

If you have trouble with the concepts of bow and stern, your eyes might glaze over with the mention of a taffrail, vang or a Samson post. But don't panic. In reality you have probably been using sailing terminology for most of your life. For example, the phrase chock-a-block, which we generally use to describe something which is full, actually comes from the use of block and tackle on old sailing ships. When a rope (halyard, line, lanyard, warp or sheet, as a sailor might say) was pulled as far as it could go – which is when the two blocks on a tackle line collide – the rope was said to be chock-a-block. Touch-and-go is another one. Today we apply this phrase to any situation where a risk was overcome with no injury or embarrassment. The term originates from the action of a vessel striking a sandbar and continuing on its way without mishap.

My favourite sailing term is **tumble home**. This doesn't refer to drunk yachties, but to the inward curve of the topsides (the side of the hull above the waterline) of some vessels. It's the opposite of **flare**. Sadly, many of these words and terms are fading into history. A mouse is

Sailing has its own
LANGUAGE, and as with
any sport, if you want
to understand the ACTION,
you need to understand some
of the TERMINOLOGY.

Fortunately sailing has a
beautiful JARGON with
a fascinating HISTORY.

Their job entails absorbing all incoming data – including the direction of the wind and tide, the actions and reactions of the competition, and the latest numbers on the computer equipment – and offering advice to the helmsman/skipper about the best tactical options. The skipper then reserves the right to completely ignore this advice as required. A similar role would be fulfilled by the 'first mate' on any other sailing vessel.

Despite the America's Cup being raced over short courses in conditions of near perfect visibility, the boats still require a **navigator**. Every second counts, and the navigator makes sure the vessel is on line between marks and the start and finish line.

You will not find the term **grinder** in any old sailing glossary. It's a new term used to describe muscle. On any non-racing yacht, a lot of wind (i.e., speed) is often lost as a boat **goes about** (tacks or turns). The sails have to be moved from one side of the boat to the other, which means, in the case of the headsails, the sheets have to be released on one side and then taken in again. Without a great deal of training and speed, this

SAILORS' LANGUAGE

by Rob Greenaway

now tethered to your computer and belongs on your desk, when it is used to prevent ropes from slipping off hooks. When a yacht fails to 'come about' (to turn across the wind, or to 'tack') it is now described as failing to come about. The use of the original phrase – 'to miss stays' – is pretty rare, but so much nicer. A stretched rope is no longer said to be 'long in the jaw'. No America's Cup yacht will have any futtocks, deadeyes, or bumpkins. But they will have grinders, mastmen and pitmen, so it's best you know what they are.

The **helmsman** steers the boat, and the **helm** is the wheel used for steering. It is very bad form to call the helm a steering wheel. Likewise, a boat is never 'parked', unless it is aground on a sandbank. Otherwise, it is moored, tethered, tied-up or anchored. If it is deliberately beached or lifted ashore it is said to be 'on the hard'.

In the case of the America's Cup, the helmsman is also generally the **skipper**, who has the final say about all actions onboard. The skipper's authority can never be disputed, unless a full mutiny is completed.

The **afterguard** is the skipper's best friend.

move can be very sloppy. The grinders have the job of taking in and releasing line as quickly as possible, using a set of winches set up like bicycle peddles – but they use their arms rather than their feet. They also raise and lower all the sails.

You'll need to know that **tacking** is when the wind moves across the bow of the boat, and a **gybe** occurs when the wind passes across the stern. The latter is generally a more violent exercise than a tack, since the wind can force the main sail across the boat with frightening speed. If gear is going to break on a boat, it commonly breaks during a poorly executed gybe.

There are three **trimmers** aboard. One looks after the main sail (say mains'l or just main, or you'll get laughed at), another looks after the headsail (heads'l) and the third keeps an eye on the spinnaker (the really big and often brightly coloured sail often referred to nowadays as a kite or chute).

You'll notice that 'main sail' is two words and 'headsail' is one. **There's no reason.**

The main and headsails have many small lengths of thread attached to either side called

Photo: Rob Greenaway

telltails. When these threads are flying horizontally against the sail, it is said to be in **trim** and is doing the best job possible. So the trimmers spend their time looking skywards, heaving on sheets and advising the grinders to either pull in or let out more sail. **Sheet** comes from an Old English term for corner, and refers to ropes attached to the corner – or ‘clew’ – of sails.

The **mastman** works around the base of the mast, unless something goes wrong, when they might be hoisted aloft (up the mast) to sort out a jam or a breakage. They ensure the main sail is raised smoothly by guiding it up a track that runs the length of the mast. They also deal with the **spinnaker** pole, which holds one corner of the spinnaker away from the mast (a bit like the boom on the bottom of the main sail). A rope that is used to hoist (or raise) a sail is called a **halyard**.

