inserting the missile. Pigs are untouchable to Hindus and cows are holy animals, not to be desecrated. In consequence the Hindu soldiers fighting for the British were damned when they bit the bullet, whatever the fat used.

Bully: "Bully for you" is a term indicating praise. At first sight it seems an odd use of "bully" until one realises that the word had a 16th century meaning of fine fellow, sweetheart which probably came from the middle Dutch Boele = Lover.

Bunkum: If something is a load of old bunkum then it's regarded as rubbish, unreliable or even frankly untruthful. The expression comes from the US congress where, in about 1820 Representative Felix Walker, when asked why he had made such a vociferous, angry and flowery speech, replied "I wasn't speaking to the House, but to Buncombe!" which was his constituency in North Carolina. To debunk something has the same basis.

Burton: To go for a Burton implies that someone has been killed or completely ruined. World War Two pilots used this expression when colleagues did not return from missions; it seemed less permanent than saying that their fellow pilots had died. It is supposed to refer to Burton Ale, a strong beer brewed at the time, with the implication that their friends had only popped out for a drink. It may be that it refers to when they crashed into the sea, or went down in the drink (a more obvious slang term) linking it to Burton's fine ales!
However the phrase is recorded in the 15th century as a euphemism for "to die". Furthermore, it could be that it is one of several expressions which transferred from the Royal Naval Air Service (RNAS) when it was merged into the RAF in 1918. If so, there are two possible derivations. The first refers to a 'Spanish Burton' which was an ingenious but complicated pulley arrangement made up of three blocks. Indeed, so complicated was the Spanish Burton, and so rarely used, that hardly anyone could remember how to do it. Thus it became the standard answer to anyone in authority enquiring the whereabouts of a missing member of a working party: 'he's gone for a burton'. The other explanation comes from the term 'a-burton' an unusual method of stowing wooden casks or barrels sideways across the ship's hold. The advantage of this was that they took up less space and were individually more accessible than when stowed in the fore-and-aft line. The disadvantage, however, and the reason why it was rarely employed, was that the entire stowage could easily collapse. Hence the implication of knocking a man over. (Source of RNAS derivations: 'Salty Dog Talk: The Nautical Origins of Everyday Expressions' by Bill Beavis and Richard G. McCloskey (Sheridan House; originally published in London in 1983)).

Bush: To beat about the bush indicates that someone gets to the point in a round about way. This saying is several hundred years old and comes from hunting. The beaters beat for the hunters, often around bushes; however they never catch the prey, always the hunters, who go directly to the quarry.

Butt: The butt of a joke is the person who comes out ridiculed when a story is told, i.e. the target of the joke, thereby using the word in the same sense as rifle or archery Butts.

By: By and by; i.e. in due course or at the appropriate moment. Here's another very old expression, going back at least to the time of Chaucer. Originally Bi and bi meant "in order; neatly spaced" and was known to refer to Time as well as Objects. Thus something occurring at an appropriate interval after something else could be regarded as having a neat and tidy relationship to it.

By and Large indicating "on the whole"; "generally speaking" is another nautical saying. It comes from sailing days when all was dependent on the wind. By means "close hauled, to within six points of the wind with the wind before the beam": Large means "with the wind on the quarter, abaft the beam". Many ships sailed best when they had the wind both "by and large", a little of each, the average of them "on the whole".

Cake: When someone takes the cake they are regarded as having come first in some, often trivial, activity or other. Most authorities consider that this saying goes back to the days of slavery in the USA. The slaves used to hold competitions to see which couple could produce the most elegant walk. The best promenaders won a prize, almost always a cake. The extravagant walk required for this type of competition came to be called a Cakewalk and this gave rise to the old fashioned expression "it's

a cakewalk". However the meaning later came to emphasise the trivial nature of the competition and began to imply that the effort needed was minor and of little account. In consequence the modern saying "it's a piece of cake" could well be based on these old customs.
There is a much older possible origin, going back to the ancient Greeks. A "cake" in those times was a toasted cereal bound together with honey. It was given to the most vigilant man on night watch. Aristotle is quoted as having written in "The Knights": "if you surpass him in impudence, then we take the cake".

Can: To carry the can means to take the blame for something in which others have also taken part and are largely responsible. The origin here is not clear, but probably goes back to the days of servitude when menial tasks had to be performed for the benefit of others, such as the scullery maid working for the head cook.

Candle: He's not fit to hold a candle to him. This implies that 'he' is inferior; from the times when boys held candles in theatres and other places of work to illuminate either their masters themselves, or their master's work.

The game is not worth the candle. The effort is not worth making; not worth even the cost of the candle that lights the players. French: Le jeu n'en vaut pas la chandelle.

To sell by the candle. A form of sale by auction. A pin is thrust through a candle about an inch from the top, and bidding goes on till the candle is burnt down to the pin; when the pin drops into the candlestick the last bidder is declared the purchaser.

To hold a candle to the Devil. To aid or countenance that which is wrong. The allusion is to the Roman Catholic practice of burning candles before the images of saints.

Cap: A feather in your cap is an honour or praise for good effort. The original "effort", however, was one associated with killing an enemy. An American Indian Brave was allowed to place an extra feather in his head-dress for every new killing he made when on the warpath.

Carpet: To carpet someone summons up a picture of a boss reprimanding an underling for a misdemeanour. This goes back to the days of the Victorian Civil Service when attainment of a certain status carried with it the right to a piece of carpet in the office.

To give someone the red carpet indicates that they are regarded as important. A suggested origin was posted on the SHU Phrases Forum. "Sometimes carpets provided the actual architecture; for example, when they were used in the construction of portable tent compounds for military campaigns or royal visits. The layout of the Mughal palace was re-created in these tent compounds. Rows of qanats, free-standing textile screens, replaced red sandstone walls, and flower-covered carpets reproduced the gardens of the inner courtyards. The red color served to identify the emperor's tent, and luxurious textiles not only provided the comforts of home but also symbolically reminded envoys and visitors of the power and the wealth of their rulers."
Jahangir, Mughal emperor from 1605 to 1627, once paid a visit to his brother-in-law on New Year's Day. To celebrate the event, his brother-in-law carpeted the road between his house and the palace with gold brocades and rich velvets, so that the royal entourage would not have to touch the ground. Today we say "Roll out the red carpet" or "the red-carpet treatment" to indicate the conferring of honor and prestige."

Cart: "If you do that, you'll be in the cart". This saying implies that there will be retribution if a certain deed is carried out. I can't find a documented origin for this one, but I suspect that it goes back to the days when criminals were publicly punished. Some were hung, many others were placed in the stocks or the pillory. I guess most were transported to their place of punishment in a cart.

To upset the apple cart would appear to have an obvious origin. One can imagine a busy market scene when, suddenly, some youths run by and hit one of the stalls and, in their rush, over goes the apple cart. Although this is likely to be the basis of the saying, in the early to late 1800s "apple cart" was wrestlers' slang for the body and "down with his apple cart" was to throw a man down.
Incidentally, the Romans had a similar expression "Perii, plaustrum

perculi" - "I am undone, I have upset my cart" and so the whole saying may be very old indeed.

Cat: If there's not enough room to swing a cat then space is very tight; the room is very tiny. The cat in this instance is said not to be of the Pussy variety but, rather, o'nine tails type. The nine thronged whip was used as punishment at sea. Because space was at a premium below decks there was not enough room to wield the whip; in consequence the whipping always took place on deck.
Evidence against the above origin comes from the fact that the expression was in use in the 1500s and the cat o'nine tails was not invented until the mid 1600s. Thus it may be that the saying truly involves felines, since there used to be a "sport" of swinging cats as targets for archers. This was either by their tails, in a sack, or in a leather bottle. Shakespeare, in "Much Ado About Nothing" (I,i) uses the phrase "hang me in a bottle like a cat".

To let the cat out of the bag is said to occur if a secret is revealed. This type of cat is truly furry, unlike that just described. In medieval times piglets were often taken to market in a sack where they were sold. If the purchaser was particularly gullible he was sometimes sold not a piglet, but a cat in the sack. Cats are versatile animals and sometimes managed to escape - the cat was truly out of the bag. In similar manner it was possible to be sold a pup. Incidentally, the sack or bag was correctly termed a poke, hence a pig in a poke. To be sold a pig in a poke was clearly the object of the exercise and why it has come to imply a swindle I can't understand. However, there are other sayings and words which have reversed their meanings over the years. Why this should be so is not understood but this drift of meaning is known as catachresis. A good example of drift is found in the word Brave. In the past it implied cowardice as, indeed, Bravado still does. Incidentally, the diminutive of poke lives on today in modern English in the form of Pocket.

Catch: Catch 22; Most people are familiar with this modern saying and recognise it as implying a "no win situation", one where, whatever happens, there will almost certainly be a bad outcome. Many people will also know that Catch 22 was the title of the 1955 novel by Joseph Heller set on a USAAF WW2 base (in those days it was an Army Air Force).

The aircrew are on the edge of breakdown; they must be mad to go on another mission but the fact that they realise that they must be mad means that they must be sane at the same time. They have to continue flying. Truly a "no win situation".
The above is as far as any reference book that I have found has ever gone, but why did Heller call his book Catch 22? I found what I think is the answer in, of all places, a review of a TV programme in a daily paper. The programme was about the daylight missions flown by the USAAF over Germany. Many of the aircraft were shot down; others were damaged but managed to get back to England. A very few were so damaged that, although they could still fly, they couldn't make it back to base. Such aircraft were allowed by US military law to divert to neutral countries like Sweden and Switzerland. Once there, the crews were interned but they were out of the war. This near-death scenario of gross but not fatal damage was covered by USAAF general directive number 22. Hence, if you could fall into, or catch, the tiny area of severe but not disastrous damage, all would be well. However the likelihood was that you wouldn't and you'd be either shot down and possibly killed, or back in the war. I think that this is a splendid explanation, somewhat marred by the suggestion that Heller is said to have originally planned to call his book "Catch 18"; he changed to "Catch 22" because Leon Uris's novel "Mila 18" came out just before Heller's book was published.

Chalk: I beat him by a long chalk signifies a good win over an opponent and comes from the days before lead pencils were common. In schools, merit marks were made with chalk; the longer the mark, the more meritorious the receiver.

Changes: To ring the changes implies swopping things around, such as frequently rearranging the furniture in a room. The "changes" here come from bell ringing where it is possible to make many, many variations in the order in which the bells are rung. Such variations are the changes. In a 12 bell tower, to ring all possible changes would take nearly 40 years.

Cheap: If something is described as cheap at half the price, then it's reckoned to be very cheap indeed. At first sight this seems a contradiction in terms - surely "cheap at twice the price" would be a

better description? However, the phrase is a play on the meaning of "cheap"; in this instance it's not related to price, but rather to quality. Thus something that is of very poor quality could still be thought of as "cheap", even if it were "half the price". It is said that the saying first came into usage in the mid 19th century, when impecunious members of the aristocracy were forced to borrow money from high interest charging money lenders, the lenders themselves being regarded as "cheap" individuals for so demeaning themselves by lending money at such high rates of interest that they would still be regarded as "cheap" even if they charged half the rate.

Cheerio: Although this is a word and not a saying I again include it because I like its derivation. The word is a corruption of "Chair-ho" used when a parting guest called for a sedan chair.

Cheese: Cheesed off; this is similar to Browned off and is one of many variations such as Brassed off: Pissed off. There is no apparent reason for using "cheese" other than, perhaps, cheese can be seen to change when it is going mouldy.

Chestnut: That's an old chestnut means, usually, that a joke is old and well known. The origin here goes back to a near forgotten melodrama by William Diamond. The play, first produced in 1816, has one of the characters forever repeating the same joke, albeit with minor changes. The joke concerns a cork tree. On one occasion another character, Pablo, fed up with the same joke says; "A Chestnut. I have heard you tell the joke 27 times and I'm sure it was a Chestnut!" The quotation was used in real life by the American actor William Warren who, at the time, was playing the part of Pablo. He was at a dinner party when one of the guests started off on a well worn joke. Warren interrupted with the quotation, much to the amusement of the other guests. As a result the expression entered into the wider language.

Chew: To chew the fat/rag is to indulge in gossip with friends, family, work mates etc. Originally there was apparently an element of complaint in these exchanges. It is thought that the expressions are nautical in origin. Sailors had to chew on salt pork when supplies were low,

complaining about the poor food as they did. The 'rag' variant is supposed to be based on chewing pieces of rag when the chewing tobacco had run out.

Chip: A chip on his shoulder; this saying implies that someone is sulky, aggressive and moody. He thinks he has a grievance about something although this grievance is probably unwarranted. The expression is based on a mainly American schoolboy custom, about 200 years old. When two boys were arguing and itching for a fight then one would place an actual chip of wood on his shoulder and challenge the other to knock it off. If the challenge was taken up, then the proper fight started.

Chips: You've had your chips means that someone's luck has run out and that they are close to failure. The chips here are almost certainly gaming chips or tokens. Someone who loses their chips could well be ruined. Although I think the above explanation is the probable origin of the saying there is another, completely different one recorded. In this case the chips are actual pieces of wood. The story goes that, in the old naval dockyards, the off cuts of pieces of timber, in other words the chips, were regarded as legitimate perks for the workers. They took them home and used them; some say that even the woodwork of whole houses was so built. This privilege could be revoked by the foreman or boss, in which case the individual had had his chips.

Chock-a-Block: See Block

Choke: To choke someone off; today this means to discourage someone or to dampen their enthusiasm for a proposal. The original discouragement was to a fighting dog. It was gripped by the throat and choked in order to make it release its hold on its adversary.

Chop: To chop and change, meaning to constantly alter things. Change is understandable but Chop? I can find no modern origin, but in 1811 the expression was in use and chop was slang for "making dispatch, or hurrying over any business", hence our modern saying "Chop, chop" when urging someone to hurry.

Clap: To clap ones eyes on. This is another for which I can't find an explanation.

Clapped: Clapped out. If someone is clapped out they are exhausted. Hares are the origin here. When pursued by hounds or other adversaries they will stop from time to time to catch their breath. They routinely sit up on their haunches and look around; their respiratory movements are so strong that their chests heave in and out and their front legs move in time with the breathing. To the observer they appear to be clapping and, in the world of hare hunting, this is exactly what it's called.

Clink: To be put in clink means to be sent to prison. The "clink" here is not the rattle of chains but, rather, the name of a specific London prison which, in turn, took its name from the Borough in which it was sited. This was The Liberty of Clink, a district of Southwark exempt from the jurisdiction of the City of London.

Cloud nine: The expression ‘up on cloud nine’ to describe a feeling of euphoric exaltation is based on actual terminology used by the U.S. Weather Bureau. Clouds are divided into classes and each class is divided into nine types. ‘Cloud nine’ is the cumulo-nimbus cloud that you often see building up in the sky in a hot summer afternoon. It may reach 30,000 to 40,000 feet, so if one is up on ‘cloud nine,’ one is high indeed.

Coals: to haul someone over the coals is to severely reprimand them. This derives from the testing of suspected heretics in the Middle Ages. They were literally hauled over a bed of burning coals. If they survived they were considered innocent, and guilty if they did not.

Cobblers: What a load of cobblers; implies that something is rubbish or nonsense. The origin is in rhyming slang for "cobbler's awl". An awl is a pointed tool for making holes in things; it is an essential part of a shoemaker's (cobbler's) kit. The rhyming linked "cobbler"s awls" with "balls", ie slang for testicles. "Cobblers" then came to be used in the same way as "balls". "A load of old cobblers" is an extension of the saying.

Cockles: To warm the cockles of your heart implies a feeling of pleasure and affection. The cockles here are said to come from the belief that 17th century anatomists likened the shape of the ventricles of the heart to that of the marine mollusc of the same name and, of course, the heart has always been regarded as the seat of love and affection.

Cock up: To cock up something indicates that there has been a bungle or mess up but not a disaster in a project. The source here is obscure. The saying has sexual overtones but would hardly be used in the way that it is if this were so. It is said that "cock up" is an innocent expression meaning "error" used by printers and others, including poachers. This latter group could well be the true origin since it is claimed that, if you startle a pheasant that you're stalking, then it will squawk and the noise sounds like "cock up".
A second possibility suggests an origin based on "cocking" a flintlock pistol. If not cocked up there was likely to be a disaster when the trigger was pulled. To be cock sure comes from this source but otherwise I'm not impressed.
A third suggestion comes from archery. The arrows of traditional English long bows had three feathers. One of these, named the "cock" feather, had to be positioned away from the line of the bow string, otherwise it would hit the string and affect the flight of the arrow to produce a "cock up".
In December 2002 Terry Instone offered the following: ".....May I contribute a fourth possibility for cock-up (which I heard many years ago)? When a fermented barrel of wine is ready to be run-off for bottling, a stop-cock is driven into the barrel and a sample is tasted to check for quality. If the wine has turned sour, the cock is twisted upside down showing that the barrel is not to be used - hence.... "
In October 2003 Nick Baker wrote from Sweden: "..... Cock-Up... I agree with half of one of your explanations, but my grandad used to tell of a reason that makes more sense to me... in the ranks of soldiers practicing manoeuvres with their flint-lock (or percussion-cap) rifles, it was not unusual to hear a rifle discharge when it shouldn't have done. Some rifles lacked the trigger guard that is now mandatory, and trigger mechanisms in general were not to be trusted.

Subsequently, when the rifles where slammed and jerked from position to position, any recruit who had eagerly cocked their rifle in error, would be likely to inadvertently fire the rifle. The remark would be "well, that was a cock up"... the mistake becoming known as a 'cock-up', and giving name to many other accidental happenings.
Incidentally... as someone who used to compete with fire-arms (I've also competed with flint-locks in Sweden), allow me to add... If the weapon is not cocked and you pull the trigger, there is no disaster at all...(as suggested in the text)... you merely pull the trigger, and nothing happens... (this counts for ALL weapons modern or old that have the ability to be 'cocked')

Cock: see Bull:

Cock: To be cock-a-hoop is to be full of jubilation and delight, as a cock crowing proudly and the analogy with a crowing cock could well be the origin. However, there's another likely basis, one which I prefer. During medieval drinking bouts the spigot or cock was often removed from the barrel and placed on the hoop at the top. The beer flowed freely and the drinkers were full of merriment and delight. The 1811 dictionary, however, spells it Cock-a-whoop, thereby raising an altogether different possibility.

Codswallop: What a load of codswallop means that something is a load of rubbish. This one also has a drinking background. Wallop is a still current expression for beer; it was certainly in use in the 19th century. In 1872 a certain Victorian businessman called Codd went into the manufacture of lemonade. It was sold in green glass bottles sealed with glass marble stoppers and was jokingly called Codd's wallop. Its poor quality, when compared to beer, although not perhaps with other lemonades, gave rise to the derogatory implications of the phrase.

Coil: Shuffle off this mortal coil; i.e. to die. Why "coil" I have not been able to find out. My references state "Archaic for disturbance; confusion; fuss." The actual saying comes from Shakespeare's "Hamlet".

Cold: To have cold feet is to have doubts; to be afraid of a course of action and is, again, of uncertain origin. The one reference that I found suggested that an old Italian (Lombard) proverb may be the source. The story goes that the expression signifies "to be without means or resources"; if someone is very poor then the chances of affording shoes are remote and the person therefore has cold feet. How this translated into our current usage has never been explained and it may be that the phrase has nothing to do with the proverb.
A second explanation comes from an 1862 novel by Fritz Reuter in which a card player backs out of a game on the grounds that his feet are cold. One can imagine that he was fearful of losing all and his cold feet were as good an excuse as he could think of to help him get out of the game.

Colours: To come through with flying colours is to successfully achieve a difficult objective, such as passing an exam with distinction. The origin here is clearly military, but which service? Lancers charging? A victory parade through a captured town? In reality it is a victorious fleet sailing into harbour with their flags still flying at their mastheads.

Comb: To go something with a fine tooth comb is to do a task with especial care. This probably comes from the use of a fine tooth comb to remove nits and head lice from scalp hair, a common infestation of children in the inter-war years, and back with us in the 21st century!

Cook: To cook the books is to falsify an account of an event, often a financial one. At first sight this may seem a strange combination, but it started its life in the mid 17th century, and thus it has endured. It truly relates to the act of cooking, whereby ingredients are changed, altered and improved by the process. Thus financial statements can also be so modified to the benefit of the 'cook'. Such a change, in a negative way, is also seen in the expression to 'cook someone's goose', thereby depriving the owner of the benefit of the animal, either alive or dead. See Goose.

Copper bottomed: A copper bottomed guarantee indicates that the guarantee in question is "Cast Iron" in quality. One can work out the relationship between quality and cast iron, but why copper bottomed?

This too harks back to the days of sail. Wooden ships are particularly prone to damage from underwater rocks and other obstacles; they are also particularly prone to encrustation from barnacles and other sea creatures. In order to significantly reduce the chance of damage, and encrustation, really well built expensive ships were given a copper bottom. This almost guaranteed that they would suffer only minimal damage or encrusting. The smooth bottom meant that they were faster than their rivals and could be guaranteed to arrive earlier.

Corker: What a corker; this is another where this is another where I found an origin on the Sheffield Hallam University web site, as follows: In "Random House Historical Dictionary of American Slang, Volume 1, A-G" by J. E. Lighter (Random House, New York, 1994), it says: "CORKER n. 1. A hard or finishing blow; (hence) (obs.) that which settles an issue…2.a) a stiff drink of liquor…b) a person or a thing of extraordinary size, effectiveness, quality, etc; a remarkable person or thing…c) an attractive young woman; knock-out. 3. Baseball, a fly ball…"
Thus it seems that "corker," used as a thing of effectiveness or quality, gave rise to the other uses. First recorded in 1891.

Cotton on: To cotton on to someone is to adhere to them, perhaps when not wanted; or to eventually understand an idea or intention, again perhaps when this is unwelcome. The origin here is nothing more than the fact that cotton thread seems to stick to almost anything and can be difficult to dislodge. The saying is recorded in a play as early as 1605. Clearly the saying is a lot older.

Course: In due course; this phrase indicates that something will happen at the appropriate time, but only after other events have occurred and not before. I can't find an origin for this one, but I suspect that it too is naval. The appropriate course can only be set when all necessary preliminaries have been completed and not before.

Coventry: Sent to Coventry; if someone is "sent to Coventry" then they are shunned by their fellow citizens and friends. There are three possible explanations for this phrase. The first comes from the English Civil War.

