

### Some Words From The Wise

#### what do those old sayings really mean?

I was always under the impression that everyone understood those words of wisdom frequently used by parents and grandparents in their attempt to educate children in the ways of the world. The meaning of “first in, best dressed” seems obvious enough, and city dwellers advised to “make hay while the sun shines” are unlikely to rush off in search of a pitchfork. Having spoken with a few of the younger generation, however, it became clear that many of these old sayings are either totally ignored as senile rambling; or, if the messages are understood at all and the wisdom imparted is subsequently taken on board, the recipients have only a vague idea how they managed to interpret these messages when they knew nothing of the true and original meanings.

One saying I've already mentioned is a classic example of Chinese whispers changing the meaning over time. Money for old rope is often thought to refer to a task that pays well for doing very little whereas it is, or was, quite the opposite. You can find out why by having a look at Popcorn's “Someone Once Said.” In the meantime, here are some you may or may not be familiar with...

#### **To Spike Someone's Guns: to act in a way that defeats another's intentions.**

In the days of old-fashioned cannons, the firing procedure was to load the breech with a sack of gunpowder, followed by the cannonball, and finally some wadding. A small amount of powder was then tipped into a recess at the rear of the weapon. This had a hole leading directly to the main chamber inside. One touch of the gunner's glowing fuse would ignite the powder in the pan which would, in turn drive fire through the hole to the main charge in the barrel. The simplest way to disable these fearful weapons was to hammer an iron spike into the hole leading to the breech, rendering them useless.



#### **A Flash in the Pan: something that begins well, but ends disappointingly.**

Like cannons, the hand guns of that period were also breech-loaders and worked in the same way. Unless the hole beneath it was kept clear and clean, igniting the powder in the pan merely produced a flash, but the gun would fail to fire.

#### **Swinging the Lead: slacking off; doing the easiest job, either by choice or good luck. This is a practice often frowned on by others who are working much harder.**

Before the invention of echo-sounders, extreme care had to be taken while navigating in shallow waters. To ensure the vessel didn't run aground, a sailor was sent forward with a weight attached to a length of rope, knotted at intervals of a fathom (6 feet). He would lower the weight over the side, swing it to gain momentum, then release it into the sea. When it hit bottom, he could then check the depth by simply counting the number of knots below the surface. Needless to say, other seamen slaving hard at their usual tasks were all very envious of the lucky Jack Tar swinging the lead.

**Never Look a Gift Horse in the Mouth: when something is freely given at no cost, it should be accepted regardless of quality.**

When buying a horse, and to avoid being sold one older than the seller's claims, those in the know will check the teeth of the animal, the condition of which give a good indication of its true age. If a nag is offered for free, however, to perform such a check would seem pretty ungrateful.

**Never Buy a Pig in a Poke: don't buy anything sight-unseen; open the package to check the contents before paying for them.**

One explanation of this warning refers to a poke meaning a bag supposedly containing a suckling pig for sale. Unless the bag was untied, the buyer had no idea whether they were actually getting a pig. As was often the case, swindlers would substitute a dog or a cat for the porker.

**(Having to) Toe the Line: adhere strictly to protocol and the rules.**

This requirement was, and may still be, upheld by schools dogmatically sticking to old traditions. Pupils had to attend roll-call twice a day, having to present themselves with their toes touching a line drawn on the floor. It does, however, seem to originate from the 18<sup>th</sup> century British Royal Navy rule for inspecting seamen. Sailors would have to stand to attention with their toes in line with the seams between the decking planks.

**Sailing Close to the Wind: performing some task in a manner that is very risky.**

Sailing ships obviously need wind behind to drive them forward on the water. There are, however, times when winds aren't favourable and as sailing directly into the wind is impossible, a manoeuvre called tacking has to be employed. This is a series of angled course changes which zigzag across the oncoming wind. The angle between the line of the wind and the heading of the ship is critical to the stability of the vessel. If this becomes too small, the sails will luff (back-fill with wind from the front) affecting the ability to steer placing the craft in danger. A captain sailing too close to the wind in order to meet a deadline risks losing ship, cargo and crew.

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