The **bowman** works with the headsails, the spinnaker and the **gennaker** (an asymmetrical spinnaker for use in light winds – or ‘airs’). When the boat tacks, the bowman must guide the headsail across the deck and around the mast, ensuring nothing gets snagged. They also deal with all halyards and sheets associated with the spinnaker and headsails. During the race, the main sail remains aloft at all times. But the headsail and spinnaker will be swapped as the boat manoeuvres around the course, with the spinnaker being set to speed the boat as it sails in the same direction as the wind (that is, ‘running’ or on a ‘square run’). A number of different sized headsails are used depending on the wind strength. The bowman is also a key lookout, spotting wind changes.

brake, accelerator, gear lever and windscreen wipers. These tools are merely an extension of the limbs of one person. A well-trained crew means a yacht might be sailed like a car with an automatic transmission, but the reality of one skipper remains. Even after a mutiny, a committee never skippers a ship.

As with many outdoor activities, couch potatoes often ask the question, Why? Why go sailing? That hopeless simile of standing in a cold shower ripping up money is raised in accusation that sailing is a mug's game. How wrong can you get? One of New Zealand's most enduring ships, the Ngataki, was built for the price of a box of oranges. Fifty years after its launch, the Ngataki is still sailing international waters, even though it is held together by fencing wire and caulked with pyjamas.

Let's refer to some well-known sailing authors. Eric Hiscock is perhaps New Zealand's most prolific sailing writer, having started publishing in 1950. In that year he wrote in his first book, *Cruising under Sail*, that, “sailing is one of the finest sports. Those who take part in it pit their knowledge and skill not against a human opponent for kudos or gain, but against the sea in all its moods. It is one of the few worthwhile things that can still be enjoyed today by a man or woman of independent spirit, for there are no restrictions, no organising body is needed, and the sea is open and free to all who have the inclination to sail on it and a suitable vessel for that purpose.”

Hiscock was not referring to the America's Cup when he penned



Photo: Rob Greenaway

It is essential to not only know the lingo on a boat, but to also know your place. For example, if the skipper tells you to do something, do it quickly. When the skipper says, “Let go”, do not reply, “Do you mean I should let go of this rope I'm holding?” By then you might be short several fingers. Similarly, when told to ‘duck’, never ask why.



The **pitman** operates below decks, working closely with the bowman by passing out and storing away the headsails and spinnaker.

And remember, you are never on a boat. You are in her. And **port** is on the left, and at night is indicated by a red light (as in, ‘There is no **port** (a red beverage) **left** in the glass’). Many other sailing terms are pretty much self-explanatory. The **foredeck** is the deck at the front of a vessel. The **afterdeck** is back aft - that is, at the back of the boat. A **side deck** is at the side. The **topsides** are the sides of the hull above the waterline. If you are told to get **aft**, run to the **stern**. If you are told to go **for'ard**, go to the **bow**.

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Never forget that there is only one skipper on any one vessel. If two members of the crew are vying for rule, one has to be thrown overboard. Skippers may be changed from day-to-day on a sensitive New Age ship, but on any single day, only one skipper exists and they will operate a benign dictatorship for that period. You might think this is a little archaic, but try driving a car in rush-hour traffic with four hands on the steering wheel and two on the gear lever. A yacht, with all its lines, sheets, winches and sails is the same as a car with a

those words.

Johnny Wray, builder of the Ngataki and author of the 1939 book *South Sea Vagabonds* summarised his joy of sailing by describing an evening aboard, off the coast of Tonga. “At the present moment,” he wrote in the book's last paragraph, “Ngataki is anchored in the calm and clear waters of the lagoon off the island of Euakafa. Loti [Wray's partner] is on the near-by coral reef, singing and shell-fishing. Rasmic [the cat] is playing in the cockpit with a small fish that I have just landed. And I – well, I think I'll have a plunge over the side to cool down a little and then I'll go ashore and see if there are any turtle about.”

The final words have to be left to Ratty, the rodential rower in Kenneth Graham's *Wind in the Willows*. Ratty is rowing his friend Mole down a river, when Mole asks whether boating is, “So nice as all that?” Ratty replies, “Nice? It's the only thing. Believe me young friend, there is nothing – absolutely nothing – half so much worth doing as simply messing about in boats. Simply messing about in boats – or with boats. In or out of ‘em, it doesn't matter. Nothing seems to matter, that's the charm of it. Whether you get away, or whether you don't; whether you arrive at your destination or whether you reach somewhere else, or whether you never get anywhere at all, you're always busy, and you never do anything in particular, and when you've done it there's always something else to do, and you can do it if you like, but you'd much better not.”