Birmingham was strongly Parliamentarian; the citizens were aware of a small group of Royalists in their midst. Some of these they killed and others they sent as prisoners to nearby Coventry, also a Parliamentary town. Why they did this is not clear and, by being sent to Coventry, these people were rescued. In truth they had good fortune - their colleagues were killed. Thus, I don't like this explanation.
The second possibility rings a little truer. In this case the citizens of Coventry were in a phase of hating the military, possibly also as a result of the Civil War. Such was this hate that the young women of the town were forbidden to speak to the soldiers garrisoned there. Naturally no soldier welcomed such a posting.
The third possibility is the one that I like best. It is suggested that the name Coventry is derived from Covin-tree, an oak which is supposed to have stood in front of the castle in feudal times. The tree was used as the gallows and those to be executed were sent to the covin-tree.

Cox: To Box and Cox means to chop and change. It comes from the farce by JM Morton (1811-1891) called Box and Cox which he adapted from the French. In this story a deceitful lodging house lady called Mrs Bouncer let a single room to a Mr Box; without telling him she also let the same room to a Mr Cox. Since one worked at night and the other during the day they never met but, I guess, there was a great deal of scheming needed by Mrs Bouncer in order to achieve this.

Creek: To be up the creek means that you are in trouble or in an awkward situation. The expression is a gentrified version of a WW2 saying "Up shit's creek without a paddle" which summons up a mental picture more graphic than the current refined one.

Cropper: To come a cropper implies that there has been a tumble, either actual or metaphorical. The saying is based on horse riding where to fall neck and crop means that the horse has hit the ground with both its neck and its crop; i.e. a potentially serious accident.

Cross: Criss-cross. The use of this expression implies that something is repeatedly crossed, such as " the field is criss-crossed by cart tracks". This meaning is very far from the original one, which truly relates to a

Cross. The spelling can be quite variable but originally it was Chriss-cross or Christ-cross and referred to the alphabet in a Hornbook, which had a cross like a Maltese cross at the beginning and end. The emphasis today is more in the sense of crossing a barrier or hurdle in an undisciplined way, not the neat and orderly manner of a Hornbook. Incidentally, a Hornbook was a thin board about 9"x 5" with a handle. It served as a backing for a sheet of vellum or paper on which was written or printed the alphabet, the Lord's prayer, an exorcism or Roman numerals. The whole was covered by a piece of transparent horn. The handle had a hole so that it could be tied to a schoolchild's belt. Such books were still in use in England in the 18th century.

Crows. Stone the crows. This expression is used to express amazment, wonder, etc. - 'well, stone the crows!'. I found it difficult to find the origin of this very British saying. However, in March 2003 in the Q&A section of the Times, the following was offered.
"For many centuries, young children (and others) were employed as bird scarers, especially of crows. They used whatever means were available to frighten away the birds, hence the expression "stone the crows".
The Norfolk Labour MP, Sir George Edwards, who founded the National Union of Land Workers, even called his autobiography, written in 1922, "From Crow Scaring to Westminster", and there are many references in old country accounts to "crow scaring", "crow keeping", "crow stoning" and "rook starving". The rewards were modest - at the age of six, Edwards was paid a shilling for a seven-day week in Norfolk. In Gloucestershire, things were more varied - the going rate was from 6d a day, although if you were unfortunate enough to live in Winchcombe, all you received was 1d or 2d plus a swede.
Professor Stefan Buczacki, author, Fauna Britannica,
Stratford-upon-Avon"

Cuckoo: To be in Cloud cuckoo land implies that someone is divorced from reality. It comes as a translation of the word Nephelococcygia the name of an imaginary city, built in the sky by birds, and part of a 5th century BC Greek comedy called "The Birds" written by Aristophanes. A further insight into this phrase appeared in the Times Q&A of 14th October 2002, in response to a query about its origin:

The phrase "cloud-cuckoo-land" was coined by Rabelais (1490-1553) and features in his extraordinary mythical chronicles Gargantua and Pantagruel. He also had a significant knowledge of classical literature and he published the Greek text of the Aphorisms of Hippocrates in 1532. Aristophanes' "The Birds", and the word "Nephelococcygia", might have been known to Rabelais, but Rabelais is surely the true originator. Geoffrey Hinton. Oxford

Cuff: To speak off the cuff means to speak spontaneously, without much preparation. Why cuff? This comes from the habit of some after dinner speakers making quick notes on the cuff of their stiff shirts in order to remind themselves of some points or other that they had, perhaps, not considered before. It was all done with virtually no preparation.

Curry: To curry favour is to seek to get into someone's good books; to ingratiate oneself. It has absolutely nothing to do with Indian food. The "curry" in this instance is a horse riding term for grooming or rubbing down an animal. The "favour" is an alteration of the word Favel. Favel was the name of the half horse, half man Centaur in the early 14th century French satirical romance Le Roman de Fauvel. This beast was cunning and evil and it was just as well to keep on the right side of him. To curry him kept him in a good mood.

Cut: To cut and run from something is to rapidly depart a situation. It is another naval expression. In the old days anchor "cables" were made of rope. If a ship was at anchor and suddenly came under attack the crew would not attempt to raise the anchor; rather they would cut the rope and allow the ship to run before the wind.

To cut no ice means to have no influence. The saying comes from the USA and actually means what it says, unlike many in this book. The cutting here is done by ice skates and, if not sharp, will not allow the wearer to slide easily over the ice. Blunt blades make no impression - they cut no ice.

To cut to the quick means to cause deep emotional hurt and has the same origin as the theological Quick and the Dead. Here "quick" comes from the old English Cwicu meaning "living" and thus to "cut to the quick" implies a deep wound into living flesh.

Cut out: 'To have your work cut out for you' means that there's a large amount of work to be done. An odd phrase, and surely very difficult for a non-English speaker to understand and use. The most likely origin is from dressmaking or carpentry, where pattern parts are literally cut out so you see what needs to be assembled. Whatever the pieces are, the mission is clear, and the work to be done is evident; your work has been cut out for you - get on with it!

Dab: To be a 'dab hand' at something means that you have a special skill for that particular task. Why &lsquodab'? As far as I can find out the word, which goes back to the 12C in the sense of a &lsquoheavy blow', took on its current meaning in the 17C; however, even the editors of the Oxford Engl. Dict. admit to not knowing the origin of this sense of &lsquodab': Quote: "It appears before 1700; frequently referred to as school slang: origin unknown. Conjectures have been offered as to its being a corruption of 'adept,' and of 'dapper,' but without any other evidence than appears in the general likeness and use of the words".

Dam: see Tinker

Dampers: When someone puts the dampers on something they express lack of enthusiasm; they hinder its progress and are discouraging. The analogy here is said to be with music, specifically the piano. A damper is a part of a piano which presses on the strings and cuts out their sounds.

The wider use of the saying is clearly related. I personally think that there might be another explanation: see Blanket.

Dander: To get your dander up means that you are excitedly angry; getting into a temper. The phrase has origins in Dutch where op donderen means to burst into a sudden rage. This, in turn, comes from Donder=Thunder.

Deadline: When you work to a deadline there is a point beyond which the task must not last otherwise the effort will be worthless. This is particularly true of newspapers; if not produced on time they are unsaleable and out of date; dead. The original deadline was a far more lethal line; if crossed actual death occurred. It existed around the Andersonville prisoner of war camp in the USA at the time of their Civil War. It was a white line drawn around the camp; if any prisoner crossed the line they were shot dead.

Dekko: To have a dekko implies a quick look or glance at something. There's nothing devious about this phrase; it comes from the Indian army. In Hindustani Dekho means "look".

Devil: Let the devil take the hindmost may well be said when someone doesn't care too much about the outcome of his actions, as long as he comes out well from the affair. The saying comes from late medieval magic. The Devil was supposed to have a school at either Toledo or Salamanca in Spain. The students, at a certain stage of their training, had to run through a subterranean hall. The last one through was seized by the Devil and became his Imp.

The devil to pay: this saying has nothing whatsoever to do with "Old Nick" or handing out money. It is part of a longer saying, the last bit of which has been nearly forgotten. It goes; "The devil to pay, and no pitch hot". In this instance the "devil" is the heavy wooden beam used to support the big guns on sailing ships. It was also known as the Gunwale and was a very difficult place to get at for maintenance with the tar (=pitch) needed to regularly seal (=pay) the gaps in the ship's sides. From this difficulty comes another related saying "between the devil and the deep blue sea", the devil here again being the wooden beam.

"Go to the Devil" is a saying which has more to do with Old Nick. In this instance The Devil was the name of a 17th century London pub near the Temple Bar, often frequented by lawyers. The Inn sign was St Dunstan pulling the Devil's nose and the saying was a deliberate play on the double meaning of the words. Clients arriving at lawyers' offices were regularly told Go to the Devil because that happened to be where the lawyer was at that particular time. However nice this story seems it probably is not true since the expression dates back at least to the 12th century. Pity!

Dicey: A dicey object or project is one of dubious character. The origin, as given on a BBC2 antiques programme in May 1999, is as follows. There was once an unscrupulous 19thC map seller who used old, worn map plates to print new versions of the old maps and pass them off as genuine old originals. His name was Dicey!

Dickens: There will be the dickens to pay is yet another example of a saying not being what it seems at first sight. It has nothing to do with Charles Dickens but comes from a 16th century euphemism for the Devil. It may be an altered pronunciation of "devilkin" and it was certainly in use long before Charles was born. Shakespeare's 1601 play "The Merry Wives of Windsor" contains the words "I cannot tell what the dickens his name is."

Die: The die is cast is a saying that retains about the only common example of the correct singular of Dice. Its implication is one of finality in the course of an event, just as the turn up of dice is set once they are thrown or cast.

Straight as a die is used to describe someone who is honest, reliable, trustworthy. I have found absolutely no derivation for this saying, but it could come from the same basis as &lsquodie cast', used in the sense of metal or plastic casting.

Dog: Dog-days; the days in high summer when it is allegedly too hot even for dogs. Again the true origin is somewhat less obvious. In mid summer the dog-star Sirius rises with the Sun. The Romans believed that the star also gave out heat and was thus partly responsible for the hottest

time of the year, hence Dog-days.

The naval expression dog-watch has a different basis. The dog-watch was the pair of two hour afternoon shifts put into the normal sequence of four hourly stints in order to ensure that the same men did not do the same watch every day. In this way they dodged around or, alternatively, the shifts were docked.

The hair of the dog is part of a longer expression "the hair of the dog that bit you". This goes back to the old belief that the hair of a dog that bites someone could be used as an antidote against the bad effects of the bite. By extension, another drink or two after a drinking binge would be the cure for a hangover.

Top dog. This is said to relate to cutting logs and not to dog fights. Sawing logs was often done in a pit with one man in the pit and the other above, both working the saw. The one above was known as the top dog and the other as the bottom dog. Working on the top was easier than down below. However, I guess that the name was actually taken from dog fights, where the winner came out on top.

To be a dog in a manger means to be a spoilsport; to be unwilling to let others benefit when self benefit is not possible. All of this comes from one of Aesop's fables in which a dog occupies an ox's manger. The manger is full of hay, for which the dog has no use; never-the-less he refuses to let the ox get at its fodder.

When someone says that they are going to see a man about a dog they really mean that they are unwilling to reveal the true nature of their business. The expression comes from the long forgotten 1866 play 'Flying Scud' by a prolific Irish-born playwright of the period named Dion Boucicault. One of the characters uses the words as an excuse to get away from a tricky situation. This character, an eccentric and superannuated old jockey, says: "Excuse me Mr. Quail, I can't stop; I've got to see a man about a dog". This is the only thing that seems to have survived from the play.

Dogs - he's gone to the dogs is an expression which describes someone who has worsened in appearance, character, behaviour, etc. This is an analogy to the scraps of waste food etc that were thrown to dogs from medieval baronial dining tables. They were of no other use. Thus, if

someone is said to have 'gone to the dogs', he is also regarded as worthless.

Dogsbody: If someone is a dogsbody they are regarded as a drudge or menial. This is nautical in origin from a not very popular dish aboard ship which consisted of passengers' leftovers mixed with ships biscuits, reheated and called Dogsbody, ie a meal without much status and then applied to those who once ate it. In this sense the expression came into use in the 1920s, but the term, which is virtually unknown in the US, had been in use from the 19C and referred to a stew, especially peas pudding.

Doolally: To drive someone Doolally means to drive them mad. This is another one that goes back to the days of the British Army in India. After a tour of duty the troops were sent back to Britain for redeployment. Troopships were the means of transport and the troops were sent to the appropriate port to await the arrival of the ship. There they had to wait, often for weeks, in the heat and humidity. They were nearly driven mad by these and boredom. The port was called Deolali which became Anglicised and used as a term of semi-abuse. Incidentally, there was a large "lunatic asylum" in Deolali and its presence may also have played a role in the evolution of the phrase. Intriguingly Deo in Urdu means Devil and Lal means Red and is a very ancient name.

Doornail: As dead as a doornail is an expression used to indicate actual or apparent total lack of life. The saying is many hundreds of years old and is one of many used over the centuries to describe death. It has survived longer than all the others, e.g. dead as mackerel, although "dead as mutton" is still in use. Medieval doors were studded with heavy nails-Doornails, one of which was used as a knocker. This nail was clearly very unresponsive and dead to the constant assault, hence the saying.

Dot: When something is on the dot it is precise and accurate. The basis of this one is not absolutely certain but probably comes from the comparison with the minute hand of a clock being exactly over the dot on the dial when it's precisely on the minute.

Double: To do something at the double is indicative of urgency and speed. It's another with a nautical origin; in this instance double was the old name for the rapid drumbeat summoning all hands to action stations.

Dozen: When going nineteen to the dozen something or someone is going at breakneck speed. The origin here is one of the nicest that I have come across. It goes back to the time of the Cornish tin and copper mines. These mines were often hit by floods. In the 18th century coal powered, steam driven pumps were installed to clear the water. When working maximally the pumps could clear nineteen thousand gallons of water for every twelve bushels of coal.

Drum: To drum up support was a military term and described the custom of recruiting parties marching into town and announcing their arrival with fife and drum. Their duty was described as Drumming up recruits.

Duck: The phrase a lame duck implies that a person or business is ineffectual. It was coined by the great actor Garrick in a play he wrote in 1771. In the play he describes Stock-Jobbers (dealers) in the Stock Exchange who could not or would not pay their debts as follows; Change Alley bankrupts waddle out (like) lame ducks. The expression was taken up by the Stock Exchange itself. It then spread to the USA where it came to be applied to politicians near the end of their term of office and therefore ineffectual.

Dutch: e.g. "I'm a Dutchman"; "Dutch courage", "Dutch treat" . All these come from the time of the 17th century when the Dutch were hated military and commercial rivals of the English. Examples include Dutch reckoning, a bill that is presented without any details, and which only gets bigger if you question it, and a Dutch widow, a prostitute. In the same spirit are Dutch auction, one in which the prices go down instead of up; Dutch courage, temporary bravery induced by alcohol; Dutch metal, an alloy of copper and zinc used as a substitute for gold foil; Dutch comfort or Dutch consolation, in which somebody might say "thank God it is no worse!"; Dutch concert, in which each musician plays a different tune; Dutch uncle, someone who criticises or rebukes you with the

frankness of a relative; and Dutch treat, one in which those invited pay for themselves.

Dyed: A dyed in the wool individual is one with fixed, deep felt beliefs. The saying is many hundred of years old and goes back to the medieval method of adding dye to raw wool rather than to spun wool or finished cloth. The final colour was much more long lasting and deeply ingrained than dyeing at later stages of manufacture.

Ear: To make a pig's ear out of something means to do a job messily. I can't find an origin for this either but, again, it may be associated with rhyming slang.

Earmark: To earmark something. This comes from the ancient habit of marking cattle ears with a tab to indicate ownership. In biblical times the custom even extended to human property. In Exodus xxi, 6 it says of a servant who declined to go free after six years' service : "his master shall bore his ear through with an awl; and he shall serve him forever".In the 19th century the term came to be applied to money designated for a special purpose. Later it spread to the wider application used today.

Ears: If someone is wet behind the ears they are regarded as being inexperienced and new to a task. The saying is many hundred of years old and comes from the fact that many animals, when they are new born,have a small depression behind the ears. The young themselves are

wet at birth and this depression is the last thing to dry out. By the time it does, the animal is a little older and possibly wiser.

Eavesdropping: To be caught eavesdropping implies that a person has been deliberately trying to overhear a conversation not intended for their ears. The word and its implication go back centuries to the time when most houses had no gutters; the rain dripped off the roofs but the roofs themselves projected well beyond the walls. This area inside where the water dripped was known originally as the Eavesdrip and later as the Eavesdrop. People sheltering here were somewhat protected from the rain,but could also overhear what was going on in the house.

Egg: To egg on means to urge someone to continue doing something that is, perhaps, a little dubious, such as a schoolboy being encouraged by his classmates to make faces at the teacher behind his back. Why Egg?This could be an adulteration of the word Edge and the expression should perhaps really be to edge on.
However! there is another, more likely origin. In this case egg derives from the old English eggian which means "to spur" or "to incite".

A curate's egg; anything that is a less than perfect but which has its good points is often described as being like the "Curate's egg".This comes from a famous "Punch" cartoon of the 19th century in which a young curate is seen having breakfast with his Bishop. The curate's egg is clearly not fresh and, when asked by the Bishop "how is your egg?", is forced to politely reply "excellent, in parts".

As sure as eggs is eggs is used to describe a certainty but,again, why eggs? This is another possible adulteration, this time eggs is really "X" and the saying should be As sure as X is X.

Elephant: A white elephant is something which is a liability, more trouble than it's worth. The saying is based on the supposed habit of the King of Siam who, if he wished to get rid of a particular courtier,gave a gift of a white elephant. The courtier dared not offend the King with a refusal although he was fully aware that the cost of upkeep of such an animal was ruinous.

Ends: If one is at loose ends then there is not much of anything to be done; life is a little dull and boring. The ends here are almost certainly those of rigging ropes on a sailing ship. There were many such ropes associated with the sails and the ends were tightly bound to prevent them unravelling. When there was little else to do the Captain would order his men to check the ropes and repair any of those with loose ends.

To make (both) ends meet is to live within one's means, but what are the ends in this instance? Most probably the term comes from accountancy where meet used to be an adjective meaning "equal" or "balanced". The end was the end of the financial year in which both profit and loss accounts had to be balanced: the ends had to be met
An alternative explanation is that it came from tailoring or dressmaking, in which the amount of cloth available might only just be sufficient to complete the garment, so that it would wrap completely around the body, making the ends meet. A saying with this sense occurs in Polish.

Eyewash: It's a load of eyewash implies that something is a load of rubbish or is Bunkum. Why such use has arisen I haven't been able to find out.

Fagged out: To be fagged out is to be exhausted, weary. I can find no certain origin. The 1811 dictionary hints that it may be derived from the schoolboy use of the term "fag", or servant, to a senior boy by a junior one. These were often worked so hard that they did indeed become exhausted. Alternatively, the term may come from the original use of "fagend" - the very end of a piece of cloth, which was therefore exhausted

Fall: To fall foul of someone is to be on bad terms with them. The foul here is another nautical word and is used when one ship impedes the

progress of another; it falls foul of it. A foul anchor is when its own rope becomes entangled with itself.

Feather: see Cap.

Fed up: To be fed up is to be lethargic, bored, uninterested in the world. This comes from the ancient sport of falconry, which has left several marks on the English language:
Fed up - trained hawks are driven by appetite: one which has 'fed up' wants merely to sit still and digest its meal (ie it is totally unresponsive).
Gorged - a hawk's crop is in its throat (le gorge in French).
Chaperone and hoodwink - blindfolding a hawk with a hood (chaperone in French) calms it by making it think it is night. This reduces the risk of impetuous behaviour.
Booze - hawks were traditionally trapped in Holland and needed to drink (&lsquoboozen' in Dutch) on the sea crossing to England.
Haggard - an older hawk, caught in adult plumage. Although falconers used to prize such birds, haggard and hag are definitely derogatory when applied to humans.
Cadge - a mobile perch on which falcons are carried. The unpaid bearer would have to 'cadge' tips from onlookers.

Fettle: To be in fine fettle implies being in good shape or humour; to be prepared for anything. The word has been given several uses, such as fettled ale, a type of ale seasoned with ginger and nutmeg and all uses have a sense of "preparation" in them. It all goes back to the old English "fetel" or "girdle" and links in with the biblical concept of preparation by "girding up the loins".

Fiddle: If someone is on the fiddle then they are reckoned to be doing something illegal. Why fiddle? There's no reference that I can find, but a naval anecdote told by guides on HMS Victory offers a partial explanation. To this day dining tables on ships are edged with a rim, either fixed or hinged, which stops plates falling off during rough weather. These rims are called "fiddles" (why I can't find out). Similar rims were present on the square wooden plates which gave the origin of "a square meal". The story goes that some sailors would get their plates

unfairly so full that the food was "on the fiddle" - hence today's saying.

Fit as a fiddle means to be in good health and comes from the sense of 'fit' as being suited to a purpose, such as 'the meal was fit for a king'. Why 'fiddle' was chosen for the comparison is unclear. The earliest recorded form of this expression (1595) is 'as right as a fiddle', perhaps because it was a piece of skilled craftsmanship and therefore to be admired, or because its playing required dexterity. It used to be said that a person who was well-liked had a face 'made of a fiddle', meaning that it was always wreathed in smiles, as a fiddle has a much-curled shape.

Fiddlesticks: It's all fiddlesticks implies that it is all nonsense. Again I can't find a modern origin but, in 1811 "Fiddlestick's end" meant "nothing". The ancient fiddlestick (violin bow) ended in a point, hence, metaphorically, used to express a thing terminating in nothing.

Field day: To have a field day now implies easy achievement of a task. It wasn't originally so. Like so many other English sayings, it has a military background, and is a term for a day of manoeuvres in open fields or country, often in front of the commanding officer or even higher rank; a day of great effort and inspection. When these days are successful the units can be seen to be well prepared and turned out. In the US Navy it is also applied to a day devoted to cleaning ship prior to inspection.

Fig: I don't give fig indicates complete lack of concern about an event. It comes from the Spanish Fico (= Fig) which gave its name to a traditional gesture of contempt made by placing the thumb between the first and second fingers. The gesture was common in Shakespeare's time and was known as The Fig of Spain. The modern-day equivalent is the "V"sign.

