# **THE ORIGIN OF SAYINGS – Part 1**

**Bite the bullet and learn something new**

The English language is full of nuanced sayings that are used every day, whilst being rooted in history. Some you may even use yourself have some bizarre beginnings; so let’s investigate.

#### Baker’s Dozen

A baker’s dozen is commonly understood to mean 13. If we travel back to Medieval England we get a greater understanding as to its origins. Common law dictated at the time that the price of bread was related to the cost of the wheat used in its production. Any baker found to be selling overpriced loaves was subject to punishment, including large fines and flogging. Thus, to account for anomalies in the baking process, bakers would bake an extra loaf to ensure they were free from prosecution.

#### Shambles

A shambles nowadays commonly references a situation or state of total disorder, and its origins are similarly grimy. Butchers in the 16-17th century would display and sell their goods on a table or stall in the street, which was known as a **shamble**. This led to the collective noun representing the street where butchers operated being known as the **shambles** (this street name survives in many towns to this day). However, as butchers would throw offal into the streets where they worked, the meaning began to be associated with being a place of **untidiness or disorganisation**.

#### Humble Pie

In the 14th century the **numbles** was the name given to the less appetizing parts (heart, liver, entrails, etc. – what we now know as offal) of an animal – and by the 15th century this had migrated to **umbles**. The **umbles** were commonly used as a primary ingredient in pies given their relatively low cost at the time, so were often eaten by the lower classes, whilst the upper classes would take the more valued cuts. The adjective **humble** was derived separately, meaning of lower class or low estimation of one’s importance. The similarity in the two words likely led to its current idiomatic meaning – **make a humble apology and accept humiliation**.

#### Goodbye

This is relatively simple one, but interesting nonetheless. In the 15th century a common farewell was ‘*God be with thee*’. Over 300 years this eventually got compounded; ‘*God be with yee*’ in the 16th century; ‘*God b'wee*’ in the 17th century; and eventually ‘*Goodbye*’ in the late 17th century.

#### Beyond the Pale

What we know today as pale (light in colour) is far different from its now obsolete early English meaning – a stake or pointed piece of wood, also known as a fencepost. In turn the **Pale** began to be associated with the area enclosed by these pale posts, such as a settlement. Therefore, anyone wanting to go outside of these safe areas were said to be going ‘**beyond the Pale**’ – to go outside agreed standard of decency.

# **THE ORIGIN OF SAYINGS – Part 2**

**Continue to pastures new**

The English language is full of nuanced sayings that are used every day, whilst being rooted in history. Some you may even use yourself have some bizarre beginnings; so let’s investigate.

#### Nail Your Colours to the Mast

During nautical battles, the flag of a ship were struck (lowered) to surrender to the enemy – and was customary for the enemy to direct the cannon towards the ships mast during a battle to disable it. If all of the masts were hit, the captain usually had little choice but to **lay down arms**. However, if the captain decided to fight on, the crew were ordered to hoist the colours on remnants of the ships rigging, said to be ‘**nailing the colours to the mast**’.

The expression is widely believed to have originated from the crew of the **Venerable**, the flagship of British Admiral Adam Duncan, at the **Battle of Camperdown**, in 1797. The mainmast of the ship was struck by the Dutch enemy and the ships flag was brought down by the blast of the cannon, which could be interpreted by the rest of the fleet as surrender. However, Jack Crawford, a sea-hand upon the ship, climbed the remains of the splintered mast and nailed the standard back in place. With its standard intact, the fleet continued and the British were eventually victorious, with the battle penned to be the ending of the Dutch dominance at sea and the beginning of ‘Britannia ruling the waves’.

#### Hair of the Dog

Anyone who’s woken up after a heavy night of drinking has probably heard this one. But its original etymology can be traced back as far as 2500BC in Northern Syria, from a book in which the God Ilu becomes hungover after a drinking binge, and the recipe in which he is prescribed consists or ‘hairs of a dog’ and an unknown plant mixed with olive oil. The belief seems to stem from a belief that being bitten by a rabid dog could be cured by ingesting a potion containing some of the dog’s fur. The phrase also exists in Hungarian, directly translated as ‘you may cure the dog’s bite with its fur’.

#### Steal Someone’s Thunder

Surprisingly, this idiom comes from a real event in the early 18th century. The petulant playwright and critic John Dennis devised a thunder machine that could be used during one of his plays -consisting of a sheet of tin being rattled backstage. Unfortunately, the play was a disaster and flopped - yet a few days later he found it used at a performance of Macbeth upon which he had communicated his thunder machine to the managers. Upon the discovery he is quoted as saying ‘**that is my thunder by God; the villains will play my thunder, but not my plays’**.

#### Once in a Blue Moon

It is generally believe to mean something highly irregular or rare – originating from a clerical pamphlet printed in 1528, where one of the characters converses to another, ‘Yf they say the mone is blewe/We must believe that it is true’. It is likely in reference to the fact that priests at the time expected any statement they made to their parish to be believed, no matter how farcical.

However, a blue moon is in fact possible. This occurred most notably after the eruption of Krakatoa in 1883, when the moon had a blue tinge for almost two years. This is due to the large ash particles in the atmosphere that were released after the eruption, diffract red light making the moon appear blue or slightly green. Particles of mixed sizes are far more common however, and these are more likely to diffract blue light, giving the moon a red tinge, especially when the moon is on the horizon and more particles are likely to interfere with the line of sight.

#### Give the Cold Shoulder

In everyday use, this often means to ignore or turn away from someone. Some etymologists believe it to have originated from medieval etiquette. After hosting a feast, to hint that the meal was over and it was time for the guests to leave, they would serve a cold slice of pork or beef shoulder. However, it is far more likely that it came from a Latin mistranslation of the word ‘umerus’ (meaning both back and shoulder) from the works of Sir Walter Scott – “[her] dislike did na gang farther at first than just shewing o' the cauld shouther...”.