

What are you talking about?

Author: Alistair Duff

The English is a strange and wonderful thing. The most common cause for complaint is the number of different sounds certain letter clusters seem to make in direct contradiction to the sounds they make at other times “gh” is a handy example of this from cough to through (not threw, mind). The perplexing number of ways to attain the sound most often associated with the letter “f” in itself could take a while to adjust to. All of this without the merest consideration as to what the language adopted from the French. This matter has been the subject of many discussions in the past and no doubt conversations still waiting to happen so instead I thought it might be interesting to address an even more tricky aspect of the language; the great English idiom. That combination of words so often used in describing everyday life with an assortment of words that take on amazing new meanings when found together. It was “raining cats and dogs” long before it ever began raining men.

Extraordinarily many of the terms still in use today seem to have started during a particularly fertile period of language creativity. A large number of our current phraseology dates all the way back to the 16th Century or the 1500s if you prefer. When one takes the time to consider the way our ancestors lived back then a lot of the mystery around common day language is quickly demystified. Although a great number of sayings have a colourful explanation from this period, I have decided to limit the examples used here to those used most often or with the best derivation. So, sit back, read on, and discover why life in the 1500s was so instrumental in our modern-day chat.

Here are some facts about the 1500s:

Baths consisted of a big tub filled with hot water. The man of the house had the privilege of the nice clean water, then all the other sons and men, then the women and finally the children. Last of all came the babies and by this point the water was so dirty you could actually lose someone in it.

Hence the saying, “Don’t throw the baby out with the bath water!”

During these early days houses had thatched roofs, thick straw piled high, with no wood underneath.

It was the only place for animals to get warm and so all the cats and other small animals (mice, bugs) lived in the roof. When it rained, it became slippery and sometimes the animals would slip and fall off the roof. Thus, giving birth to the popular saying “It’s raining cats and dogs”.

Some of the sayings even work together in combination. A fantastic example of such revolves around the common diet of the time which was heavy on the vegetables but decidedly light on the meat side. The lucky few who had the means could occasionally obtain pork, which made them feel justifiably special, so special in fact that they would display their bacon to show off.

It was a clear sign of wealth when a man could, “Bring home the bacon”. In an act of kindness, they would cut off a little to share with guests and thereafter all sit around talking and “chew the fat”.

Don’t be fooled into believing that meat alone was divided according to status. Bread was also seen as a means to uphold the class system in the past. Each loaf was a clear indication of one’s standing in such times. Workers got the burnt bottom of the loaf, the middle would make its way onto the plates of the family, and guests got the top, or if you prefer “The Upper Crust”.

The means of libation at the time also handily unlocks another set of our much-loved idioms. The use of lead cups when drinking ale or whisky could create a powerful mix that would sometimes knock the imbibers out for a couple of days. Someone walking along the road would take them for dead and prepare them for burial. They were laid out on the kitchen table for a couple of days and the family would gather around eat, drink and wait to see if they would wake up.

Hence the custom of “Holding a Wake”.

Now by this stage, I can guarantee that a number of readers will be sharing a wry smile created by a certain inkling as to where this is all headed. Not wanting to belabour a point I will conclude with the only true certainty at that time, death. The tax people simply weren't as efficient in the 1500s and have therefore lost their status as the other certainty. Shuffling off the mortal coil was a tricky proposition in England during this period as it is a reasonably small country. Once graveyards started to fill up it became necessary to dig up coffins, take the bones to a bone-house and reuse the grave. When reopening these coffins, 1 out of 25 coffins were found to have scratch marks on the inside and they realised they had been burying people alive. To remedy this, it became customary to tie some string on the wrist of the corpse, thread it through the coffin and up through the ground and then to a bell. Someone would have to sit out in the graveyard all night "the graveyard shift" to listen for the bell, thus, someone could be, "Saved by the Bell" or was considered a "Dead Ringer".

What may now surprise some readers is that in reality none of these common day expressions derive from the 1500s but rather all of them came into existence sometime in April 1999. "Life in the 1500s" remains as one of the longest running Internet pranks to this day. A trickster released a long list of language and everyday practices with a seemingly logical explanation for each. The author, who remains anonymous to this day, can be pleased with both the success and longevity of their work as I was sent a version of the notorious scam earlier this year. A sad truth is that the carefully selected sayings usually can't be traced to an actual source and when it is possible the explanations seem somewhat drab in comparison. The one idiom that seems absolutely pertinent to this list is "you shouldn't believe everything you read on the Internet".