Finger: To pull your finger out is to hurry, to get a move on. This is another nautical saying and comes from the times of the Men'o'War. When the cannon were loaded a small amount of powder was poured into the ignition hole near the base of the weapon. In order to keep the powder secure before firing, a crew member pushed one of their fingers into the hole. When the time came for ignition, the crewman was told to pull his finger out

Fired: The words "you're fired" are often used to tell someone that they've lost their job; have been discharged. The similarity between "fired" and "discharged" may suggest a connection with firearms. I could find no real origin in any of my reference books, other than suggesting the analogy with firing a gun. However, one day, I was sent the following which appeared in the Clevedon, Somerset, Civic Society Newsletter for summer 1996:
"We discovered recently that the word 'fired', meaning discharged from a job, originated on Mendip. It comes from Item 6 of the Laws of Mendip Miners.
"If any man... do pick or steale any lead or ore to the value of xiiid,the Lord or his Officer may arrest all his lead and Oare House or hearthes with his Grooves and Workes and keep them in forfeit... and shall take the person that hath soe affeended and bring him where his house or worke and all his tooles and instruments are... and put him into his house orworke and set fire in all together about him and banish him..." Fired indeed!

First rate: These words imply excellence but what is the rate by which things are judged? From Elizabethan times up to the 19th century British warships were rated by the number of their guns and not the weight of the ships themselves. Six rates were applied and First rate was the most armed. The term was soon used for other comparisons.

Fish: A pretty kettle of fish is an expression used to indicate that there is a mess, problem or predicament. There are at least two possible origins, the first of which relates to a Kiddle. This was a grille put across a stream to catch fish. It could become full of weeds and only a few fish; alternatively, the fish might have become damaged. In any case there was a pretty kiddle of fish.
The second theory is more accepted. In this instance the "kettle",the local name for a cooking pot, was taken on picnics by Scottish gentry.Salmon were caught straight from the river and cooked on the bank side.Such an outing was known as a kettle of fish. How the current usage arose is not clear, but one can imagine all sorts of disasters being the cause.

Fits: To go by fits and starts means to run irregularly or intermittently. "Starts" is obvious, but why "Fits"? It maybe that it has something to do with epilepsy and it is well recognised that a "fit" can cause someone to stop breathing. Perhaps this is the origin, but I can find no published evidence.

Flat out: To go flat out is to go as fast as possible. This is another for which I have found no published basis; however it is not difficult to imagine a horse and rider going at full speed, with the rider lying flat along the back of the animal to reduce the wind resistance.

Flea: To be sent off with a flea in the ear means to sent away from a situation in an upset frame of mind. This is said to come from the analogy that a dog with a flea in the ear is prone to become very restless and run off in distress.
Brewer says 'this is an old phrase dating at least from the 15th century in English, and earlier in French. It is found in Scogan's Jests, Heywood's Proverbs, Nashe's Pierce Penilesse, etc.
"Ferardo ...whispering Philautus in his eare (who stoode as though he had a flea in his eare), desired him to kepe silence." Lyly: Euphues, the Anatomy of Wit (1579).
Here the phrase implies that vexatious news has been heard; and in Deloney's Gentle Craft (1597) there is a similar instance, where a servant goes away shaking his head "like one that hath a flea in his eare".'

Fly: To fly in the face of something is to go against accepted belief; to respond actively against danger. The analogy here is said to be that of the hen that flies in the face of the dog or fox that attacks her.

To fly off the handle or to go into a rage has an origin set in the old US frontier times. The basis is the axe head which could sometimes come loose and fly off the handle. Such an event was not only dangerous,but held up work until it was fixed, much to the annoyance of all concerned.

Fob: If you fob off someone then you offer them an inadequate explanation or reward; give them less than they deserve; cheat them out

of something. The origin here is the German word Foppen: to hoax or to jeer.

Fogey: He's an old fogey, used to describe someone as a bit old fashioned: out of touch with modern things. Why Fogey? In 1811 an "Old Fogey" was a nick name for a sick or invalid soldier; derived from the French word fougeux, fierce or fiery. The modern sense has changed the use a little, but there is still the element of disability in the saying.

Foot: I'll foot the bill is another way of saying that you will pay for an item. When a bill is presented to a customer the total sum is placed at its foot. The customer then checks the bill's accuracy and that of the 'foot' - hence the saying.

Footing: To be on a good footing with someone means to be on good terms with them. This goes back to the days of trade apprentice-ships when a newcomer, on the first time he put his foot over the threshold of his workplace, was expected to pay for drinks for all. If he was generous then he had had a good footing.

Fork: To fork out means to pay over money due for goods or services. It comes from the old thieves' use of the word fork to describe the fingers. A similar analogy is used in the phrase "fingers were made before forks".

Foul: see Fall;

Frog: To have a frog in the throat describes a choking sensation in the throat. In the past in was truly feared that a frog was really present when this sensation occurred. In olden times people often drank from ponds and streams; there was always the possibility of swallowing a whole animal or, worse, its eggs. If the eggs were taken in, then they were said to hatch inside and, when ready to come out, would cause a choking feeling.

Gab: The gift of the gab is given to those who talk a lot. The primitive Celtic word for mouth was Gab, but the expression is more likely based on the Middle English Gabbe meaning "idle talk". Gab however remains in modern use as the basis of Goblet and the slang Gob for mouth. Gab, for mouth, was known in 1811.

Gaff: To blow the gaff means to reveal a secret: gaff here is reckoned to be a variant of the Gab described above and has nothing to do with the use of the word to describe a spar on a sailing ship, nor does it relate to the pole of the same name, which is based on the Portuguese gafe meaning "boat-hook".

Gammy: To have a gammy leg implies a deformed or lame leg. It comes from the Celtic cam or kam meaning "crooked". Surprisingly, the use is said to be relatively modern in spite of the age of its origin.

Gamut: To run the gamut of, say, emotion means to go through the entire spectrum of emotional possibilities. Gamut is the first word of a medieval Italian mnemonic used to help remember the musical scale. Gamma was the first note followed by ut, re, mi, fa, so, la and si. Gamma and ut became combined to describe the whole range.

Gauntlet: When someone runs the gauntlet they are exposed to risk. Gauntlet here has nothing at all to do with leather gloves but rather with Sweden. An old military punishment in that country was to send the victim, stripped to the waist, through a double line of men, each armed with a stick with which to beat him as he passed. Its first English form

was gantlope from the Swedish gata, "passage or lane" and lope or lopp, "a leap or chase", but the word changed a little over the centuries into gauntlet. The punishment itself came into use in the Royal Navy in 1661 but was abolished in 1813.

George: By George is an expression used as an oath or to express surprise. It is the modern version of the old battle cry of English soldiers, most well known in Shakespeare's Henry V where the King shouts: "for Harry, England and St George!"

Gerrymander: This is a splendid word with a very specific use; it means the manipulation of electoral boundaries for party political ends. As such, since it isn't a phrase, it really has no place in this book; however the word is so intriguing that I put it in. It goes back to the USA in the very early 1800s when the Governor for Massachusetts, one Elbridge Gerry, redrew his local electoral boundaries to help him maintain control of his party. The new shape of one district in Essex County, with a little invention by Gilbert Stuart, an artist, came to look like a salamander; as a result, the manipulation was named a Gerrymander. However, the practice was not new.

Gibberish: To talk gibberish means to speak unintelligibly or in a meaningless way. There are a couple of possible origins here. One says that the basis is in the old word gibber which is allied to jabber. The problem with this one is that gibberish was in use before the word gibber, therefore making things definitely dubious.
A better explanation says the word comes from Geber, the name of an Arabian alchemist in the 11th century. He invented a strange terminology so that his works could not be understood by others; more importantly, he could not be accused of heresy, which was punishable by death. Gibberish in its modern sense was certainly known in 1811.

Gingerbread: To take the gilt off the gingerbread means to show something up as worth far less than first thought. Gingerbread is a cake mixed with treacle and flavoured with ginger. It was coated with a golden leaf and, as such, was often sold at country fairs up to the middle

of the 19th century. I guess that sometimes the cake was less than perfect; when the gilt was removed, all was revealed.

Gingerly: To do something gingerly is to do it with caution. The word here has nothing to do with the vegetable "ginger" but probably has an origin in the Old French word 'genzor', the comparative form of 'gent,' meaning 'delicate.' There are other theories, including one that it comes from the Icelandic by way of Swedish but no one accepts the vegetable origin.

Gist: To get the gist of something is to understand its basics, its fundamentals. This comes from the old French Gsir meaning to lie, itself having the meaning of something lying within something and being its basis.

Goat: To get someone's goat means to irritate or annoy them. This may refer to an alleged old English (Welsh?) belief that keeping a goat in the barn would have a calming effect on the cows, hence the production of more milk. To antagonise your enemy, you would steal their goat, thereby supposedly making their cows give less milk.
An alternative comes from early 20th century USA where it was the practice to keep a goat as a stable companion for a highly strung race horse in the expectation that the goat would be a calming influence. If the goat were stolen then there was a chance that the horse, being upset, would not run well in the next race. However, there seems little documentary evidence to suggest that keeping a goat for this purpose was widespread.
Another likely origin of the phrase comes from 1904 where, in the Random House dictionary, "goat" is prison slang for "anger." This may be the key. After all, with much provocation, goats do get angry. To bring out the "goat" in someone may take some doing, but will eventually have dramatic results.

Goose: To cook someone's goose means to put them at a disadvantage; to thwart their efforts to achieve a goal. This seem a really odd way of describing things. The saying is recorded in an 1851 London street ballard, but its origin is obscure. Suggestions range from Eric, King of

Sweden, coming to a certain town with very few soldiers, the enemy, in mockery, hung out a goose for him to shoot at. Finding, however, that the king meant business, and that it would be no laughing matter for them, they sent heralds to ask him what he wanted. “To cook your goose for you,” he facetiously replied. However, there's no documentary evidence to theory. Another suggestion comes from the 'The Goose that laid the Golden Egg' where the greed of the peasants caused the goose to be killed. In truth, no one knows for sure.

Gooseberry: To play gooseberry now means to be an unwelcome third party at a lovers' meeting. In the past it was used somewhat less specifically and meant any unwanted third party. In the old days Gooseberry was one of the many euphemisms for the Devil, who was naturally not welcome in most company.

To be born under a Gooseberry bush was used as a way of explaining to a child where a new baby had come from, an explanation not often needed these days. Why "gooseberry bush" has completely defied explanation in my researches.

Grandfather: Grandfather clock is so called after an 1878 song by the Connecticut composer Henry Clay Work entitled My Grandfather's Clock (...was too tall for the shelf, so it stood 90 years on the floor). Before that, this type of clock was known as a "long case". Although not a "saying", the origin was sufficiently unusual as to beg inclusion.

Grapes: To have Sour grapes means to offer an implausible excuse for not achieving a goal; to be a little bitter about someone else's success. This comes from one of Aesop's fables in which a fox, having unsuccessfully tried to get at some grapes in a vineyard, went off saying "They're as sour as crabs, anyway!" A strange answer, but ‘crabs' is likely to refer to 'crab apples'.

Grapevine: To hear something on the grapevine suggests that a rumour or gossip has been heard through unofficial channels. This is another with an origin in the USA. In the early days of telegraphy, companies rushed to put up telegraph poles, some made none too well and some actually using trees rather than poles. To some, the tangled wires

resembled the wild vines found in California, hence a Grapevine. During the US Civil War the telegraph was used extensively, but the messages were sometime unreliable, hence the association of rumour on the grapevine. The phrase first appeared in print in 1852.

Grass: To grass on someone means to inform some higher authority about possible misdemeanours. The origin here is far from clear but I have found two possibilities. The first relates to the fact that this type of informing is often done in a whisper. In the 1940s the singing group the "Ink Spots" had a world wide hit with the song "Whispering Grass". By extension whispering became known as grassing.
The other explanation relates to London slang starting with to shop someone, derived from the concept of the Coppers' shop. Someone who habitually informed to the police became a shopper and rhyming slang produced a grasshopper which was then shortened to grass. You can take your choice. It's not mentioned in 1811.

Greenhorn: A greenhorn is used to describe someone who is less than expert at a task, an amateur, a trainee. The earliest possible origin I have found dates from the 15th century and derives from the fact that young oxen have green horns. The analogy is clear.
Another suggested origin goes back to the 17th and 18th centuries and the jewellery manufacturing industry. Some items of decoration were a bit like cameo brooches, only made from horn and inset in to silver frames. The horn was usually decorated with a figure, often a head, and this was impressed in the brown horn by heating the horn to a specific temperature and shaping over a mould. Too high a temperature would result in the horn ending up, not its original and desired brown, but green. Such an outcome was regularly produced by the apprentices - hence they came to be called greenhorns.

Gubbins: A load of gubbins is a saying used to describe poor quality goods or thoughts; the dregs. The Gubbins were the wild and savage inhabitants of an area near Brentor in Devon in the 17th century. They, in turn, were so called after the name for the near worthless shavings after fish had been scaled. Why the shavings were called gubbins is another matter.

Gum: He's up a gum tree implies that someone is at a loss, in a bit of difficulty or to be virtually stuck on some project or other. The origin here is not clear but it is suggested that the saying may be an allusion to the gum tree being a refuge for the opossum, an animal which feigns death by lying still and is therefore apparently stuck up the tree.

Gun: Son of a gun is now an expression of light hearted familiarity but it was not always so. In the past it was one of contempt and derision derived from the fact that it described a special type of illegitimate child. In the old days civilian women were allowed to live on naval ships; many became pregnant and had their child on board, usually near the midship gun behind a canvas screen. If the father was unknown, then the child was recorded in the ship's log as A son of a Gun.

Half: To go off half-cocked means to start something without full preparation. The cock referred to is the one used to set the hammer of a gun. At half-cock a gun won't fire properly since the setting is one which is supposedly secure.

Ham: To be a ham actor is to be an inferior actor with, perhaps, lots of gesticulations but little else. There are many suggested origins for the expression:
1. that 19th century make-up was removed with ham fat.
2. that a touring troupe of American actors in the mid 1800s, known as Ham's actors from the name of their leader, was the basis.

3. from the popular minstrel song "The Hamfat Man", about an inept actor.
4.a play on the word "amateur".
5. that down-at-heel actors had played Hamlet in better days.

Hand: To get the upper hand means to come out the winner in a situation , but what about the "lower hand", which must be there in order to have an upper one? Robert Henrickson's "Encyclopedia of Word and Phrase Origins" states:
"It would seem on first thought that this expression derives from the way kids choose sides with a bat in sandlot baseball. Two players, usually the best two by general agreement, participate in the choosing. One puts a hand around the bat near the fat end, then the other puts a hand around the bat just above his hand. This goes on, hand over hand, until the bottom of the bat is reached and there is no room for another hand. The last hand on the bat wins the contest (although the loser does have the chance to delicately grasp with his fingertips whatever little wood is left and twist it around his head, winning if he can hold on to the bat while doing this three times). The winner, in any case, gets to choose first for the first player on his team and the picks are made in rotation thereafter. Perhaps this sandlot choosing popularized the expression 'getting the upper hand,' 'getting the best of someone,' but the phrase apparently was used long before the age of sandlot baseball. It probably derives from an English game of chance that has been traced back to the 15th century and was played in the same way as the sandlot choosing contest."

Handle: To fly off the handle; see Fly.

Hands down: To win hands down is to win easily. The saying comes from horse racing where a jockey, if he is winning comfortably, can afford to drop his hands and let the horse run without further urging.

Hang out: "Where do you hang out" is a colloquial way of enquiring where someone lives or passes their time. To the present day pubs and hotels advertise their presence with signs hanging outside. The allusion here is not difficult to see.

Hanky panky: To get up to some hanky panky implies some sort of underhand dealing or cheating. I can't find a certain origin, but the expression has been compared with Hocus Pocus, the start of a mock Latin phrase used by conjurers with the object of distracting the audience from any slight-of-hand. Our word Hoax is probably derived from this mock-Latin and Hanky panky possibly a variant.

Hard up: If someone is hard up then they are pressed for cash, just like the ships which originated the phrase were pressed by the wind. In sailing ship days, when a vessel was forced by stress of weather to turn away from the wind, then the helm was put hard up to windward to alter course. By analogy, someone is hard up if they have to weather a financial storm.

Harp on: To harp on about something is to continue with a theme that has lost its relevance and interest to others involved in a discussion. Its origin is self evident when it's realised that the original saying was: To harp forever on the same string.

Hat: If something happens at the drop of a hat then it happens suddenly, almost without warning. This saying comes from the American West, where the signal for a fight was often just the drop of a hat. It may have an Irish origin, based on something like "he's ready to fight at the drop of a hat" which in turn may be followed by "roll up your sleeves" or "take off your coat" i.e. items of clothing are involved in the start of fights. However, a more likely origin comes from the days of fair ground boxing competitions. Here the public were invited to try their skill against the resident pugilist. In those days all men wore hats. In order to indicate willingness to enter the fray a man in the crowd would throw his hat into the ring. Since he was then bare-headed, he was easily identified as he made his way up to the ring.

He's been "knocked into a cocked hat" is an expression used to describe the situation after someone has been beaten in a battle of skills. I have found three completely different suggested origins, one of which I don't find very satisfactory. It is based on the early days of sailing when a ship's position was charted by marking three plotting lines on a map. The ship should be at the junction of all three but, since navigation was in its

infancy, the lines often produced a little triangle. The ship was reckoned to then be in the middle of the triangle. The triangle itself was known as a cocked hat after its resemblance to the common three-cornered hat of the times. On this basis the expression originally is said to have implied a sense of uncertainty, of not knowing where you were.
Another explanation comes from nine-pin bowling. In certain forms of the game three pins were set up in a triangular shape. The rest were set up around and the object was to knock these down and leave the three standing. The three reminded people of a three-cornered or cocked hat.
The third explanation suggests that the cocked hat of the 18th century was merely the 16th century Puritan hat with the brim rolled up or cocked into a triangular shape. This was a dramatic change which later took on the inference of defeat.

It's old hat is applied to something that's out of date; not new; unfashionable. The expression is said to come from the fact that hats go out of fashion rather quickly, long before they are worn out. Not very good I'm afraid, but it's the only explanation I could find.

Hatchet: When one buries the hatchet peace is made with a foe or rival. The hatchet in this instance was one wielded by Red Indians. When they were about to make peace with an enemy the Great Spirit required them to smoke the Pipe of Peace and to bury all weapons until they were out of sight.

Hatter: Mad as a hatter is a term used to describe crazy behaviour and has a basis truly in the concept of mad hat makers. In olden days felt and other hats were prepared with the aid of mercurous nitrate. This is a highly toxic substance which can produce a tremoring disease similar to Parkinson's disease. Such people were assumed to be mad. The most famous Mad Hatter is in Lewis Caroll's "Alice in Wonderland" but the original is thought to be the 17th century Robert Crab, an eccentric who lived in Chesham, who gave away all his worldly goods to the poor and lived on dock leaves and grass.

Havock or Havoc: To wreak havock means to cause confusion and possibly death to one's enemies. The expression started out as Cry Havock an old military cry derived from the old French havot meaning

"plunder". The cry was very common in the 14th and 15th centuries but was banned, on pain of death, in the ninth year of Richard II's reign. The expression is used in a number of Shakespearean plays.

Haywire: To go haywire is to go out of control; to behave wildly. I have found several suggested origins for this phrase, all from the USA.
The first says that wire, properly only intended to bale up hay, (ie haywire) was used, instead, by many farmers to make their boundary fences. The wire rusted quickly with the result that the properties were unkempt and had an appearance of being out of control.
A second suggestion says that the wire, when correctly used to bundle up hay, would writhe and wriggle when cut to eventually release the hay.
The third says the notion comes from the disorder and chaos present in a farm yard when the used lengths of wire were left dumped in a corner.

Heath Robinson: A Heath Robinson affair/solution is something characterised by apparent muddle. It comes from a famous English cartoonist whose 'trade mark' style was one of drawing of pieces of apparatus, designed to perform simple tasks, in an over complex way. These drawings contained a jumble of badly assembled bits and pieces, often joined up by scraps of string or rope to produce an over complex solution to the task in hand. He was a great draughtsman and eccentric and his name is remembered in the above phrase.
Some of his cartoons can be seen on Heath Robinson - well worth a look!
In the U.S. they speak of "a Rube Goldberg contraption". Mr. Goldberg's cartoons similarly illustrated fanciful, overelaborate devices for doing something simple.

Hector: To hector someone is to continually worry and harass them. The origin is somewhat obscure but probably relates to the name of one of the several London street gangs in and around the reign of Queen Anne. These had names like The Scowerers, The Nickers. One of the gangs was The Hectors, presumably named after Hector, the ancient Trojan warrior.

Hedge: To hedge one's bets is to support more than one outcome or person; to put in cross bets. Although it is clear from my researches that

hedge in this context is very old, none of my references explain this particular use. Hedge was used to imply inferiority (perhaps because hedges are themselves low in height) with examples like hedge-priest for a poor, impecunious priest. However, the 1811 dictionary gives a clue; "Hedge. To make a hedge; to secure a bet or wager, laid on one side, by taking odds on the other, so that, let what will happen, a certain gain is secured, or hedged in, by the persons who takes this precaution".

Hem (Hum) and Haw. As an expression for hesitancy, to Hem and Haw isn't recorded until 1786. But it is found centuries earlier in similar expressions such as to hem and hawk, hem and ha, and hum and ha, which Shakespeare used. These are all sounds made in clearing the throat when we are about to speak. When a speaker constantly makes them without speaking he is usually hesitating out of uncertainty, which suggested the phrase. Said the first writer to record the idea in 1469: "He wold have gotyn it aweye by humys and by hays but I would not so be answered. " The modern version is to "Um & Ah".

Hep: A Hep-cat is a now dated American expression used to indicate that someone is knowledgeable about popular music. The hep goes back to hip (from which "hippie" comes) which, in turn, derives from the west African Wolof word hipi meaning "to open one's eyes". The cat is also derived from the same source since hipi-kat in Wolof means "one who has opened his eyes".

Herring: A red herring is an alternative, somewhat old fashioned, name for a smoked herring. Such fish have a very strong smell and were usually known, not as kippers, but as red herrings in many parts of 19th century Britain. Because of their smell they were good at masking other smells; as a result they could easily cover the scent of a fox. A red herring pulled across the trail could divert the hounds onto a false path. Thus, by analogy, the phrase came to be used to describe any false trail.

Hiding: A hiding to nothing is used to suggest that there is no way to win in a particular situation. I am intrigued by this combination of words. To start with but I could find no recorded reason why they should be used together in this way. A 'hiding OR nothing' would be

clearer. However, later, I found the following: &lsquoHiding,' in this expression, is synonymous with &lsquothrashing,' and a &lsquohiding to nothing' means &lsquoa thrashing to bits.'

Hijack: A hijack is the theft of some form of transport or other, usually associated with the threat of force, with the object of material or political gain. Why this combination of words? The only explanation that I have found is rather unsatisfactory. It suggests that the expression goes back to the days of US prohibition when hold-ups were apparently accompanied by the order "stick 'em up high, Jack!".

Hippie: see Hep-Cat

Hob-nob: To hob-nob with someone is to associate with them; to keep their company. The expression is a corruption of the now defunct hab-nab in turn a shortening of old English habbe (=hit) and nabbe (=miss). This took on the implication of give & take and this giving and taking (of drinks) is one of the hallmarks of hob-nobbing. In 1811 it was "Will you Hob or Nob with me?" If the party so questioned replied "nob" they were deemed to have agreed to have a drink of wine with the proposer and had to choose red or white wine. The 1811 suggested origin goes back to the days of good queen Bess when great chimneys were in fashion. On each corner of the hearth or grate was a small projection called the hob. In winter beer was placed upon the hob to warm and cold beer was set upon a small table, said to have been called the nob and so the question "will you hob or nob with me?" seems to merely been an invitation to warm or cold beer. The modern use of Hob retains the furnace association.

Hobo: He's a bit of a hobo is an Americanism used to describe a travelling tramp-like worker, unlike a true tramp who travels without working, or a "bum" who neither travels or works. The origin is from hoe-boy, which was the name for a migratory farm worker.

Hobson: Hobson's choice is no choice at all. This goes back to an actual Hobson who died in 1631. He ran a livery stable in Cambridge and was well known in his day; in fact Milton, who was a student in Cambridge at

the time, mentions him in two epitaphs. Hobson was renowned for the fact he would only let out his horses in strict rotation - there was no choice at all.

Hog: To go the whole hog means to do something thoroughly, completely. There are a number of possible origins for this expression and, again not all are equally acceptable. The first recorded use of the sense of the phrase is found in 1779 in a poem by William Cowper. The poem concerns debate by Muslim divines about which parts of the pig were forbidden as food by the Prophet. Unable to reach a decision, each wished to declare that their own favourite portion was acceptable. As individual tastes differed it meant that the whole hog was acceptable. "Thus conscience freed from every clog, Mohametans eat up the hog."
An alternative comes from the fact that in Ireland a shilling and in America a 10c piece were both known as a hog and if one spent the money all at once the whole hog was gone.
A third possibility places the origin firmly in the USA. In Virginia the butchers allegedly asked their customers if they wished to purchase the whole hog or only part of the animal. The phrase was widely used during Andrew Jackson's 1828 Presidential campaign.

Hollow: To beat someone hollow is to beat them soundly, but why hollow? The only offered origin that I have found suggests that hollow is a corruption of wholly.

Hook: By hook or by crook is a phrase which suggests that something is done by any means possible; by some means or other; one way or another. This goes back to medieval Britain when there was a custom for tenants of the Lord of the Manor to be allowed to collect firewood from the trees, but only as much as could be cut off with a bill-hook or pulled down with a shepherd's crook.

Hookey. To play hookey is to take absence from school - to play truant. My researches have failed to give a decent origin for the expression. It's recorded as 'Hooky', i.e. no 'e', US mid 19C+, to play truant.
In Brewer it's spelt 'hookey' and a suggested origin is 'from the idea "to hook" something is to make off with it'. There never seems to have been

a person called 'Hook' or 'Hook(e)y'.
The “Encyclopedia of Word and Phrase Origins” by Robert Hendrickson (Facts on File, New York, 1997), has the following. “There is no widely accepted explanation for the word ‘hookey’ or ‘hooky.’ An Americanism that arose in the late 19th century, when compulsory attendance laws became the rule in public schools, ‘hooky’ may be a compression of the older expression ‘hook it,’ ‘to escape or make off,’ formed by dropping the ‘t’ in the phrase. Or it could be related to the old slang word ‘hook,’ meaning ‘to steal,’: kids stealing a day off from school. ‘Hooky’ has so often been associated with going fishing that it may even owe its life to ‘getting off the hook’ the way a fish can; anyway, school is often insufferable as a hook to schoolchildren and many kids squirming in their seats all day look like they are on a hook.”
Not very satisfactory, I'm afraid, but that's all I've been able to come up with.

Hoop: When someone is put through the hoop then they are punished or are in trouble. This comes from the ancient marine custom of "to run the hoop" in which four or more half naked boys had their left hands tied to an iron hoop. Each had a length of rope, called a nettle, in the other hand. One of the boys was then hit with a cat o'nine tails by the bosun; the boy in turn hit the boy in front with his rope and so on. The lashes were at first quite gentle, but soon became heavy and in earnest. This "pastime" was anciently practised when a ship was becalmed.

Horse-play: If someone indulges in horse-play then they behave boisterously. The background here is one of the English Morris dancers. These were often accompanied by players riding wooden hobby horses and such horses were expected to perform many antics and move about uncontrollably.

Horse: Never look a gift horse in the mouth is said in order to discourage too great an inspection of a gift, which might be less valuable than first thought, thereby taking the gilt off the gingerbread. To those who know about horses the analogy is clear; the age of a horse is well mirrored in the state of its teeth. Too close an inspection could result in a nasty surprise with the animal proving to be long in the tooth.

A dark horse on the other hand, is an unknown quantity; a person whose qualities are untried. This saying is said to go back to the Victorian politician Benjamin Disraeli who, apart from finding time to regularly become Prime Minister, also found time to write a novel called "The Young Duke". In the book there is a description of a horse race in which the two favourites cannot make the running. In the meanwhile "a dark horse...rushed past the grandstand in a sweeping triumph".

Humble: If you eat humble pie then you apologise deeply for a taken stance when it is proved that you are wrong; you're in a position of great inferiority. The expression is really a play on words and is based on medieval feasts. The well-to-do fed off the best pieces of the roasted animals and gave the left-overs to the servants and other lowly people. Much of the left-overs consisted of offal and the contemporary name for this was numble from the French nombles in turn from the Latin lumbulus, a "little loin". A pie made from such flesh was, naturally A Numble Pie; however it soon turned into An umble Pie, being easier to say. It was therefore Umble for the humble.

Humbug: You're full of humbug is said as a means of implying that a person is bigoted, somewhat deceptive and unpleasant. A Humbug is also a sweet but clearly this is not the origin of the saying. My researches in modern texts show that the expression was in use in the 18th century but "of unknown origin". However, recourse to the Etymological Dictionary of circa 1880 reveals a probable origin from Old English hum, to deceive and Welsh bwg, an object that frightens.

Image: If someone is the spitting image of someone else, then they have a great similarity, but why "spitting"? The only suggestion that I found was to say that the two are so similar that it is as if one could spit out of the other's mouth. I don't like this explanation and I think the saying could well be based on the expression that a man "is the very spit of his father", which, in turn, may come from "the very spirit and image of his father". A further alternative, which is very possible, is that it's based on a corruption of 'split image', meaning the two identical, but mirror, images produced when a piece of wood is split.

Iron: To strike while the iron is hot is to act at just the right time to achieve a desired end. The analogy here is to that of a blacksmith, whose experience and knowledge enables him to know exactly when to start hammering on a horseshoe to form the correct shape.

Irons: To have too many irons in the fire probably has the same root as just described. Here one can imagine a blacksmith with so many horseshoes on the go at one time that it is impossible to strike them all at the ideal time. Alternatively, it is possible for a laundress to be the basis. If she kept too many irons in the fire then some would be too hot or too cold and the ironing would suffer.

Jack: Jack Tar: Jack of all Trades; etc., See Tar

Jeopardy: To be in jeopardy is to be in danger or peril: at risk. The origin of this phrase is found in the Old French "jeu parti", literally "divided game" and hence of uncertain outcome.

Jiffy: Something done in a jiffy is done very quickly. I can find no recorded origin of this one. The Oxford English Dictionary says "Origin unascertained". The earliest use it gives is from Munchhausen's Travels (1785): "In six jiffies I found myself and all my retinue . . . at the rock of Gibralter [sic]".
I'm told that the term was taken into the scientific community late in the 20th century and was actually applied as a unit of time; however the unit seems to vary from discipline to discipline! See Jiffy .

Jot: I don't give a jot is said when someone really doesn't care about what is going on. The Jot here refers to the letter Iota, which is the smallest in the Greek alphabet and came to imply the least of anything. The same occurred with the Hebrew yod which later came to be translated as Jot.

Jug: If you're in jug then you're in prison. Why "jug"? This comes from the Scottish Jougs which was a pillory or, more properly, an iron ring fastened to a wall and used as a pillory. The name in turn derived from the Old French Joug (yoke). There is also a suggestion that the Mexican-Spanish word juzgado (prison), simplified by early English speaking settlers to jug, was the source. The Scots origin seems to outdate the Mexican.

Keep: If someone has to continue with a difficult task then they must keep it up. This is a very common phrase but what is the "it" that has to be kept "up"? Modern language has lost the basis of this saying, but it comes from shuttlecock. The shuttle, naturally, had to be kept up in the air.

Kibosh: If someone puts the kibosh on something then they have adversely affected it; killed it off; put an end to it. It has been suggested that the phrase is based on the Irish "cie bias", the "bias" being pronounced "bosh". This translates into "cap of death".

Gary Davis of Mound, MN, USA wrote in January 2002 to say that he thinks a better probable source for the word is from Hebrew, which he ran across during study of the Bible. The Hebrew word transliterated as *kabash* means "bring into bondage, force, keep under, subdue, bring into subjection" according to the The New Strong's Dictionary of Hebrew and Greek Words, published by Thomas Nelson Publishers. Other suggestions come from Heraldry, Middle German and Yiddish. No one really knows.

Knuckle: To knuckle under is to submit, give way, admit defeat. Why should you put your knuckles under anything in order to express submission? The saying seems to go back to the late 17th century tavern habit of knocking the underside of the table when beaten in an argument; they put their knuckles under.
Another source at Expressions & Origins says that, "Although the word knuckle now generally signifies the finger-joint, it used to be applied to other joints such as the knee. To knuckle under therefore meant to bend the knee in respect or submission."
The same source goes on with:
"To knuckle down (apply oneself diligently) is, however, a reference to the knuckle of the hand. The term is from marbles, where the knuckle has to be placed down on the ground when playing. It is an important rule of the game that the knuckle must be placed exactly at the spot where one's previous marble ended up. From this sense of strict observance of a rule comes the modern sense of earnest application.
Near the knuckle (almost indecent) is more dificult. It may come from an old proverb expressing approval - 'The nearer the bone the sweeter the flesh [meat]' - or from the old school punishment of rapping the knuckles of a child with a ruler. The most likely explanation is that when carving a joint of meat one may get 'near the knuckle [bone]' and be unable to cut any further; thus a remark that is near the knuckle is close to the limit (of propriety). There is in fact an expression 'near the bone' that means the same."

Lam: If you're on the lam, then you're reckoned to be 'on the run' (from the law). The Word Detective gives the following:
"'On the lam' has been popular American slang for 'on the run' since at least the latter part of the 19th century. The root of 'lam' is the Old Norse word 'lamja,' meaning 'to make lame', and the original meaning of 'lam,' when it first appeared in English back in the 16th century, was 'to beat soundly'. The English word 'lame' is from the same source, as is 'lambaste,' a double whammy in that the 'baste' part is from a Scandinavian root meaning 'thrash or flog'."
The change in the meaning of 'lam' from 'beat' to 'run away' probably echoed another slang term for running away - 'beat it.' To 'beat it' (or 'lam it') could well come from the sound of rapid foot beats on the road when running.

Large: At large is an expression used to indicate that a prisoner has escaped and is free. "Large" seems a funny word to be used in this sense but it goes back to a French phrase "prendre la large" meaning to stand out to sea so as to be free to move. "Large" also has another nautical meaning as in By and Large.

Lark: To lark about is to play around; to frolic; to go on a spree. Again the main word seems inappropriate until one realises that it comes from the Middle English laik, to play and the Old English lac, a contest. To Skylark is a modern extension.

Law: Possession is nine points of the Law is a phrase used by someone claiming an overwhelming advantage over an opponent; it is also used

when someone claims that something in their possession actually belongs to them whether this is the case or not. The original nine points of the Law were: a lot of money; a lot of patience; a good cause; a good lawyer; a good counsel; good witnesses; a good jury; a good judge and, finally, good luck.

Lead: To swing the lead is to be lazy. This is another nautical saying. Normally the Leadsman, who was there to assess the depth of water under a ship, sat "in the chains" i.e. near the mast shrouds and swung a lead-weighted depth gauge so that it entered the sea near the bows. If he was lazy he just "swung the lead" without going to the trouble of sounding the depth, calling out an imaginary reading to the Officer of the Watch.

Leg: If someone says "don't pull my leg" they want you to stop playing a joke on them; to stop telling fibs and to tell the truth. There is a sense of good humour about the whole concept, but it may not have always been so. The origin is found in a Scottish rhyme in which "draw" is used in the sense of "pull" rather than the word itself. It goes:
"He preached, and at last drew the auld body's leg,
Sae the Kirk got the gatherins o' our Aunty Meg."
The suggestion in the rhyme is that Aunty Meg was hung for a crime and, at the end, the preacher pulled on her legs to ensure that she was dead. The rather more sombre overtones of this possibility than are apparent in the British use of the phrase are mirrored in the American usage, where there is much more a feeling of trickery and deception when the saying is used.

Show a leg is a saying ordering people to get up out of bed. It is mainly used in institutions such as camps, dormitories or other place where men sleep in communal rooms. The origin is naval and goes back to the days when civilian women were tolerated on board ship. When the bosun's mate called out the hands in the mornings he did so with the shout Show a leg! Modern English has almost forgotten that this was only part of the shout, the rest going ..."or a purser's stocking". The meaning here is that if a female leg appeared, preferably clad in a stocking, then she could stay in her bunk or hammock until the men had departed.

Level: To do your level best is to do as best as you can in the circumstances. The level here is an underground seam or level found in a mine. The particular mines of origin in this saying are the gold ones of 19th century California.

On the level is used to indicate honesty and is probably based on the level used by Freemasons in the 14th century. Freemasons were originally all skilled workers in stone. From their use of the square, which drew a straight line and made you Go straight, and their use of the level, to make sure a surface was true, came the extension of the sayings into wider use.

Level pegging comes from cribbage.

Lick: To lick into shape is to bring someone or something up to scratch; to make them fit for a particular task. Olden belief had it that bear cubs were born as shapeless masses of fur and flesh and had to be licked into shape by the mother.

To go at a great lick comes from mid-19C+ US slang, where 'lick' took on the meaning of 'to move fast'. Why is not clear. Incidentally, there are numerous other meanings to the word, such as 'to beat' someone in a competition.

Lily: He's lily livered is a saying used to describe a coward or weakling. The ancient Greeks used to sacrifice an animal before battle. The liver was regarded as a prime omen; if red then all was fine but if pale then this signified bad tidings. By extension the liver of a coward was thought to be pale and lily livered was one of the ways of describing this. Others were "white livered" and "pigeon livered".

Limelight: In the limelight means to be prominent or important. The saying reflects the way the old Victorian theatres were lit before the days of electricity. Lime was used as a source of illumination since the combustion of hydrogen and oxygen on the surface of lime produces a very bright light. Beams of this light were used to shine on the stage, but not all the stage could be lit up at once; hence some actors were in the limelight and others not.

Line: My job is on the line is perhaps related to the above but the expression has an implication of job insecurity. As a result the line may be the dole queue and this fits in with the mainly American use of the phrase since "queue" is seldom used in American English. An alternative origin may be the Assembly Line. This type of automation deprived factory workers of any sort of control over their speed of work - they had to keep up with the line. By extension, if someone felt that they had lost control of their own destiny or job security, then a comparison with the Assembly Line is understandable.

If you are asked to toe the line then you are expected to conform to the rules of the situation. In one suggested origin the Line actually exists and is still found in the House of Commons. It was put there to mark the sword distance between Government and Opposition front benches. Members were told to toe the line if, in the eyes of the Speaker, they became too excited.

A less romantic possible basis is found in athletics where the runners in a race line up with their toes on the line.

The US Navy has a completely different origin. From their web site comes:

"The space between each pair of deck planks in a wooden ship was filled with a packing material called "oakum" and then sealed with a mixture of pitch and tar. The result, from afar, was a series of parallel lines a half-foot or so apart, running the length of the deck.

Once a week, as a rule, usually on Sunday, a warship's crew was ordered to fall in at quarters -- that is, each group of men into which the crew was divided would line up in formation in a given area of the deck. To insure a neat alignment of each row, the Sailors were directed to stand with their toes just touching a particular seam.

Another use for these seams was punitive. The youngsters in a ship, be they ship's boys or student officers, might be required to stand with their toes just touching a designated seam for a length of time as punishment for some minor infraction of discipline, such as talking or fidgeting at the wrong time. A tough captain might require the miscreant to stand there, not talking to anyone, in fair weather or foul, for hours at a time. Hopefully, he would learn it was easier and more pleasant to conduct himself in the required manner rather than suffer the punishment.

From these two uses of deck seams comes our cautionary word to obstreperous youngsters to "toe the line.""

What sort of line are you in is said as an enquiry about the nature of someone's job, but, why line? The word seems very inappropriate in this sense, but we all recognise its meaning. There is even a panel game called "What's my Line?". I can find no good reference to the background, especially when one thinks that the saying is sometimes in the form of "what's your line of country?". However there seem to be at least two possibilities that personally occur to me, but without any documentary evidence to back them up. One puts the basis in the theatre where actors had their own lines to read; by extension this related to occupations. More possible is the theory that the line was the specific one on which the business details were entered on Victorian business cards; one can imagine the printer saying to a customer "what's your business line?"

Lines: To read between the lines is to be able to discern a hidden or secret meaning; to draw conclusions which are not at first apparent. The background here is that of cryptography where one method of secret writing was to position the message in such a way that it was only intelligible when alternate lines were read.

To have hard lines is to have bad luck; hardship. In Psalm 16.6: 'The lines are fallen unto me in pleasant places; yea, I have a goodly heritage', apparently referring to lines marking out the boundaries of the speaker's land and home. Hence, 'lines' came to mean one's position in life; thus 'hard lines' were bad fortune.

Loaf: If you are asked to use your loaf you are expected to show a little common sense; to show some intelligence. This is merely rhyming slang; loaf=loaf of bread=head.

Lock: Lock, stock and barrel is an old expression indicating totality, such as is seen in "he sold up, lock, stock and barrel" meaning everything. These locks and stocks are those of a gun and they came to be used in "totality" sense when guns themselves came to be manufactured in interchangeable pieces. This first occurred in the USA where a Senator in Massachusetts (I believe) persuaded his Senate that it was a good idea

to break down the manufacture in this way. The pieces were easier to transport and, since they were interchangeable, then "new" guns could be made up from bits from otherwise damaged weapons. To make up a gun you did, however need a lock, stock and barrel.

Loggerheads: If people are at loggerheads then they are quarrelling or arguing with each other. The phrase is several centuries old and can be found in Shakespeare's "Taming of the Shrew". Logger was the name given to the heavy wooden block fastened to the legs of grazing horses to prevent them straying. Sometimes the loggers became entangled, with resultant strife; horses being basically impracticable they were likened to a block head if they became entangled and this is the explanation of the saying according to some sources.
Other sources suggests that the origin is nautical. Loggerheads were long handled devices with a spherical cup at one end. These cups were filled with hot tar or pitch which was thrown at enemy sailors. They, of course, responded and both sides were truly at loggerheads.
There is yet another nautical suggestion, this time involving whale boats. In these boats the loggerhead was a channel through which ran the harpoon rope. The channel became very hot when the rope was running out; it had to be cooled with water. The heat generated was likened to that found when people argue.
I suspect the nautical origins are correct and I suspect also that the whale boat loggerhead derived its name from the hot pitch background.

Long: So long is an informal way of saying Goodbye. I can find no reference to an origin, but I think that I read once that the expression is based on the Jewish equivalent shalom, which sounds like so long.

Lurch: To be left in the lurch is to be left in a disadvantageous position. The expression comes from an old French dicing game called "Lourche". Any player who incurred a Lourche in the game was left helplessly behind. In the game of cribbage where, if your opponent has run out his score of 51 holes before you turn the corner or have pegged out your 31st hole, you are also left in the lurch. Additionally the winner, having put his peg in the final hole has caused the game to die; it is pegged out.

Madcap: If someone's considered impulsive or reckless then they could well be said to be a bit of a madcap. The "mad" portion seems clear, but why "cap"? I have been unable to find an explanation. A guess is that, in olden times, the village idiot wore an identifying cap so that people would excuse his mad behaviour and be understanding; I don't know.

Main brace: To splice the main brace means to celebrate something. The saying comes from the Royal Navy. The following was sent to me by an ex-Royal Navy sailor who was the designated 'rum bosun' on a number of ships: "..... As for the origin, it was a privilege earned by seamen who undertook dangerous tasks up the rigging, ie braces, of sailing ships during heavy seas. In those days it was granted by the ship's Bosun who used to take a sip from each man that he named; this tradition was stopped when steam/sail ships took over from sail".

Main chance: To have an eye to the main chance implies being on the look out for gain or profit. The phrase seems to derive from the dice game of "Hazzard" in which players throw twice, the first being the main throw and the second, determining, throw the chance.

March: If someone steals a march on you then the have gained an advantage by doing something earlier than expected. The origin of this saying is military and the march referred to is the one undertaken by armies. If one army marched unexpectedly soon, then it could well gain an advantage over its enemy.

Marines: To say to someone "tell that to the Marines" suggests that you don't really believe them. The Marines here are not the US variety but the much older military unit which belonged to King Charles II. The story goes that the King, being told by a naval officer that such things as flying fish existed, remarked "Tell that to my Marines". A nearby Marine officer, who felt that this was an insult, was mollified when the King explained that it was a compliment. His Marines had been to all parts of the World and had seen everything. If they had not seen flying fish, then they didn't exist.

Mark: If someone or something doesn't come up to the mark then it is below standard; inferior. Mark in this instance is the assay mark used on gold and silver items. If an article was below standard, then it was not up to the mark.

McCoy: The real McCoy is the genuine article. The saying is said to have arisen in the late 1920s. At that time there was a well known boxer called Kid McCoy; a drunk picked a fight with him without realising who he actually was. When told the situation he was still unbelieving. In the end Kid McCoy knocked him out; on waking up the drunk is alleged to have said; " you're right, it's the real McCoy!"
Like many of these sayings there is another suggested origin. This goes back to the 1880s and uses the name McKay, which was the name of a brand of whisky and was advertised as "The real McKay".
A third alternative comes from the days of prohibition in the USA. Billy McCoy was an infamous smuggler of hard liquor from Canada into the eastern US seaboard. Since the articles were genuine and not home brewed the they were "real McCoys"
The phrase is recorded in an Irish ballad of the 1880s and was in use in Australia in 1903. The real McKay is pretty certainly the correct version.
In September 2003 I had a message from 'Jerry' (no surname given). As judged by the spelling of 'traveled', I guess he comes from the USA. He offered the following origin. I pass it on, with a few additional details that I later discovered.
"Just a note: the term 'the Real McCoy' came from Elisha McCoy, a black born (apparently into slavery: my later finding) in 1843. At the age of 16 (presumably liberated: again, my later addition) he traveled to

Edinburgh, Scotland, to serve an apprenticeship in mechanical engineering. In Edinburgh, McCoy won the credentials of a master mechanic and engineer. He went on to invent the self-oiling Steam Engine Lubricator. After time others started duplicating it. People wanted to know if it was a copy or the 'Real McCoy'.
The reason I know this is because I am a big steam Engine buff."

Mettle: To be on your mettle is to be well prepared, ready to deal with the situation. This is simply a 16th century variation of metal.

Mickey: To take the mickey out of someone is to make fun of them. There appears nothing more subtle to this one than the stereotyped English attitude to the Irish.

Mickey Finn: to give some one a Mickey Finn means to add a sleeping drug to their drink in order to rob, or otherwise abuse them. Who was Micky Finn? The following answer appeared in the Q&A section of 'The Times' on 16th July 2003:
"Micky Finn was, around 1896, the dubious proprietor of the Lone Star Saloon and Palm Garden Restaurant, the lowest and roughest of all the saloons on Whiskey Row, Chicago. The Palm Garden was so called because it featured a scrawny palm tree in a pot and in this dark, secluded area, the pickpockets trained by Finn practised their arts. Victims had their drinks laced with chloral hydrate "knock-out drops", were rendered sleepy, deprived of clothes, money or virtue and slung out into an alleyway. By 1903 the saloon had been closed down. Finn escaped prosecution and found work as a bartender, supplementing his wage by selling details of his secret "recipe". Chloral hydrate, a near-relative of chloroform, was discovered in 1832. Its nasty taste had to be disguised by a strong-tasting drink, usually whiskey. It was widely used as a sedative in the late 19th and early 20th centuries and was occasionally used in this country as a soporific as late as 1998.
Alan Dronsfield, Swanwick, Derbyshire."

Mockers: To put the mockers on something is to spoil its chances of success, to put a curse on it. The expression started in the 1920s and

comes from either the English Mock or the Yiddish Makeh, meaning 'plague' or 'wound'.

Molly coddle: To molly coddle someone or some pet is to really fuss over them; to over indulge them. In the 18th century Molly or Miss Molly was a term used to describe effeminate or weak males. To coddle is to pamper or to spoil and is used in this way today. To Molly coddle was therefore to treat someone in a manner appropriate to weaklings. Rhyming must also have played a part, as it has in a number of sayings.

Money: see Pin

Monkey: It's cold enough to freeze the balls from a brass monkey is an expression with slightly genital overtones used to describe very cold weather. A widely accepted origin is quite different. In the old wooden Men-of-War the powder was taken from the powder magazine to the gun decks by young boys. These boys were frequently orphans or waifs taken off the streets. The passages and stairs along which they carried the powder were so narrow that only boys, and not men, could get through. They were known as "powder monkeys"; the cannon balls were stored in brass rings near the guns themselves. By analogy these rings were called "brass monkeys". On cold days they would contract with the result that the cannon balls would be squeezed out of the ring - hence the saying. Sadly, there is no historical evidence to support the presence of brass rings, or any other form of brass container for cannon balls. From the US Navy Historical Center web site comes the following:
"In actuality, ready service shot was kept on the gun or spar decks in shot racks (also known as shot garlands in the Royal Navy) which consisted of longitudinal wooden planks with holes bored into them, into which round shot (cannon balls) were inserted for ready use by the gun crew. These shot racks or garlands are discussed in: Longridge, C. Nepean. The Anatomy of Nelson's Ships. (Annapolis MD: Naval Institute Press, 1981: 64).
A top view of shot garlands on the upper deck of a ship-of-the-line is depicted in The Visual Dictionary of Ships and Sailing. New York: Dorling Kindersley, 1991: 17)."
However, the story of brass holders can't have come out of thin air and

there may be some truth in the story. Perhaps such holders were used on armed merchantmen? More research is indicated. I'll update this item as, and when, I find anything else.
In March 2003 I had my attention drawn to the Urban Legends web site at http://www.urbanlegends.com A message posted there in 1997 gave this information:
According to the Concise OED, the two volume version with four-pages-in-one printed in micro lettering, it is "a kind of gun or cannon." The usage seems to be archaic. The dictionary cites a 1650 book called Art. Rendition Edinbur. Castle as referring to "28 short brass munkeys alias dogs", and a 1663 (1672) publication called Flagellum, O Cromwell as referring to "Twenty eight brass drakes called Monkeys." Perhaps we have clue here!
According to the Random House Historical Dictionary of American Slang. (New York: Random House, 1994), the first recorded use of the term "brass monkey" appears to date from 1857 when it was used in an apparently vulgar context by C.A. Abbey in his book 'Before the Mast'. On page 108 it says "It would freeze the tail off a brass monkey."

Moon: Someone who is over the moon is elated. The allusion to feeling so high with excitement that one imagines one could jump or fly over the moon is easily understood. A definite origin for the phrase is unknown. It is alleged that the family of William Gladstone's wife invented idiomatic phrases which they used in private. 'Over the moon' is said, by some, to be one of these, possibly inspired by the nursery rhyme 'Hey Diddle Diddle'. Eric Partridge apparently found one 19C reference in a private letter, (?from the Gladstones?)

Mouth: Mealy mouth is a term used to imply that a person is velvet tongued; afraid of giving offence. It is somewhat derogatory in sense and comes directly from the Greek melimuthos meaning "honey-speech".

Mud: Here's mud in your eye is used as a toast (why do we use that word in the context of a drink? The answer can be found later). The speaker is really congratulating himself, for the saying comes from the world of horse racing where the winning horse will kick mud into the eyes of those following.

An alternative origin was suggested in a BBC TV programme about the restoration of very old houses with wattle and daub walls. The 'daub', a mixture of straw, mud, etc. was thrown at the wall. This was said to be quite enjoyable work, even though another ingredient was often cow dung! Such was the alleged pleasure that it was worth having 'mud in you eye' from the splash-backs. Believe this if you wish!

His name is mud is a derogatory phrase used to suggest that someone is out of favour or has offended his or her peers. This may have nothing to do with wet earth but refers to Dr Samuel Mudd, a country doctor in the USA and thus should be "his name is Mudd". In ignorance as to what had happened he treated the broken leg of one John Wilkes Booth shortly after Booth had assassinated President Abraham Lincoln in a Washington theatre in 1865. Booth had had a horse waiting for him outside the theatre; he made his escape to the nearby countryside and was treated by Dr Mudd. The next day, on hearing of the assassination, Dr Mudd informed the authorities that he had treated Booth. In spite of Dr Mudd's ignorance of the events at the time he gave the treatment, he was arrested and charged with conspiracy. He was convicted and sentenced to life imprisonment. Truth eventually prevailed and Dr Mudd was pardoned in 1869. However the public never forgave him and it was only in the 1970s was he actually declared innocent and the family name cleared.

However, "mud", in the sense of a fool, is described in my 1811 dictionary, and thus in use for several years prior to that. Additionally, as long ago as 1846 and well before the US Civil War, there was an expression, "the mud press," used to describe newspapers that besmirched people's reputations by throwing mud. So it seems most likely that the expression "his name is mud" was well established before Dr. Mudd met his unhappy fate, and his name just happened to be a play on words already well in use.

Incidentally, John Wilkes Booth features in the family tree of Cherie Booth, the wife of British Prime Minister Tony Blair.

Mum: To keep mum is to remain quiet; to keep information to oneself. The Mum here is connected to the German mummeln, to mumble. It has long been used in this manner in English and one of the oldest examples

is found in the dice game called Mumchance. This had to be played in absolute silence.

Murder: To cry or shout blue murder summons up a picture of someone in fear or terror but not involved in an actual murder. The origin of this one is said to be a play on the French morbleu. where bleu was a euphemism for dieu - this occurs also in sacré bleu . The related to 'get away with blue murder' must have the same source, but has no overtones of fear or terror, merely good fortune. Blue is occasionally added to words to strengthen them, e.g. blue blazes, blue funk.

Music: If you must face the music then you are accused of some mistake or misdemeanour and must accept whatever punishment that is deemed necessary. One theory suggests that the saying comes from the theatre, where nervous actors must literally face the music when the curtain goes up. Others think that the origin is military and based on the drumming out ceremony that accompanied dishonourable discharge.

Mustard: To cut the mustard means to come up to expectations, come up to scratch. The origin here is uncertain. Some say that it's a corruption of the military phrase 'to pass muster', indicating that military standards have been achieved. Others say that a cowboy expression 'the proper mustard', meaning the genuine thing, may be the basis. 'As keen as mustard', dating from the mid 1600s has also been suggested. In truth, no one really knows!

Nail: To pay on the nail is to pay promptly for goods or services. The nails in this saying were common accessories in medieval fairs; they were long, pointed and narrow sticks with a little platform on the top producing an overall appearance of a nail. They were stuck in the ground and acted as the base for trade. Two traders would reach a deal and one would pay the other by placing the money on the little platform - they paid on the nail. Examples of more permanent nails can still be seen outside the Corn Exchange in Bristol, but they are only examples and not the basis of the saying, as many Bristolians believe.

To nail a lie is to expose an untruth, but why "nail"? It is said that the saying comes from the habit of traders nailing counterfeit coins to shop counters for all to see and recognise.

Nail is also used in the sense of to be caught/punished for a misdemeanour, such as 'I'll nail you for that'. The origin here seems to come from a few centuries ago when, in Britain, 'justice' was meted out mostly by hanging or flogging. However there were some crimes for which you could be 'nailed'. For these crimes you would be taken to the hangman's gibbet and nailed through the earlobe(s) until night. You had two options: you could either stand all day, nailed to the scaffold or else tear your ear from the nail. Women could also be nailed through the tongue for spreading malicious gossip.

Namby-Pamby: He's a namby-pamby describes a "wet" individual. Ambrose Phillips (1674-1749) was so called by Henry Carey because of Phillips' "wishy-washy" poetry addressed to Lord Carteret's children. NAMby-pAMBy is clearly a play on AMBrose, again with a rhyming element thrown in.

Neck: If you are speaking about where you live you might say "in my neck of the woods". Why "neck"? This is an example of a Fossil word in which an old meaning has been preserved in only one or two special sayings. Short shrift is another. In the case of neck, the ancestor words in

Old Breton (cnoch) and Old High German (hnack) both had a meaning of "hill" or "summit". This sense has been lost in all other uses of the word neck.

Neck: & crop: Brass: see Cropper and Brass

Nellie: Not on your nellie is an expression used to describe an element of disbelief; not on your life; not on any account. Again rhyming comes into this one; Nellie is part of Nellie Duff, rhyming slang for "puff" which, in turn is slang for "breath"; i.e. life itself.

Nest: A Mare's nest is a "nothing"; a triviality where once was thought to be importance. An example is "He's discovered a mare's nest". In some parts of Scotland it is a "snake's nest"; in Cornwall a "wee's nest" and in Devon a "blind mare's nest". It seems that Mare is only one of several variants and happens to have become the most well known; however, why Mare has defeated my researches. The 1811 dictionary says: "He has found a mare's nest and is laughing at the eggs; said of one who laughs without any apparent cause".

A nest egg is a little saved up something or other that will hopefully grow. The saying comes from the "trick" of putting a pottery egg into a chicken's nest in the hope that it would encourage her to lay more. The saying has been in use since the early 1600s.

Newt: To be as drunk as a newt is to be really drunk. Why Newt? I have found two explanations, one suggesting that the saying came to Britain in WW2 from the US. In this instance newt is a corruption of the Eskimo tribe 'Iniut'. Due to their genetic makeup, these Eskimos are allegedly more susceptible to alcohol than other races.
The second explanation goes back to the 18thC or so, when gentlemen spent much time in gaming houses. They left their horses outside in the care of young boys, whom they called 'newts'. They often sent these young lads a warm-up drink or two during the long evening, only to find them somewhat inebriated when they came to collect their horses! A nice explanation with, sadly, no reference to it in the 1811 Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue - pity.

Nick: If something is done in the nick of time then it is done at just about the last moment. For hundreds of years the score in team games was kept by a tally man who would put a nick in a piece of wood each time a team scored. If victory came at the last minute then the winning nick was the nick in time.

Nincompoop: A Nincompoop is a fool. The word seems to be a made-up one. Dr Johnson suggests a corruption of non compus mentis but experts don't all agree. It may be that the word comes from non compos mixed up with the Dutch word Poep a "fool".

Ninepence: If something or someone is as right as ninepence then they are fine; well; problem free. Ninepence here is thought to be a corruption of ninepins. When all nine pins are standing upright they are ready for the next game; there are no problems with starting the game.
Other uses of ninepence have largely fallen out of modern English e.g. "he's ninepence short of a shilling". This type of saying doesn't seem to be related to the first one.

Nip & Tuck: To race nip & tuck means much the same as "neck & neck", but the latter suggests two racers each level with the other, whereas nip & tuck implies a race where the lead changes. The earliest recorded form is found in James K Paudling's Westward Ho! (1832): 'There we were, at rip and tuck, up one tree and down another.' perhaps the Rip came from the sense of "letting her rip" which changed to Nip over the years. Tuck is an old slang word for 'vim & vigour'

Nines: If you're dressed to the nines then you are wearing you very best bib and tucker; your best clothes. It is felt that the expression started out as dressed to the eyes. In old English "eyes" would have been "eyne" and, over the centuries this became changed to "nines".

Nitty gritty: To get down to the nitty gritty of something is to get to its basics. The origin here is somewhat unpleasant and a little unexpected. It seems to derive from the nits found in unclean pubic hair plus the tiny, gritty pieces of dried faeces found in unwashed peri-anal hair.
The Dictionary of Popular Phrases (see Appendix) says: "Let's get

down to the (real) nitty-gritty". Idiom. Meaning, 'let's get down to the real basics of a problem or situation' (like getting down to brass tacks). Sheilah Graham, the Hollywood columnist, in her book Scratch an Actor (1969) says of Steve McQueen: 'Without a formal education - Steve left school when he was fifteen - he has invented his own vocabulary to express what he means. . His "Let's get down to the nitty-gritty" has gone into the American language.' All she meant, I feel, is that McQueen popularized the term, for it is generally held to be a Negro phrase and was talked about before the film star came on the scene. It seems to have had a particular vogue among Black Power campaigners c1963, and the first OED Supp. citation is from that year. In 1963, Shirley Ellis recorded a song 'The Nitty Gritty' to launch a new dance (like 'The Locomotion' before it). The opening line of the record is, 'Now let's get down to the real nitty-gritty'. Stuart Berg Flexner (Listening to America, 1982) comments: 'It may have originally referred to the grit-like nits or small lice that are hard to get out of one's hair or scalp or to a Black English term for the anus.'

Nod: If a resolution passes on the nod it passes without much difficulty. The saying is also used in the sense of gaining monetary credit. One suggestion for the origin comes from the House of Commons where it was possible to nod one's vote.
An alternative derives from the auction houses where a bid can be given on the nod. This latter explanation best fits the saying when used in its sense of obtaining credit for something but doesn't really fit with the more common use.

Nose: On the nose is an expression signifying exactness; precise timing. It comes from radio broadcasting in the USA where the producer would signal to the performers that they were "on air" by touching his nose.

To pay through the nose is to pay an exorbitant price for something. I have found a couple of possible origins, one of which I reckon to be a little "anaemic"; it goes as follows. As early as the 17th century "rhino" was slang for money; "Rhinos" is Greek for "nose". Noses bleed and someone who pays over the odds can also be said to bleed.
The other explanation goes back to the days of the Danish invasion of

Britain. 9th century Danes were particularly strict with their tax laws, especially where "foreigners" were concerned. They levied a particular tax against the Irish called the "Nose Tax"; failure to pay was met by harsh punishment - the debtor had his nose slit open.
The expression only seems to have come into English at the end of the 17th century and so the "anaemic" version is the most likely to be correct.

It's no skin off my nose is used to express indifference to the outcome of an argument or event. I have been unable to discover why.

Notch: To be Top notch is to be the best at something. I can find no certain origin, but it is not difficult to imagine results of endeavours being recorded by notches on a stick or rod - like a Tally stick - or heights of children being marked on a door post.
An extensive Internet search in February 2002 failed to find a definitive origin. The 'Word Detective' site did offer the following:
"..... theories about the source of "top notch," which since about 1848 has meant "first rate" or simply "the best." Unfortunately, none of the theories you propose matches what we do know about the source of "top notch" (which isn't, however, very much). Evidently, the term "top notch" originated in some sort of game or competition where the score was kept by moving markers upward on a notched board or stick. The winner, presumably would be the one whose marker reached the top notch first, making "top notch" a fitting metaphor for "the best." Ordinarily I'd apologize for the vagueness of that explanation, but it's the best anyone can do today, and the fault really lies with the slackers back in 1848 who neglected to write down precisely what game they were playing".

Nutshell: In a nutshell is an expression used to convey that a situation has been summed up very precisely and correctly in few words - "you've got it in a nutshell". Nutshell seems an odd unit by which to measure this degree of exactitude. The origin can be found in Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable. Here it describes that Pliny (vii, 21) tells us that Cicero (Apud Gellium, ix, 421) asserts that the whole Iliad was written in such a small hand on a single piece of parchment that it could be put into a walnut shell. Brewer quotes other examples of extremely small writing,

such as the Bible produced by Peter Bales in 1590 that could be enclosed within a walnut shell. The analogy is thus clear.

Oar: If someone puts an oar in during a discussion or argument then they are interfering. The words are part of a longer phrase which is never used these days; it should be "to put an oar in someone else's boat". The expression is recorded in 1542 in an elaborate, but never-the-less recognisable form in a translation of a work by Erasmus. "Whatsoever came in his foolish brain/ Out it should were it never so vain/ In eche man's bote would he have an oar/ But no word of good purpose, lesse or more."

Offing: In the offing is a means of saying that something is imminent. It is a nautical term used to indicate that a ship out at sea is actually visible from the shore i.e. off shore, in the Offing, not far from port and due to arrive in the near future.

Ointment: A fly in the ointment is something that gets in the way; an encumbrance; a hindrance to the outcome. There are many possible ways of describing this type of difficulty but why fly and why ointment? The answer almost certainly lies in the Bible. The book of Ecclesiastes (10.i) includes "Dead flies cause the ointment of the apothecary to send forth a stinking savour...."

OK: If something is OK then it is acceptable. There have been numerous suggestions as to the origin of this one. Some believe it came from the abbreviation of Orrin Kendall biscuits, which American soldiers ate during the civil war. Others say OK is short for Aux Cayes, a Haitian port that American sailors praised for its rum. Another legend suggests the word comes from Old Keokuk, a Native American tribal chief who was said to have signed treaties with his initials. Others say that it stands for 'All Correct.', but then why not 'AC'? Yet others suggest the French

"au quai" meaning "at dock", and therefore at last safe from the ravages of the open sea.
What is known is that OK first appeared in print in the spring of 1839 in the Boston Morning Post. By that stage it must have been a well established phrase and was further popularised in the election campaign of 1840 when Martin Van Buren, a native of Kinderhook, NY, popularly referred to as "Old Kinderhook" - OK for short - stood for re-election. 'OK' was widely used and abused by both sides.
There are words like OK in many other languages. In the West African language of Wolof, "waw kay" means "yes." In Choctaw, "okeh" means "indeed", or "may it be so". Of course, there's also the Scottish "Auch Aye"!
The truth is that no one knows the origin. The US civil war biscuits are ruled out because they came into being 25 years or so after the phrase. It probably comes from several sources, and I like the Choctaw version.

Onions: To know your onions means to know what you're talking about; to be an expert in a particular field. I can't find a derivation, but it's not hard to imagine that this comes from the hobby of vegetable growing where a particularly successful gardener, who produces outstanding produce, including onions, would have this said about him.
However, in June 2003, Michael Quinion offered the following on his World Wide Words web site
"The crucial fact is that the expression isn't British but American, first recorded in the magazine Harper's Bazaar in March 1922. It was one of a set of such phrases, all with the sense of knowing one's stuff, or being highly knowledgeable in a particular field, that circulated in the 1920s. Others were "to know one's oats", "to know one's oil", "to know one's apples", "to know one's eggs", and even "to know one's sweet potatoes" (which appeared in a cartoon by T A Dorgan in 1928). You may notice certain similarities between the substances mentioned, most being foods and most having names that start with a vowel."

Ox: My giddy ox is an expression of mild surprise at a situation that seems stupid or outlandish, The saying is now somewhat outdated but it is based on the saying "to play the giddy ox" which, in its day, meant to behave in an irresponsible or over hilarious manner. This saying in turn

came from a time when an ox was regarded as an even more stupid animal than now. Such use is seen in Shakespeare's Merry Wives of Windsor (V,v)

Paid: To put paid to something is to finish it; to make it over and done with. The background is that of counting houses; when accounts were settled and closed the word Paid was written at the bottom. They were over and done with; finished.

Pains: If you say that someone undertook painstaking research, then you mean that their work was meticulous; full of effort and detail. By elaboration the saying can be expanded to say that the researcher went to the effort to give him or herself pain. Why should this type of feeling be associated with pain? Surely something like "time consuming" research; or "meticulous" or "extensive" but why Pain?. The logic and origin of this saying defeats me and I can't find any sort of explanation. I thought that painstaking may have come from a completely different root from pain but, in spite of painstaking research I have had no luck. There is no help from German where the equivalent has absolutely no connotation with pain, only of "thoroughness". Surely some expert reader will be able to cast light.

Paint: To paint the town red is said to happen when people go out on a spree or indulge in excessive revelry. The phrase started in the USA in about 1880 and came to Britain about ten years later. It is said to come

from the US slang use of "paint" to mean "drink", When someone's drunk their face and nose are flushed red, hence the analogy.
An alternative origin comes from the Wild West and alludes to revelling cowboys who would express their exuberance by letting off shots and saying that they would paint the town red if anybody tried to stop them.
A different origin, not in accordance with the dates above, is found on: Expressions & Origins which gives: "..... locates its origin in an actual piece of drunken vandalism by the Marquis of Waterford and a bunch of his chums who, as an aristocratic joke, actually painted parts of the local town red in the area of Melton Mowbray, Leicestershire, in 1837. The incident created sufficient stir to be recorded in contemporary verse and engraving."

Pale: If someone is beyond the pale they are regarded as beyond normal civilised behaviour; uncouth; somewhat barbarous. The Pale here was an actual area. In medieval times both The Pale of Ireland and the Pale of Calais existed. A Pale was the area over which the King of England had control. It was often little more than the area immediately around a town. All outside was regarded as full of savagery and barbarism. The word itself comes from the Latin palum meaning "stake". By evolution this came to mean "fence around a territory".

Pan out: If something pans out then it has a good outcome. The origin is found in the language of gold diggers. They wash their diggings in a water filled pan. If they have found gold then, because of its heavy nature, it would fall to the bottom of the pan and could be washed clean of all the other bits and pieces; it panned out.

Pan: A flash in the pan describes something which shows great initial promise but then doesn't come up to expectations. The pan in this instance is the one on early flintlock rifles. Sometimes only the powder in the ignition pan would light; the propelling charge would remain unlit and the rifle would not fire; there was truly only a flash in the pan.

Pander: To pander to someone is to support their wishes; to act on their behalf; to be their agent. Pander comes directly from Pandarus, the Trojan who procured the love of Cressida for Troilus.

Parcel: If something is part and parcel of something then it is an essential element. Part is easy to understand, but why parcel? Here the word is used in the sense of a parcel of land. i.e. a portion, and was used as such in the 15th century. By the 17th century the use as a package had evolved.

Park: We are all familiar with the term "to park a car", but why Park? Park is an area of enclosed open land, such as a city or national park. Did the owners of horses and carriages, before the days of the car, store their vehicles in such open areas when they went visiting in London? Who knows, but the seeds of the modern usage can be found in Shakespeare's "How are we parked and bounded in a Pale?" (cf: beyond the Pale). The modern usage itself allegedly started in the USA.

Pat: To have something off pat is to have it exactly right. The saying has been in use since the 17th century but its precise origin is not altogether clear. The best suggestion is that it is derived from the sense of the word a "light touch". If something only needs a light touch to get it right then it must be almost perfect. Not very convincing I'm afraid, but it's all that I could find. Pat in 1811 meant "apposite, or to the purpose".

Patch: "Your team's not a patch on mine" is the sort of expression that can be heard at sporting events. It implies great superiority of one team over the other. I can find no explanation for the use of patch in this expression.

Pear shaped: To go pear shaped is an expression used to indicate that a scheme has not been perfectly executed. The phrase seems to have originated in British English in the late 1940s or early 1950s. I have come across several suggested origins, but the best, for me, is related to training aircraft pilots. At some stage they are encouraged to try to fly loops - very difficult to make perfectly circular; often the trainee pilot's loops would go pear shaped.

Peg: To peg out; see Lurch

To take down a peg implies a reduction in status for someone. The Peg in this case is of the type used in the past to raise or lower a ship's

colours. The higher the colours, the greater the esteem and vise versa. An alternative explanation comes from as far back as the year 975. King Egbert was so annoyed about the amount of drunkenness in his Kingdom that he ordered pegs to be put into the sides of ale kegs and said that no man should be allowed to drink below the level of the previous peg at a single sitting. No sooner did this edict come into force than people began to drink from others' kegs in order to take them down a peg and thus reduce their drinking status.

Pell Mell: To run pell mell means to do so in a vigorous, almost reckless, manner. The words are derived from Pall Mall, the London street, in turn derived from an Italian ball game palla (ball) maglio (mallet) which used to be played on the land that eventually became Pall Mall. The players were often vigorous and indiscriminate in their actions, hence the analogy.

Penny: If someone says "the penny has dropped", then they mean that they finally, and often suddenly, understand a situation. I have found no authenticated origin for the saying, but it must surely come from old Victorian slot machines, where a game would only work when the penny had dropped.

In for a penny, in for a pound implies taking some sort of risk. Whilst it may have had an origin in gambling, its modern use relates more to decision making and deciding if a more risky option is better than a less risky one. If the risky version is chosen, then the decision is often accompanied with 'oh well, in for a penny, in for a pound', implying that the risk is worth taking and must be carried through.
I think the saying must be several centuries old although none of my reference books give a date.

Petard: If someone is hoist with his own petard then he has been caught in his own trap; beaten with his own weapons; involved in danger he intended for others. The Petard was an ancient iron bell shaped engine of war which was filled with gun powder. It was hoisted, usually on a tripod, onto gates, barricades etc. to blow them up. The danger was that it would explode prematurely and involve the engineer who had fired it.

Peter: If something peters out then it comes gradually and gently to an end. The saying comes from the American gold fields where the black powder used as an explosive was known as peter, after the saltpetre on which it was based. When a seam was truly worked out even the peter couldn't bring forth more gold.

Phoney: When something or someone is phoney then they are not genuine. The word comes from "fawney", an obsolete underworld name for the imitation gold found in rings said to be used by US confidence tricksters in the 1920s. Exactly the same "fawney" was, however, current in England in 1811 and the 1920s term must have been a continuation. In December 2002 Michael Walsh wrote: "Under "Phony" you refer to the "fawney". The Gaelic word (certainly in Irish) Fainne (pronounced Fawnyeh) is in curent use and means a ring (finger ring), which is clearly the source of fawney."

Pie: When it's all pie in the sky then it's all a bit unlikely; improbable; open to wishful thinking. The original use of the phrase had a deal more cynicism in it. It comes from a Trade Union parody of a well known hymn "The Sweet By and By" (see by and by). The parody became more popular than the hymn during the days of the Depression. It went: "You will eat, bye and bye/ In that glorious land above the sky!/ Work and pray, live on hay,/ You'll get pie in the sky when you die!" (Joe Hill: The Preacher and the Slave.)

Pig: To buy a pig in a poke. See Cat

Pigeon: That's not my pigeon is said to indicate that it is not a person's fault or responsibility. Pigeon in this instance is an incorrect spelling of Pidgin as in Pidgin English. "Pidgin" itself is an extreme Chinese corruption of "Business", hence the saying.

Pikestaff: Something is said to be as plain as a pikestaff if it is quite clear; obvious; unambiguous. In an earlier form the phrase was as plain as a packstaff. A packstaff was the staff or stick on which a pedlar carried his pack. The allusion is clear.

Pillar: To go from pillar to post is to go from one disaster to another. It is suggested that it comes from the comparison with criminals going from the pillory to the whipping post.
Another possible definition suggests that the saying was originally from *post to pillar*. In this case the comparison is with old, indoor, tennis courts - Real (=Royal) Tennis is still played on replica courts today - and relates to the banging about of the balls. (NB: Real Tennis is 'Court Tennis' in the US.)

If someone is a pillar of the Establishment then they are a prominent member of a group, political party or society in general. The origin seems obvious; "pillars" are "supports" and this is how the phrase should be constructed. It comes from an Ibsen play. In the original Norwegian the text was "Support of the Establishment" but became translated as "Pillar".

Pin: Pin money is now regarded as a term for small amounts of money, usually saved by a woman. The sum was not always small; in the 14th and 15th centuries pins were very expensive and were only allowed to be sold on the first two days of each January. Husbands gave their wives special money for the purchase. As time went by pins became ever cheaper and the money could be spent on other things. However, the expression remained.

Pink: In the pink signifies a state of well being; good health. The pink here has nothing to do with colour, rather with the same source as pinking scissors. They are both based on the old English pynca meaning "point", hence "peak" or "apex". Shakespeare in Romeo and Juliet (II, iv) speaks of "the pink of courtesy".

Pip: To give someone the pip means to get them fed up; to annoy them; to get them browned off. It is possible that the basis is that of the old fashioned saying "to have the hip", where "hip", a feeling of melancholia, was an abbreviation of hypochondria. An alternative suggestion puts the connection with pip the poultry disease which causes the birds to pine away.

Pipe down: If someone is told to pipe down then they are expected to stop talking and be quiet. Pipe Down was the last call on the Bosun's pipe each day, signalling time for "lights out" and silence.

Pipe: A pipe dream is an unlikely to be fulfilled wish. This is based on the hallucinogenic effect of smoking an opium pipe. It is first recorded in Wallace Irvin's 'Love Sonnets of a Hoodlum' (1901), but probably dates back to the 1890s.

Piping: If food is piping hot the it can be said to be as hot as it is possible to eat. The analogy in this case is said to be with boiling water which pipes and sings with the heat.

Plain sailing: It's all plain sailing is used as a way of stating that a particular situation is problem free. This was originally "plane sailing" which was the method of recording course and speed of a ship on a plane projection of the spherical Earth. This type of charting was easier than the more complicated method required for a spherical assessment. Over the years the spelling changed to that of today's style.

Play fast and loose: If a young man plays fast and loose it means now-a-days that he's a bit of a lady's man; likes a good time. The origin is very different. "Pricking the Belt" was an old fair ground game, a little like the three card trick. The victim was invited to push a skewer through a folded belt so as to fix it to the table. The operator would then show that the belt was not, in fact 'fast', but still 'loose'. He would, of course, win the bet.

Plum: If a job is regarded as a plum job then it is considered very desirous. Why "plum"? Plum in the 17th century was slang for £1000, a very large sum indeed in those times. This use was then applied to some political jobs, thought by the man in the street to involve little work for a lot of money. From there the word entered wider use for an easy, choice job.

Plug: To plug a song is a phrase used to describe attempts to popularise a song by repeated requests for it to be played. Sometime these requests

are part of an orchestrated effort and are therefore likely to be unrepresentative of the public's feelings. The origin could be from Leonard Plugge, a disk jockey on Radio Normandie before WW2. He certainly pushed records, but his part in the origin is not certain.

Point: To stretch a point is to exceed the bounds of normal acceptance; to exceed what is right and proper. The point in this saying is probably one of the points which were parts of clothing to which laces were attached. To "truss a point" was to tie the laces which fastened the garment. To "stretch a point" was to stretch the laces to allow for the extra fullness that might be expected after a good meal.

Poke: Pig in a poke; see Cat

Pole: If someone is described as being up the pole then they are reckoned to be a little crazy. Why pole and why up? I can't find a reference but it's not difficult to suggest that the background may be in the "mad" pastime of the 1920s when it was fashionable to climb up flag poles and sit there for as long as possible. sometimes for many, many days. Often there was no object other than that the pole was there.
An alternative origin is based on the use of pole as a term for a ship's mast. Sailors obviously had to climb the pole regularly, but this suggestion lacks the element of madness found in the expression. I prefer the 1920s.

Post: Pillar to post; see Pillar

Pot: To take pot luck is to be offered a choice from what's available and not from what you might wish. It goes back to the days when a cooking pot was always on the fire. An unexpected guest was welcome to eat but only from what was on offer in the pot. To take a pot shot has the same basis - to shoot at game in general in order to get something for the pot rather shooting at a specific type of animal.

If someone has gone to pot then they are thought to have deteriorated or declined from their previous status. The pot here is the melting pot into which valuable pieces of stolen silver and gold were remelted. They had gone to pot never to re-appear again. In spite of this

probable origin, it is quite possible to relate the saying to the cooking pot described above. Who knows?

Potty: If someone is driven potty then they are being annoyed, frustrated, bothered etc. by something that is probably of little real consequence. I can't find an origin for this one but I guess that it comes from the use of the word potter in the sense of "dabble", "wander about aimlessly" etc. rather that of making crockery.

Ps & Qs: To mind your Ps and Qs is to be careful; cautious. The Ps here are said to be pints and the Qs to be quarts. The publican "chalks up" or "puts on the slate" the drinks supplied to customers; they must be aware of how much they have drunk or their bills will be unexpectedly large. An alternative view is that P derives from the French pied=foot and the Q comes from queue=tail(of a wig) and that the whole saying is based on 18th century court etiquette.
Bruce Kahl, a fellow "Origins" enthusiast, has offered more explanations:
-Advice to a child learning its letters to be careful not to mix up the handwritten lower-case letters p and q.
-Similar advice to a printer's apprentice, for whom the backward-facing metal type letters would be especially confusing.
-An abbreviation of mind your please's and thank-you's.
-Instructions from a French dancing master to be sure to perform the dance figures pieds and queues accurately.
-An admonishment to seamen not to soil their navy pea-jackets with their tarred queues, that is, their pigtails.
-There was once an expression P and Q, often written pee and kew, which was a seventeenth-century colloquial expression for "prime quality". This later became a dialect expression (the English Dialect Dictionary reports it in Victorian times from Shropshire and Herefordshire). OED2 has a citation from Rowland's Knave of Harts of 1612:
"Bring in a quart of Maligo, right true: And looke, you Rogue, that it be Pee and Kew."
Finally,to say they're the initials of "Prime Quality" seems to be folk

etymology, because surely that would make "PQ" rather than "P and Q". Nobody is really sure what either P or Q stood for.

Pup: To be sold a pup. See Cat

Purple: To have a purple patch means to have an exceptionally good period in, say, a game. The origin here is a little obscure but could be based on the fact that Roman noblemen wore purple togas. They were clearly exceptional people, hence the analogy. Alternatively the emphasis may be on the patch since purple and other multicoloured areas were sometimes set into ancient illuminated texts and other ventures in order to make them look more distinguished than they truly were. In Horace's De Arte Poetica he says "Often to weighty enterprises and such as profess great objects, one or two purple patches are sewn on to make a fine display in the distance".

Queer street: To be in queer street means to be in financial trouble. The origin here is said to be the habit of traders putting a query (?) against the name of customers with suspected financial problems. In 1811, however, the saying only implied that something was wrong or improper. There was no sense of financial element then. What it does say is:
'Wrong. Improper. Contrary to one's wish. It is queer street, a cant phrase, to signify that it is wrong or different to our wish.'
I have also been told that the expression may come from ‘Carey Street', a street in the legal section of London but, of course, there's no such sense

in 1811, nor is there even any mention of 'Carey Street'.There is, however, an entry in Brewer's which says that 'to be in Carey street' is to be bankrupt. The bankruptcy court is situated there. It seems that 'Carey street' is more recent than 'Queer street'.

Rabbit: To rabbit on is to carry on talking, often about trivia and to the annoyance of others. The saying comes from rhyming slang. Rabbit and pork stew used to be a popular stew. "rabbit & pork"=talk.

Rain cats and dogs: If the rain is teeming down the it's said to be raining cats and dogs. This seems to be an odd way of describing weather. The expression first appeared in print in 1653. ("It shall raine.....dogs and polecats").
There are three possible origins, one of which goes back to Norse times. In old Norse weather lore the cat was related to rain and the dog to the wind. If this were the origin then it is likely that the words would have appeared in print before 1653.
The second suggestion puts the basis in the Greek word Catadupa, "cataract" or "waterfall".
The final idea suggests that the drainage of medieval streets was so poor that cats and dogs frequently drowned during a heavy downpour. Swift's "Description of a City Shower" (1710) gives a good idea of what it was like. It's worth repeating.
"Now, from all parts the swelling kennels flow/ And bear their trophies with them as they go/..../ Drown'd puppies, stinking sprats, all drench'd in mud/ Dead cats and turnip tops, come tumbling down the flood."
You may take your choice. The argument continues.

Rain: If someone is as right as rain, then they feel fine. Why rain? I've not found an answer.

Rap: It's not worth a rap is said to imply that something is of such low value as to be almost worthless. The Rap in this expression was used in Ireland in the 1720s. Small change was in very short supply and the vacuum was filled by counterfeit copper halfpenny pieces. These counterfeits were known as raps. They soon fell to something like a quarter of their supposed value.

Rat: To smell a rat is to be suspicious of a situation. It comes from the days when rats were common pests and carriers of disease. Dogs were prized for their ability to smell out and destroy them. A dog which began to sniff around might well have smelt a rat, and this idea was transferred to a person who was suspicious of something.

Red: If someone is in the red then they are overdrawn at the bank. In pre computer times bank statements showed a positive balance in black, hence In the Black, and a negative one in red. This type of statement was produced up to the 1960s, but the advent of computerised print-outs meant that it was difficult to print red and black on the same sheet (impossible until the development of the colour printer). As a result, the red was replaced by "OD" for "Overdrawn", but we still said that we were In the Red when OD appeared.

Red letter: A red letter day is a special day, one to be remembered. In olden days some of the Saints' Days were celebrated with extra festivities; these special days were indicated in the Church calendar with red letters.

Red tape: A load of red tape is a way of describing something that is over full of bureaucracy. Charles Dickens is believed to be the first person to have used this phrase. The red tape is the tape (in fact pink in colour) used to tie up bundles of official papers.

Rigmarole: What a rigmarole describes a situation that seems excessively complex and where it is difficult to see the wood for the trees. This 700 year old expression began life as The Ragman Roll, a document with many pendant seals given to King Edward I in 1291 by Scottish noblemen. Each nobleman signed a deed of loyalty and the King affixed

his seal. All the deeds were eventually joined together to produce The Ragman Roll. The Roll is kept in the Public Records Office in London and is 12 metres long.

Riley/Reilly: To lead the life of Riley/Reilly is to live in the lap of pleasure and luxury. There's no generally accepted origin that I can find, other than that it somehow relates to Irishmen. However, there is one distinct possibility that goes back to the time of the Victorian music hall. One of the popular songs of the time was about an Irishman named O'Reilly who dreamed of making a fortune and then leading a life of luxury. The song was called 'Are you the O'Reilly' in which the audience joined in the chorus, ending up with the last line which was 'Cor blimey, O'Reilly, you are looking well'. My earliest certain reference to the actual phrase is in a 1919 song 'My name is Kelly', clearly based on well established usage.

Ringer: A dead ringer for someone is another person who has a great resemblance to that person. The word 'ringer' originally described a horse used to illegally substitute for another in a race. Why 'ringer' is used has almost defeated my researches; one possibility is that the word, which was once slang for 'counterfeit', was derived from the brass rings sold as gold at country fairs. 'Dead', in this instance is used in the sense of abrupt or exact, like in 'dead stop', or 'dead shot'.
An alternative explanation comes from medieval times. In order to make sure that a buried person was actually dead, a string was sometimes tied to the deceased's wrist and attached to a bell above ground. If he was merely unconscious and woke up, he was able to ring the bell and draw attention to himself - he was a 'dead ringer'. Personally, I don't like this one much, as it has little to do with current usage. However, it could still be the basis, since it has been suggested that someone having a close resemblance to a deceased person was regarded as being the 'dead ringer'.

Rise: To take the rise out of someone is to make them look daft or easily fooled. The allusion here is to fishing where casting a fly on the water will tempt fish to rise to take the bait, if they're daft enough to do so.

River: To be sold down the river is to be misled or to have a promise broken. The phrase comes from the USA where, in the 1800s, rich house owners would sell their unwanted black house servants to be slaves on the plantations. The servants would leave the relative comforts of the big houses to be shipped down the river (the Mississippi) to the hardship of the plantations.

To be sent up the river was originally an underworld term for a sentence in a reformatory or jail. According to 'Morris Dictionary of Word and Phrase Origins' by William and Mary Morris, it probably derives from the fact that New York State's most famous prison, Sing Sing, is 'up the river' from New York City.

Rob: If you rob Peter to pay Paul you are benefiting one enterprise or person at the expense of another. One version of the origin dates to the rivalry between St Paul's Cathedral and St Peter's Church, Westminster starting in 1540. The church at Westminster became a cathedral at that time; in consequence St Paul's lost some of its revenue. Ten years later St Peter's status was revoked and it became a church again, much to the benefit of St Paul's. Peter had been robbed to pay Paul.
However nice this story, it isn't the basis. The expression was in use as early as 1380 and a similar one is recorded in the 1170s. It is also known in French and German. The truth is that the origin has been lost in the mist of time.

Robinson: Before you can say "Jack Robinson" is a way of expressing immediacy; something will be done straight away. There is one suggested origin involving the habit of an eccentric gentleman who was renowned for his constant change of mind. He often abandoned a social call and you had to be quick to catch Jack Robinson. This is the origin given in 1811.
The French have an even less likely version. In the old days Robinson (from Robinson Crusoe) was a popular name for an umbrella. When these umbrellas were first introduced they were highly fashionable. The story goes that the gentry, at the first sign of rain, would call their servant, inevitably named Jacques, to raise the umbrella. The call was, of course, one of "Jacques, Robinson!"
The reader may take or leave these offerings as they please.

There is a third possibility, one which I find the most acceptable. Between 1660 and 1679 the Officer Commanding the Tower of London was one Sir John Robinson. It may be that the speed of beheading with an axe, something regularly done in the Tower at that time, may be the basis, Jack being a well known form of John.

Rocker: If someone is off his rocker, then he is thought to be a little mad or deluded. I can find no documentary evidence for the origin of this saying, and none is forthcoming from the SHU Phrase Discussion site. However, it has been suggested that it came from early days of steam engine development....in particular beam engines....the beam engine rocks back and forth and if it comes off the pivot (rocker) it goes mad, flailing about and smashing up everything about it.
Another possibility - not very convincing to my mind - is that it describes the antics of some having just fallen off a rocking chair!

Rope: It's money for old rope suggests that a task or problem can be executed with great ease, without much effort. This is another with a nautical background. The story goes that sailors in port, and short of cash, would go into the hold of their ships and dig out lengths of old rope which they would sell to passers by - not much effort for a certain reward. See also slush fund.

Ropes: To learn the ropes is to gain a skill in something. It derives from the days of sail when young, inexperienced sailors had to be taught the skills of dealing with the many sorts of rope found on the ships of those times.

Sack: If workers gets the sack then they are dismissed from their job. In the old days workers carried their own tools in a sack. This was deposited with their employer in order to look after the tools. When the worker was no longer needed or was dismissed he was given the sack back. The expression has now been partly replaced by to get one's cards.

Salad days: Salad days are the days of youth, when people are young and inexperienced, green, like the contents of a salad. Act1 scene 5 of Shakespeare's Anthony and Cleopatra (c 1606): *My salad days, when I was green in judgement....*

Salt: If someone is good at his or her job; reliable; trustworthy then they are said to be worth their salt. This goes back to the days when salt was an expensive and valued commodity; Roman soldiers were actually partly paid in salt and this money was known as salarium from the Latin sal, salt. From this origin comes our word Salary.

To be below the salt is to be considered of a relatively lowly status. As indicated above, salt was highly valued and had a special position on a feast table. Those of really high rank were more "valued" than the salt, and hence sat above the salt, but the rest were considered of lower importance and were therefore positioned further down the table.

If you hear something of doubtful truth, something that is unpalatable then, if you take it with a pinch of salt, it becomes more acceptable.

Sandboy: As happy as a sandboy is an expression which implies blissful contentment. I believe that the saying is truly Bristolian in origin. On Bathurst basin, in the City centre is the long established Ostrich Inn. The Inn is immediately adjacent to the Redcliff caves which, in their day, were a prime source of sand. Past landlords of the Inn used to send little boys i.e. Sandboys into the caves to collect sand to spread on the floor of the Inn to soak up the beer and ale droppings (much like butchers used to

put sawdust on the floor of their shops). The Sandboys were paid for their efforts in beer. They were indeed happy. Incidentally, in Dickens' Old Curiosity Shop (1840) there is an inn called The Jolly Sandboys 'with a sign representing three sandboys increasing their jollity'.

Sausage: "Not a sausage" is a highly colloquial way of describing something as worthless; of no value. The origin here is again one of rhyming slang. No value = no cash = sausage (and mash).

Scapegoat: Somebody who is made to take the blame for the actions of another person is said to be Scapegoat. The basis of this saying is found in the Biblical Old Testament. A goat, one of two, was chosen by lot to be sent into the wilderness. Before being sent, the Sins of the People were transferred to it and they were absolved of these sins when it was dispatched. It is thought that the element of escape in this story gave rise to the word.

Scarum: Harum-scarum is a phrase used to describe a scattered brained individual or scheme. This seems to come from the old fashioned hare, to harass to which the still current scare was added with the addition of some rhyming. The hare also had the additional association with the supposed "madness" of hares in March.

Scot: To go Scot free is to get away from a difficult situation without penalty or loss. Scot used to spelt Sceot and was an ancient form of tax, Sometimes poor people were excused this tax; they got away Scot free.

Scotch: To Scotch a rumour is to expose a rumour. Scotch here has nothing to do with Scotland, but rather the old French word "escocher" - to cut.

Scott: Great Scott! is an expression of surprise, wonder or admiration. The Scott here is probably the US general Winfield-Scott (1786-1866) who was popular after his victorious campaign against the Mexicans in1847.

Scrape: To get into a scrape is to get into trouble or danger. Why Scrape? The story goes that in 1803 a woman called Frances Tucker was killed

by a stag in Powderham, Devon when she inadvertently crossed the animal's scrape and met with the stag's fury. Scrapes are holes which deer habitually dig out with their forefeet. They can be quite deep and easy to fall into, thereby potentially dangerous.

Scratch: To start from scratch is to start from the very beginning and with no advantage. The scratch in this saying is the starting point of a race, either for humans or horses. It was originally literally just a line scratched in the earth.

You scratch my back and I'll scratch yours seems a fairly obvious expression, except that the "scratch" was originally much more severe than could be imagined. The expression probably comes from the terrible lashings which were part of 17th and 18th century navies. These lashings were usually administered by one crew member on another. In all likelihood the lasher would, at some stage in the future, be on the receiving end. Thus, if he went easy on his victim and only "scratched" instead of fully lashing, then his victim, when he in turn became the lasher, would be equally lenient.

To come up to scratch has a somewhat different origin. In this instance the scratch is one found in the old time boxing rings; both boxers started the bout with their left feet on a scratch line in the earth (there were no proper boxing rings in those days). The fights were divided into rounds but continued until one of the contestants was knocked down. The fighters were then permitted to break for thirty seconds before being given a count of eight. At the end of this time they were both expected to come up to the scratch and the one who didn't was adjudged the loser. Over the years the saying dropped the "the" and became the one we know.

Screwed: To be screwed. Although it is a slang /colloquial expression for sexual intercourse, it also means to be cheated, put in a disadvantageous position. This latter meaning seems to be related to the use of 'screw' as a slang name for a prison guard or warder. Until the mid 1800s, prisons, at least in England, were places of punishment only, with no concept of rehabilitation for the prisoners. One of the forms of punishment was to crank a handle attached to a large wooden box. The cranking did nothing, other than turn a counter. The prisoner had to do 10,000 turns in 8 hours,

equivalent to one every 3 seconds or so. As an extra punishment a warder could tighten a screw to make turning more difficult. Warders came to be known as 'screws'. By inference, the prisoner was 'screwed' and, although 'screw' remained within the prison environment, eventually 'to be screwed' became widespread..

Seamy: The seamy side of life describes the less pleasant aspects of living. The saying comes from the fact that carpets, tapestry, embroidery etc. show an unfinished side if turned over; a side not meant to be seen by the public.

Settle: To settle terms is the way of describing that an agreement has been reached and sealed. Settle is, of course, a form of seat and so why is it used in this phrase?. The answer resides in the knowledge that many agreements were sealed and arguments resolved whist sitting on a Settle.

Shakes: He's no great shakes implies that someone is not worth a lot; not up to much. Shakes in this context come from the old word schakere, maker of boasts, which was in use in the 13th century. However, another suggestion is that it comes from the shaking of dice. Someone who is 'no great shakes' is nothing extraordinary, like a gambler who shakes the dice and throws a non-winning number.

Shambles: It's a bit of a shambles suggests a picture of semi-chaos. In the old days the Shambles was the street traditionally occupied by butchers. Such a street could well have been messy, possibly even like a slaughter house. The name comes from the Saxon scamel, which was a bench or stall on which meat was displayed. The name is still applied to certain streets in Britain. It has come to be associated with any mess and has lost its original precise meaning.

Sheets: If someone is three sheets to the wind, then they are drunk. There are two possible origins here. The first relates to a windmill with only three of its four sails (sheets) set. Because it would wobble in these circumstances it mimics a drunkards walk.
The second is nautical in origin. Sails are controlled with ropes called 'sheets', and sails have two - a lee side sheet and a weather sheet. The

sailor's contention is that, if a man who had been drinking was given the support of an extra sheet, even then he could still not steady or control himself on a regular course. An alternative idea is that of a ship caught with three (jib) sheets in the wind as she goes from one tack to the other. The sails would flap and the ship would wallow and stagger in the manner of a drunk.

Shirty: If someone gets shirty then they are a bit tetchy, irritable, aggressive and possibly spoiling for a fight. The origin goes back to the days of bare-knuckle boxers. The fights were carried out with the men stripped to the waist - they took their shirts off prior to fighting.

Short shrift: To get short shrift is to be given only a small amount of someone's time; to be given speedy punishment. Shrift was the act of hearing a person's confessions and giving them absolution for their sins. Someone due for execution was given but short shrift. The word shrift comes from the verb 'shrive' meaning "to hear confession". The past tense of the verb is 'shrove', hence Shrove Tuesday, the day immediately before Lent and a holiday; people went to confession and then made merry before starting the Lenten penances.

Shot: Not by a long shot implies that there is little chance of success in a venture. The long shot here probably comes from archery, although the expression didn't come into use until the mid 1800s when it was used in racing circles to describe a bet laid at large odds; hence shooting may be the origin.

Shoulder: To give the cold shoulder means to ignore or dismiss someone. The cheapest meat in the 18th century was mutton. In order to indicate it was time to leave, an unwanted guest was given cold shoulder of mutton.

Sixes and Sevens: If someone is at sixes and sevens then they are in a quandary; they don't quite know what to do next. The saying originates from a situation in 1327 and relates to the Guilds of Tradesmen in the City of London. The Merchant Taylors and the Skinners were founded within a few days of each other, five other Guilds having already received their charters. The age of each Guild dictated its position in the

Lord Mayor's procession. The Merchant Taylors and the Skinners argued for fifty years as to which should go sixth in the procession. In the end, in 1494, Sir Robert Billesden, the current Lord Mayor, decreed that they should take it in turns to go sixth and seventh.
An alternative explanation that the saying has something to do with throwing dice is much less likely, and far less romantic.

Skinflint: We all recognise a skinflint as a mean person, tight with money, but where did the word come from? It's certainly present in the 1811 dictionary, but with no origin. To 'skin' someone is however used in the sense of swindle. A modern source indicates that the term comes from the 18th century where mean people would even try to skin a flint in order to make money.

Skid: To be on Skid Row is to be down and out. Skid Row is a US expression for the poorest part of town where vagrants, alcoholics etc. end up. In the timber industry skid row is a row of logs down which other logs roll, slide or skid. Tacoma near Seattle flourished on its timber industry; it also had a plentiful supply of alcohol. Brothels became available for loggers working on the skid row and the dregs of society soon ended up there.

Slap up. To have a slap up meal means to eat well. The expression originates from the time of Charles Dickens, when it was a "slap-bang" meal, derived from cheap eating houses, where one one's money was slapped down as the food was banged on the table. Probably to emphasise the difference in food quality in better class establishments, "down" became "up". However, the change may be just another example of language evolution, in much the same way as "to be sold a pig in a poke" has come to mean that one has been cheated, whereas, in reality, the reason for going to a medieval market was often to buy a pig and not to be "sold a pup"!
Quote: Dickens, Sketches by Boz, 3, 36. "They lived in the same street, walked to town every morning at the same hour, dined at the same slap-bang every day."

Sleep Tight: To sleep tight is to sleep well. 'Tight' seems an odd word to use in this context. It may refer to pulling bedclothes tightly around you as you snuggle down to go to sleep but there is another explanation. In the past bed frames were strung with ropes on which straw mattresses were placed. After some time the ropes would loosen, resulting in an uncomfortable bed. When pulled tight, the bed improved. Apparently there was a tool - an iron type of gadget that looked somewhat like an old clothes peg but larger - which was used to tighten the ropes.

Sleeve: To laugh up one's sleeve is to laugh inwardly; to be secretly amused . At one time it was quite possible to conceal such amusement by hiding one's face in the large loose sleeves then worn. The French say, *rire sous cape.*

Slope: To slope off means to depart without hurry; to amble away. The Saxons had a word 'hleapan', "to jump", from which we derive leap. We also got the word 'lope' from the same source. There was also a Saxon word 'slupan' meaning "to slip". Slope seems to be a combination of both words.

Slush fund: A slush fund is a fund of money that is separate and secret from other funds. Slush seems a funny word in these circumstances until it's realised that the original source of such funds was the surplus fat or grease from fried salt pork, the standard food on 19th century ships. The slush was usually sold in port and the money raised used to buy little extras and luxuries for the crew. In 1866 the US Congress had applied the term to a contingency fund it had set up from one of its operating budgets. From that time the expression took on its current meaning.

Snook: If you cock a snook at someone then you show them contempt or opposition. Snook in this saying is the action of putting one's thumb to the nose and spreading out the fingers as a sign of contempt. The gesture only became used in the 19th century and its origins are unknown.

Soap opera: If you habitually watch or listen to a Soap Opera then you are hooked on a regular TV or radio serial, usually about ordinary life, but sometimes about the rich and supposed famous. Why Soap? The

origin goes back to a well known weekly US radio programme called "Amos& Andy". This started out in 1927 and was broadcast at a prime time. Each episode ended excitingly and guaranteed a certain audience for the next episode. The sponsors were soap manufacturers Proctor and Gamble and they advertised their products. A second Soap sponsored serial called "Today's Children" soon came along and the catch phrase Soap Opera entered the language.

Sock: If you tell someone to put a sock in it then you are telling them to be quiet. The Sock in this instance was originally a real sock. In the early days of sound reproduction and radio broadcasts the ability to control the volume of sound coming out of the instruments was almost non-existent; sound came out of large uncontrollable horns. However, if a sock was stuffed into the mouth of the horn, then the volume was considerably reduced, hence the saying.
According to Expressions & Origins the above explanation ".....seems improbable: in the sort of household that alone could have afforded such a novelty it is unlikely that a sock would be used in the drawing-room. In a barrack-room, however, socks would certainly be lying around at night and one can imagine a heavy snorer being shouted at and told to 'put a sock in it' (his mouth). Some such military origin is far more likely."

Soldier: To come the old soldier. The saying is used in the context of an admonishment for a minor misdemeanour. An old (experienced) soldier charged with a minor offence, such as dirty boots, long hair, etc could well have had sufficient ability to talk himself out of punishment, even though guilty, if dealing with a young and inexperienced official. I was raised in the East End of London in the 1930s - the saying was common then, but I haven't head it for years. It was used in "Tom Brown at Oxford" and is clearly quite old. When my Mum caught me, or someone else, in such a situation, she was wily enough to spot an attempt to talk ourselves out of trouble - "don't come the old soldier with me" she used to say. We knew then that punishment was inevitable!
Some more examples of the phrase's use are in Dictionary of English Idioms. Longman. 1979, but no origin.
Soldier: play/come the old soldier. Not formal, rather old fashioned.
1 to claim to have much knowledge because of one's long and varied

experience: "he enjoys playing the old soldier among his friends"
2 to pretend to be ill, esp. in order to avoid doing one's work: "if the boss was more strict, fewer workers would attempt to come the old soldier"
3 to beg for money, drinks, etc., by pretending to be a poor man who once served in the wars: "go away and don't come the old soldier in my pub again"

Song: Something said to be going for a song is thought of as being sold for a price less than its true worth. The saying started off as "All this for a song" and is the alleged angry response by Burleigh to Queen Elizabeth I when she instructed him to pay Edmund Spenser £100 for a performance of his "The Faerie Queen". The original inference is clearly different and opposite to present day usage.

Sorts: If someone is out of sorts, then they are less than fit, not up to a task, out of order. This saying has two possible origins. The first comes from playing cards which, if out of sort, are deranged and out of order. The second suggestion comes from the printing trade, where certain characters such as @, ?, or ! are called 'sorts'. If a printer is out of these, then he's not up to doing a particular job.

Soup: In the soup is an expression used to imply that someone is in trouble. The origin goes back to the potato famine in 1840s Ireland. Such was the famine that soup kitchens in Dublin were vital; however, in order to be given soup, Irish families had to give up Catholicism and also Anglicise their names - O'Donohue became Donohue for instance. The Irish hated this, but were so hungry that many families were forced to be in the soup.

Spell: To undertake a spell of duty is to take one's turn to perform a task. Spell seems an odd word in this context until it is realised that the word derives from the Old English 'gespelia' meaning "substitute". One group of workers substituted another by taking over their duties.

Spick and Span: All spick and span describes a neat and tidy situation. Originally it had an implication of newness and was Spick and Span new.

Spick was a spike or nail and Span a wood chip. The expression was first used of wooden ships fresh from the shipyard.

Spoils: Since Spoils of War are valuable and not "spoilt" in the modern sense the use of this word seems out of place until one realises that Spoils used this way comes from the Latin "spolium" meaning a "hide stripped from an animal". Thus anything stripped from a country as a result of war became Spoils. The word was used in this sense as far back as 1300. The more common use of spoil in the sense of "ruined" comes from the rotting carcass left after the hide was stripped.

Spoke: If someone puts a spoke in your wheel then they are trying to prevent your success in a venture. The saying goes back to the days of medieval carts, where the wheels were solid. The front wheels did, however, have three holes in them to act as a primitive form of brake. The carter carried a strong wooden stick which he pushed into the holes to slow the cart when going downhill. The stick was called a Spoke. The analogy is clear.

Spoon. To get the wooden spoon is now a prize for finishing last in a sporting event or other competition. It derives from a Cambridge University custom of presenting such a spoon to the person last in the Maths Tripos. In 1811 there were three classes of Honours degree; the first were called Wranglers and were said to be born with golden spoons in their mouths. The second were Senior Optimes and had silver spoons in their mouths. The third type were Junior Optimes and were born with lead spoons; the last Junior Optime was called the Wooden spoon. Those without Honours were either meritorious, in the Gulf, or just one of the Many.

Spots: To knock spots off someone is to beat them easily. This saying arose in 19th century USA and is based on shooting competitions. Marksmen were tested for their skill by their ability to knock spots off playing cards.

Spout: If you're up the spout then you are in trouble; you have problems. The Spout in this saying is the lift found in pawnbrokers' premises.

Pawned goods were placed on the spout and sent away for storage until they were redeemed, or not, as the case may be. They were certainly at risk of never being reclaimed.

Spruce: All spruced up means dressed to the nines; all spick and span. Spruced is an Anglicised version of Prusse, the French name for Prussia. Prussian troops were always regarded as being particularly smart.

Spurs: to gain one's spurs means to show a special ability or gain fame for the first time. This comes from the times when a soldier was given a knighthood; the King would also give him a pair of golden spurs.

Square: A square meal implies an especially generous helping of food. This is naval in origin. Sailors used to eat off wooden boards; these were square in shape and were usually not filled with food. However, after a heavy watch the sailors were given a large meal which filled the square board - a square meal. Often these plates would have a raised rim, called a 'fiddle', giving rise to the saying 'on the fiddle' - see 'Fiddle'. An example of a square plate is in the museum at Chatham Naval Dockyard.

If something is all fair and square then it is regarded as being honest; above board; correct. I can't find a recorded origin for this one but there is almost certainly an element of rhyme in its basis. The square could well be something to do with the sails on a sailing ship were set and the fair added for effect.

To stand four (?fore) square behind someone means that you support them to the bitter end. This saying must have the same sort of basis as the one above but, again, no reference that I can find.

Back to square one means to start again from the beginning. The origin goes back to the days of early BBC radio soccer commentaries. The Radio Times used to publish a plan of the pitch. This plan was divided up into numbered squares; the squares were referred to by the commentators to help listeners have a better idea where the ball was. The goalkeeper's number was "number one". If the ball were passed back to him, then it was back to square one and the game had to start again from there.

Stake: To have a stake in something is to have a share in it. I can find not one single suggestion as to where this saying came from. All my reference books merely say "circa 16th century of unknown origin". However, it is not difficult to suggest that the origin has something to do with driving a stake into the ground to either mark out, or to make claim to, a piece of land.

At stake must have the same basis.

Stave: To stave off something is to ward it off; to put a problem at a distance. Stave is another word for Staff, the sort of long, strong stick carried by medieval men which could be used to fend off attackers.

Steep: That's a bit steep is a saying used to express surprise or even disbelief. It is attributed to the Duke of Wellington who, on being told by George IV (quite falsely as it happens) that he had sent a troop of cavalry down the precipitously steep sides of the Devil's Dyke near Brighton, merely replied "very steep, sir, very steep".

Stick: To get hold of wrong end of the stick means to misunderstand something, to misinterpret a statement. The precise origin is not clear. It's could refer to a walking stick held upside down, which does not help a walker much. The phrase apparently originated in the 1400s as 'worse end of the staff' and then changed to the current wording only in the late 1800s. An even older origin is reputed to have come from the Roman use of communal toilets, where people sat side by side. Personal cleansing was done with the aid of communal sponges mounted on sticks. If you picked up the wrong end, then you got the sponge!

Sticks: To up sticks is to leave a place and go elsewhere. The origin is obscure. Some say that the 'sticks' are items of furniture, and others that it to do with raising a mast before a ship sails. Yet others think it came from the days of horse travel, where the 'picket' was a rope strung from sticks/stakes where the horses were tethered. To 'up sticks' was to depart for a fresh pasture/camping ground.
An alternative was given on a BBC TV programme about the restoration of a Scottish croft. These small houses were small and often meant only for temporary occupation during a period of work. The frame was of

rough cut, unseasoned timber, often straight from the forest. Some of the timber pieces (sticks) had to be of a special shape, such as those needed for the roof structure. Such pieces were of great practical value and were taken from the croft and reused when the family moved on - thus the expression. You may take your pick, although the saying is said to be no older than the 19thC.

Stickler: A Stickler is someone who unyieldingly insists on something. The earliest Sticklers were umpires or referees at wrestling or fencing matches. The word comes from the Anglo-Saxon 'Stihtan' - to arrange or regulate.

Stiff necked: To describe someone as stiff necked is to indicate that they are stubborn. This comes from driving horses; a horse that won't turn its head in response to a tug on the rein is hard to direct. An obsolete meaning of "stiff-necked" describes such a horse. (OED)

Stops: To pull out all the stops implies maximum effort. This is a direct comparison with organ music, where the loudness of the organ is governed by the number of organ stops pulled out.

Strait laced: Straight laced means rigidly formal, almost humourless. The Puritans believed that tight lacing of underclothes disciplined the body, hence the expression and its association with a Puritanical type outlook.

To Go straight: see Level

Strapped: If you're strapped for cash then you are hard up; pressed for money. I can find no recorded basis for this saying, nor can I find it even mentioned in my references. However it is not difficult to suggest that the tightness induced by being strapped up could well cause of the expression.

Straw: A man of straw is now-a-days a name for a weak minded individual with no real strength of character. It may be that this derives from comparison with a straw filled scarecrow but, in 1811, a man of straw was a hired hand, so called from having straw stuck in his shoes to distinguish him. Presumably he had no chance of offering any sort of

opinion to his employers.
Another possible origin comes from the "Straw Men" who loitered near English courts with a straw in one of their shoes - thus indicating that they were prepared to give false evidence in return for a fee; they also didn't have opinions of their own.

The last straw, used in the sense of the final burden that destroys an effort, comes from the image of a piece of straw being added to a camel's load and proving too much for the animal to carry.

Strike: To go on strike is to withdraw your labour; to cease work for an employer. This saying is another with a nautical background. The Strike in this instance is the one used to strike (lower) the sails on a sailing ship. A crew which was in dispute with an owner simply refused to strike the sails and the ship could not move. The word in this sense was first recorded in 1768.

Stroppy: To get stroppy is a term used to indicate that someone is a little obstinate, unpleasant. Why stroppy? This is a shortening of "obstreperous", but maintaining the original meaning.

Stump: When you stump up with the cash you do the American equivalent of paying on the nail; i.e. you hark back to the days when bargains were sealed by placing the money on a tree stump.

Stumped: To be stumped is to be halted in a ; project - to find a task difficult to continue . This comes from 19C USA and originated in the task of ploughing newly cleared farmland - the ploughman couldn't proceed because an uncleared tree stump was in the way.

Suck up: To suck up to someone is to curry favour with them, to be a toady, to ingratiate oneself to them. The saying comes from the mid 19C, but why 'suck up'. I haven't found the answer yet, but one reference suggests a sexual origin. Also, to 'suck' someone is to swindle them, hence 'sucker', but this doesn't seem to be related.

Sway: To hold sway is to wield or bend power. This is an archaic use of the word which comes from C16th Old Norse itself meaning to bend, a motion still implied in modern usage.

Swim: If you are in the swim then you are in a good position; well in with the right people. Swim in this instance is based on the fact that river fish keep together in a group called a swim. A fisherman who can position himself to be in the swim will likely catch a large number of fish.

Swoop: A fell swoop is a sudden, complete and often unexpected event; over and done with great speed and totality. Why fell? This comes from the 13th century Old French word fel meaning "cruel". The speed of a fell swoop is so great as to be regarded as cruel by some. Our word Felon comes from the same source.

T: If something "fits to a T" then it's perfect for its purpose. The allusion here is said to be with a T square. This piece of apparatus is so accurate that a precise right angle fits it perfectly.
However neat this suggestion is, there is another possible origin, based on the fact that the saying was in use in the 17th century, before the T square was invented. This one suggests that the T stands for "Title", a minute and precisely positioned pen stroke or printer's mark. A tiny brush stroke was all that distinguished the Hebrew letter "dalet" from "resh". "Title" was the word chosen by Wycliffe to translate references to

this tiny difference in his version of the New Testament. Thus the mark was perfectly suited to its task.

Tab: To run (up) a tab relates to unsecured credit. Publicans would often give credit to regular customers and the drinks would be marked up 'on the slate' - literally a slate as in a board for writing in chalk - so that when paid, the customer had 'a clean slate' again. 'Tablet' is another word for a writing slate - in other words 'a tab' - so unsecured credit is on the tab or on the slate or (thirdly) 'on tick' where loans would need to be paid back each week to the tally-man who kept 'a tally' of the money owed.
Tally-men would often record payments on small sticks on which they would tick-off payments made. the customer and the lender would both have sticks and they could be compared to make sure that they 'tallied' with each other. Thanks to 'Lewis' on the SHU Phrase Forum for this.
For an alternative explanation for 'on tick', see below.

Tables: To turn the tables on someone is to get your own back on them. The original table was either a backgammon board - called a table in 16th and 17th England or a chess board. In either instance it was possible for a player, in certain special circumstance to turn the table and put himself at an advantage.

Tacks: To get down to brass tacks is to get on with things in a positive manner; to get to the heart of things. There are several possible origins for this saying, the simplest being that it is merely rhyming slang; brass tacks = facts.
More romantically it is possible that the origin is from the old time drapers' shops. These sold cloth off the roll and by the yard. A yard was actually marked out on the counter with brass tacks. When the deal was concluded and the purchase about to be cut the roll was laid against the marks i.e. down to the brass tacks.
A further suggestion is that the tacks were those used in upholstery. Any renewal of the fabric meant that the piece of furniture had to stripped drown to the brass tacks.

Tar: To spoil a ship for a ha'porth of tar is to produce a less than perfect result to a job when a minimal amount of extra effort would have

resulted in a much better finish. The origin here is clearly nautical; old wooden ships had their seams sealed with tar and they would leak unnecessarily if too little were applied. The comparison is clear.
In 1811 the expression was: "Don't lose a sheep for a halfpenny worth of tar". Tar was used to mark sheep.
Incidentally, the colloquial name for a sailor Jack Tar has the same basis as far as tar is concerned. "Jack" is a name commonly used for men in general such as in "Jack of all trades" or "every man Jack of them". The origin of Jack goes back to French where the name for a peasant is Jacques Bonhomme in turn from Jacque a leather jerkin worn by peasants. The diminutive "jacket" lives on in English today.

Tears: If someone is accused of weeping crocodile tears then they are reckoned to be showing hypocritical, rather than genuine, sorrow. They saying goes back to the times of ancient Greece and Rome and is based on the fact that a crocodile has a small duct in the corner of each eye. This duct automatically releases "tears" when the animal opens its jaws wide. It is not too fanciful to imagine that the beast is crying as it devours its victims. Pliny and Seneca both give fanciful accounts of crocodile tears.

Teeth: To escape by the skin of your teeth means to have a very narrow escape. The phrase comes from the Bible in Job,xix,20 and reads: My bone cleaveth to my skin, and to my flesh, I am escaped with the skin of my teeth. Since there is no skin on the teeth, then the narrowness of the escape is obvious.

Tell off: see Tick

Tenterhooks: To be on tenterhooks is to be tense or under strain. The saying is based on the use, in olden days, of hooked plant seed heads, like large burrs, inserted into a wooden frame on which freshly woven cloth was stretched to stop it shrinking. The frame was called a Tenter, from Latin tendere, "to stretch". Later the hooks were replaced by metal ones; however the cloth was still said to be on tenterhooks.
A Tenter was also an instrument of torture but, since it doesn't seem to have had any hooks, it probably isn't the source of the saying.

Thick: As thick as thieves is a saying used to mean that people are in very close collusion. It is based on a French saying "like thieves at a fair", which is an easily understood way of implying collusion. The adapted English form was first used by the author Thomas Hook in "The Parson's Daughter" (1833).

Thread: When you thread your way through a crowd then you are using not only a very old saying, but a very old way of finding your way out of a maze. In the 1390s the word Clew or Clue meant a "ball of yarn or thread". Two centuries later clues began to be used to guide people "threading" their way out of mazes; hence the modern use of these two words.

Thunder: If someone steals your thunder then they take credit that properly belongs to you. The expression was coined by the playwright and critic John Dennis (1657-1734). He discovered that the sound of thunder could be mimicked by rattling a sheet of tin. This he used for dramatic effect in one of his own plays. The play itself was not well received but the idea of the tin was widely copied. Dennis was very annoyed and is alleged to have said: "See how the rascals use me! They will not let my play run, yet they steal my thunder!"

Tick: To have something on tick is to have it on credit. Tick in this instance is an abbreviated form of "ticket", i.e. the note that was written to record the debt. For an alternative explanation see 'Tab', above.

To tick/tell off someone implies a reprimand, often by a superior to an inferior in a relationship. Both expressions invoke the idea of checking off a list of offences or complaints against the offender. 'Tick' in British English is the mark called a 'check' mark in US English; to 'tell' has the meaning of 'count' or 'add' in both British and US English, e.g. bank teller.

Ticket: That's the ticket implies that everything is just right; perfect; correct. Ticket is a variant of "etiquette" which has the meaning "of appropriate conduct", i.e. correct and proper.

Time: A high old time describes a thoroughly enjoyable time, but why "high"? The basis is probably from the German Hochziet = Wedding but which literally translates as High Time. The expression "high days and holidays" could well have the same root.

Tip Top: To be in tip top condition means to be in the best of shapes. A suggested origin came on a TV programme about the Wedgwood factory. In one part they talked about the best position in a Black Country kiln being at the 'Tip Top'. Thanks to Ian Harling for this.

Tinker: If someone doesn't give a tinker's dam (or cuss) then they are reckoned to be completely indifferent to the outcome of an event. Dam (note the lack of a terminal "n") is used today to describe a structure for holding back water; so it was in the days of Tinkers. They used to travel the country earning their livings mending pots and pans and sharpening knives. They would mend the pots by filling the leak on the inside with some clay and then repairing the outside with permanent material. When this was done the clay was discarded. The clay stopper was the tinker's dam. The dam was also known as a cuss. Both were worthless, hence the saying.
An alternative explanation is based on the supposed frequency that tinkers swore - so frequent that the value of their 'damn' was worthless. You choose - I prefer the first explanation.

Toady: If you call someone a toady then you imply that the person, in order to further his own ends, will say or do anything to please his superior. The saying comes from the days of travelling medicine men in the wild west. They used to sell useless potions to a gullible public. Taking advantage of the popular belief that toads were poisonous the quack doctor would arrange for an accomplice to swallow, or seem to swallow, a toad. One gulp of the potion and the accomplish would walk away fit and unharmed. A true toady.

Toast: When we raise a glass of wine to drink someone's health we drink a toast. Why on earth should we drink a piece of partly burnt bread? The explanation goes as follows:
In the days of Charles II and earlier, it was the custom to put pieces of

toast into tankards of beer in order to improve the flavour. According to a story told in the Tatler, a celebrated beauty of the time was bathing in the Cross Bath in Bath. One of her admirers is said to have taken a glass of the water in which she was bathing and drunk her health to the assembled company. Another admirer, somewhat the worse for drink, said that he would jump into the water for, "although he liked not the liquor, he would have the toast", meaning, of course, the lady herself. From that time on we have drunk toasts.

Tod: to be on your tod is to be alone, by yourself. This is an example of rhyming slang, based on the name of Tod Sloane (1874-1933), a famous US jockey who won many races. Thus, he was often out in front, alone; hence 'to be on your Tod Sloane', which then lost the 'Sloane' with the passage of time.

Tom: A simpleton can be described as a Tom fool but why should Tom be singled out for this degradation? There seems to be no answer. Tom appears to have been chosen for no now identifiable reason, unlike Jack. An early example of 'Tom' to describe a madman is in Shakespeare's King Lear (3.iv) when Edgar, in disguise and apparently living in a hovel, uses the name and also speaks the phrase 'Poor Tom's a-cold'. So clearly the association is very old, with Shakespeare seemingly using a well established convention. Apparently, back in medieval times, it was reckoned great sport to watch the antics of insane people in asylums like Bedlam in London, where inmates were sometimes given the nicknames 'Tom o' Bedlam' and 'Tom Fool'. The OED states:- 1356-7 Durham Acc. Rolls "Pro funeracione Thome Fole" [from 1337 frequently mentioned as 'Thomas fatuus'].1565 Calfhill "I might byd them tell them, as Tom foole did his geese".

Tommy rot: That's a load of tommy rot is a way of describing poor quality goods or ideas. The tommy in this instance is said to be slang for bread, provisions etc. I can't find out on what basis, but it is certainly defined as "bread" in the 1811 dictionary. In any case, before the repeal of the Truck law, many employers paid their workers in vouchers which could only be exchanged for goods from company owned shops. The workers had no choice but to accept this type of payment and the goods

were frequently of poor quality. Since part of the goods always consisted of bread, then the shops were said to supply tommy rot.

Tongs: If a heated argument is under way then the participants can be said to be going at it hammer and tongs. The analogy here is that of the blacksmith who, in order to finish a piece before it cools too much, must use his hammer and tongs with great speed and power.

Top: To sleep like a top is to sleep very soundly. This seems an odd way of describing a good sleep. However, the top referred to is indeed the child's toy. When it is spinning, it appears to be still. It is this apparent stillness that gave rise to the simile, first used in 1613.

Touch: A touch & go situation is one where the outcome is potentially dangerous, perhaps even disastrous. The expression is another with a nautical background. In the days of sail often the only way to transfer goods, or even a person, between ships was to bring the two vessels so close that they actually touched. This was clearly highly dangerous thus, when the transfer was successfully completed, the next event was to Go and separate the vessels as quickly as possible.

If you're out of touch with a situation, then you've lost contact with things. The comparison seems obvious but the saying has its roots in actual touching. In the 18th century military drills required every soldier to be within touching distance of the men on either side; he had to brush arms with his companions when marching. If he didn't do so then he was deemed out of touch

Traces: To kick over the traces means to break away from control, to do what you want and not what you're told. This is said to come from horse and cart riding where a 'trace' is one of the two side straps that form part of a horse's harness connected to the crossbar (whiffletree) . If the horse is frisky and not doing what its told, then it tends to kick over the traces. The expression goes back to C14.

Truck: To have no truck with someone means to have no dealings with them. Truck comes from the French "troquer" meaning "to barter". From this origin came the truck system from which 'tommy rot' arose.

Truth: If you tell the naked truth then the story is complete, including good and bad points. The saying comes from and ancient fable in which both Truth and Falsehood went for a swim. When they came out Falsehood put on Truth's clothes. Truth couldn't bear the prospect of wearing Falsehood's clothes and so went naked instead.

Turkey: To talk turkey means to get to the point. The story behind this saying goes as follows: back in the Colonial days of North America a hunter is said to have divided his day's haul with his Indian companion. The haul consisted of turkeys and crows. The hunter kept giving himself the turkeys and the Indian the crows. All the while he kept saying "you take this crow and I will take this turkey". At the end of the division the Indian protested "you talk all turkey for you. You never once talk turkey for me! Now I talk turkey to you." The story was first printed in1830 and is almost certainly not fact; never-the-less, the saying entered the language.

Twig: To twig on to something is to suddenly realise what it means. Twig is derived from the Irish word "tuigim" meaning "I understand".

V sign: Although the V sign isn't an expression, its apparent origin is so intriguing that I thought that it deserved mention. The sign, using two raised fingers in a gesture of contempt or anger, is widely understood in Britain, but hardly recognised in some other English speaking countries; e.g. USA. The certain origin is unknown, but a highly likely basis takes us back to the Hundred Years' War between England and France in the 14th and 15th centuries. Captured ‘English' archers who, it seems, were actually mainly Welsh, had the first two fingers of their right hand cut off so that they couldn't take part in future battles. As a defiant riposte, after felling a French soldier with an arrow, an archer would raise his two fingers, just to show that he was still in the game. The battle where this first happened was likely to have been Crécy in 1346.

Wall: To go to the wall is to be put on one side; to be shelved; to fail or become moribund. The wall in this instance is that of a church or graveyard where people are laid prior to being buried. The relationship is easily seen.

Washout: A wash-out is a fiasco, a complete failure. The word originally had a somewhat different meaning; it comes from the times when naval signal messages were taken down on a piece of slate. When the message had been relayed to the proper authorities the slate was washed-out clean and the words written on it cancelled, since they were then worthless.

Weasel: Pop goes the weasel is part of what is now a children's rhyme but it was not originally so. The words are a line of a song that was apparently intended as a warning to their parents. "Up and down the City Road/ In and out of the Eagle/ That's the way the money goes/ Pop goes the weasel". The Eagle was a tavern and old time music hall in London's City Road. Pop was slang for "pawn" and weasel probably slang for a tailor's iron; in any case some form of tradesman's tool. Without the tool there was no work and no means of redeeming the weasel. A vicious circle.

Weather: To be under the weather is to be unwell. This comes again from a maritime source. In the old days, when a sailor was unwell, he was sent down below to help his recovery, under the deck and away from the weather.

West: To go west is said when someone dies, if something is lost or a project becomes unattainable. The analogy to the sun dying in the west is an obvious one and is a concept used in many cultures. However the saying seems to have become popular only at the time of the First World War. As a result it may be that the basis is that of the Tyburn gibbet,

which was situated in the west part of London near the modern Marble Arch. Even this does not account for the delay in common usage.

Wheeling: If someone is said to be wheeling and dealing then they involved in setting up important arrangements, often involving money. Big wheel is a phrase use to describe an important person and this may be the basis of the saying. Much more likely however is a custom of the old Billingsgate fish market in London. The fish was wheeled in, prior to the dealing which could only start at a certain pre-determined time. An alternative explanation comes from the US west where a big Wheeler and Dealer was a heavy better at cards and roulette wheels. I prefer the fish market version.

Whipping boy: A whipping boy is a way of describing someone who takes punishment rightly due to someone else. In the Middle Ages in was common practice for a boy of ordinary birth to be educated alongside a prince. If the prince did something wrong it was not he that was punished, but rather the commoner who received the lashes. The whipping boy paid heavily for his privileges.

Whistle: If you are told that you can whistle for it then it means that you are unlikely to get what you want. The saying goes back to the days of sailing ships. Some sailors believed that, on a calm day, the wind could be summoned by whistling. Others feared that such a whistle would raise, not a fair wind, but a storm. To them, whistling was Devil's Music. Since, in most cases neither a fair wind or a storm resulted from whistling, then the current meaning of the phrase arose.

To be not worth a whistle implies a low value for something. The origin lies in whistling for a dog. A good dog is always worth a whistle and it's a poor one that isn't. The saying was known to Shakespeare.

To whistle down the wind is to talk purposelessly; to abandon. This relates to hawking where there is little point in releasing the bird downwind.

As clean as a whistle means really clean; bright and shiny. It also means "complete" in the sense of getting away as clean as a whistle. One suggested origin relates the whistle to the sound of a sword as it comes

down and decapitates someone. Alternatively the origin may be the clean appearance of a just carved wooden whistle. Personally, I think it may well relate to locomotives where the brass, especially the whistle was always bright and gleaming.

To blow the whistle on someone is to reveal one of their secrets. Again, I can find no origin, but it must surely come from the whistle that policemen blow (or used to blow; they use radios now.)

Wig: If someone is described as a big wig then they are regarded as important; prominent in their field. The allusion here is to the huge wigs that the aristocracy wore in the 17th and 18th centuries both in England and France. Such large wigs are still worn by the Lord Chancellor and, until recently, by the Speaker of the House of Commons.

Wild goose chase: Such a chase is one likely to be fruitless; certainly a chase of an actual wild goose would probably be so. The origin goes back to 16th century England where a kind of horse race was invented. This consisted of a lead horse going off in any direction the rider chose; other riders had to follow at precise intervals, like wild geese following their leader. At first the saying implied an erratic course taken by one person and followed by another, and was so used by Shakespeare, but the meaning changed over the years to take on the current one of a useless or hopeless quest.

Wire: down to the wire is an expression which implies a very close outcome to an event. Why 'wire'? It has been suggested to me that it may be wire around a prison, but I can find no evidence for this. The only explanation I found was on the SHU internet Phrase Discussion Board. It went as follows:
"Horse racing. A wire is stretched above the finish line so that a camera above can take a picture at the moment the first horse crosses to settle the order of finish even in a close race ... the metaphor is extended to many kinds of contest, including elections where one can win by a nose, get nosed out, finish out of the money, be an also-ran, and any of a number of race-related terms."

Wonder: A nine days' wonder describes something that is popular but soon become unfashionable or ceases to be novel. An old proverb states "A wonder lasts nine days, and then the puppy's eyes are open", alluding to dogs which, like cats, are born blind. The public are reckoned to be blind initially, but then their eyes are opened.
Although a plausible explanation, there is another. The Late Latin word "novena" is a term used in the Roman Catholic Church for a devotion lasting for nine consecutive days. Once completed a new one may be instituted and the other forgotten. Perhaps Protestants derided this custom and made mention of it as a nine days' wonder.

Wool: To pull the wool over the eyes means to try to deceive or trick someone. The 'wool' here is the hair of wigs. Back a couple of centuries ago the status of men was often indicated by the size of their wigs - hence our word 'bigwig' to indicate importance. Such people were worth robbing; the street thugs would pull the wig down over the victims eyes in order to confuse him - the 'wool had been pulled over his eyes'.

To be wool gathering is to be day dreaming, not concentrating. This come from the days when children were sent out into the hedgerows to gather the scraps of wool left by passing sheep. It was not a very taxing job and the childrens' thoughts could easily wander to other subjects.

Yarn: To "spin a yarn" is to tell a tale. At first this seems an odd combination of words until it's remembered that, in the old days, women used to spin yarn on spinning wheels. They frequently did this in groups and, to pass the time, they often told each other stories. In time the words came to mean the production of the stories themselves.

Years: Donkey's years is a phrase used to describe a long while; a lengthy period. This comes from the original parallel between "a long time" being likened to being as "long as donkey's ears". A slurring of pronunciation resulted in the present, relatively new, form, being first recorded in 1916.

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Several large conventional dictionaries!

Prologue:

The English language is full of wonderful sayings, catch-phrases and expressions. For the most part they are used without much consideration as to their origins. Some appear self-evident; "a storm in a tea cup" can have really only one basis, similarly "a stitch in time saves nine", but why do we say "a square meal"? Meals aren't square, but the expression is in almost everyday use. I spent most of my working life as a Consultant Pathologist at Frenchay Hospital in Bristol. I came to be fascinated by the histories of the City and Hospital in which I lived and worked. I also became greatly involved in trying to understand some of the intricacies of a certain type of skin cancer called malignant melanoma. The result?...over two thousand colour slides of Bristol as it has changed over the past few decades, several hundred slides of Frenchay Hospital since the turn of the 20th century and dozens of scientific articles on aspects of melanoma. The fascination also extended to bits of the English language; I kept asking myself, when I heard an expression that appeared to be "daft" - "why do we say that?" In 1990 I started to explore the backgrounds of as many sayings, idioms etc. that I came across. Since some of these are used only occasionally it took me about five years to collect a list of 450 or so. This book is my effort at trying to unravel the knots of origin. The first "edition" was produced personally in limited numbers (25) in the summer of 1996. At that time it seemed that a commercial edition of the book would appear, but this never materialised. In the meantime more origins came to light and I produced the next "edition" in the autumn of 1998. The index indicates the new additions, marked *. One thing that became clear very early on was that many had a naval or military background. Another feature was that many are very old, often going back centuries. Other sayings are much more recent and many of the really modern ones last only a few years before they go out of fashion; I have not concentrated on these latter types. Never-the-less, some modern sayings are likely to survive

and I have included those that seem less ephemeral; "Catch 22" will probably last for a few decades yet, if not longer. The book is not intended to be a work of scholarship, more a source of enjoyment for browsing and bed-time light reading, hence my title - "The Bedtime Browser". It is also a bit of a challenge to the reader since I have included items about which I have not been able to find an origin. Please let me know if you can fill the gaps. It is arranged in alphabetical order, governed by what I regard as the most important word in the text; e.g. a "wet blanket" is found under "blanket" and not under "wet".

Acknowlegements:

Several books have proved a great help to me in my searches. They include "Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable"; "Brewer's 20th Century Phrase and Fable"; "To Coin a Phrase"; "Dictionary of Idioms and their Origins"; "Dictionary of English Idioms". However, none, or even all of them combined, have included anything like as many such sayings as I located. Unique help was occasionally found in the "The 1811 Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue", a reproduction of which was produced in 1994. Full details of these books & others are in the Appendix. One further book requires thanks; this was lent to me by Dr Brandon Lush, a colleague at Frenchay Hospital. It came from his family collection and was published about 1880. Unfortunately no actual date is present in the book, but the fly-leaf bears a family signature and the date January 9th 1884. The book is "Ward & Lock's Standard Etymological Dictionary of the English Language". It contained a number of suggested origins that I found nowhere else. Finally, thanks to my wife. She is German and, as a result, I have a passable knowledge of German and a first class reference source in her knowledge of her own language. These two attributes have occasionally been the key to understanding an English phrase when other methods have failed. For those of you who would like to know more about the origins, structures, words and many other aspects of the English language then I thoroughly recommend Bill Bryson's book "Mother Tongue. The English Language". This is a wonderfully written, simple, amusing and very readable account of many aspects of why we speak as we do. (Penguin Books.1990.ISBN 0 14 014305 X).