

Various Vessels

by
Grace Tierney

{copyright 2020}

{source <https://wordfoolery.wordpress.com/downloads/>}

It would be impossible to name and describe every vessel afloat but some ship names come laden with a cargo of romance and others evoke history. You may never need to identify the difference between a *brigantine* and a *frigate* but their stories are often intriguing. This chapter runs from *ark* to *yawl* and should help you navigate most marinas.

Vessel itself comes from Roman times. It appears in English around 1300 and had the dual meaning of a hollow container and a ship from the start. In fact that link exists in several languages. *Vasculum*, or its short version *vas*, came originally from Latin to Old English via Modern French with little change other than spelling. The same root gives us our *vascular* system and blood *vessels*.

Ark

It's fitting that the first vessel here is an *ark* as it's certainly an early entry in boating history.

Noah's ark appears in the Genesis flood story in the Bible. It's the ship which saves Noah, his immediate family, and many animals, from a world-wide deluge. Flood stories are common to many cultures and many pre-date the Bible.

The construction of the *ark* is detailed in the story – it even had internal decks - and some historians believe it may have constructed from reeds rather than wood. Many expeditions have been mounted to find the *ark* itself, but thus far none have been successful.

Ark entered Old English as *earc* from Latin *arca* (large box or chest). The idea of an *ark* as being a place of refuge arose in the 1600s, thanks to the *Noah's ark* story.

Barge

Barge entered English as a seagoing vessel of moderate size with sails in the 1300s, although images of canal-going vessels without sails are more likely in recent centuries.

The size and shape of a *barge* altered over the years. In the 1580s it was associated with being an elegant boat of state for royalty. The Tudors travelled the River Thames in London in *royal barges*, for example. In the late 1400s a *barge* was a flat-bottomed freight boat.

The Egyptians had them too and that's probably where their naming began. In Coptic there's a word *bari* for a small boat. This transferred into Greek as *baris* (an Egyptian boat) and on to Latin as *barica* and Medieval Latin *barga*. By the time the *barge* reached Old French, and finally English the spelling settled as *barge*.

The idea of *barging* as crashing into somebody or something came about in the 1800s as a reference to the rough handling of *barges*, presumably on the extensive canal and river networks of Britain.

Barque

Also sometimes spelled *bark*, the *barque* was a wooden sailing ship with between three and five masts, all of them square-rigged except for the mizzenmast which was rigged fore and aft (i.e. with triangular sails on both sides of the mast).

The history of the *barque* is hard to nail down. It appears that *bark or barque* was used as a catch-all term for ships with a particular type of rigging rather than any distinctive size or hull for centuries.

From the 1800s they became the workhorses of the Age of Sail as they were easier to run with smaller crews than equivalent ships because their rigging was less labour intensive. Many sail-training craft today are *barques* for the same reason.

The *barque's* word history is somewhat mysterious with various theories expounded by etymologists. Middle French had the word *barque* in the 1400s (before such ships were really in use) and it may come from Late Latin *barca* (barge). One theory holds that *barca* came from *barc* or *bark* in the Celtic languages, perhaps from Irish.

The problem with that one is that there's no letter k in Irish and there's no word *barc* in Irish. The Irish for boat (*long*) is nothing like *barc* and generally speaking Irish rarely gave words to Latin because although there's some evidence of trade with Rome, Ireland was never invaded or conquered by the Roman Empire.

Another theory states that *barca* came from the Greek *baris* (a type of Egyptian boat) but the Oxford English Dictionary claims this is unlikely. With *barque/ bark's* wobbly spelling and long history, it's likely this debate won't be settled anytime soon.

The *barque* of Saint Peter refers to the Roman Catholic Church, appropriately enough as Saint Peter, the first Pope, was a fisherman by trade.

Boat

Boat may be a simple term, and one we're all familiar with, but what's the difference between a *boat* and a ship? One answer relates to size. A *boat* is small to mid-sized compared to a ship and has considerably less cargo carrying

capacity. Ships are made to carry cargo or passengers whereas a *boat* is the term for a variety of vessels, including those used for recreation, fishing, life-saving, and ferrying people.

Boat is an old addition to English. It entered as *bat*, in Old English, from the Proto-Germanic root word *bait* which is also the source for *batr* in Old Norse and *boot* in Dutch and *Boot* in German. The French word for *boat* is *bateau* and it also comes from Old English and Norse sources, as does the medieval Latin word *batellus*. It appears that the Vikings may have had a hand in giving us the word *boat*, which seems appropriate given their vast contributions to sailing and navigation.

Brigantine

A *brigantine* is a two-masted square-rigged wooden sailing ship. It was second only to the *sloop* (see below) in the British colonies in North America during the 1700s. Faster but usually larger than a *sloop* or *schooner*, she was often used for piracy, spying, or in supply and support of other vessels in a fleet.

The word *brigantine* may be related to *brigante* in Italian (skirmisher, pirate, brigand) from the root verb *brigare* (to fight). Given the use to which *brigantines* were put, this seems fitting.

Canoe

Canoe entered English around the 1550s to describe a light boat propelled by hand-held paddles. For this one we need to thank Christopher Columbus. He used the word Spanish *canoas* to describe boats he saw in the West Indies, which were called *canaoua* in Haiti.

The spelling in English didn't settle until the 1700s and by 1854 the expression "*paddle your own canoe*" meant to make your own way in life.

Caravel

The *caravel* was a light sailing ship of the 1400s-1600s widely used by the Spanish and Portuguese fleets for long voyages. They were designed by the Portuguese for exploring the coast of Africa and were capable of great speed. They had two or three masts, typically rigged with triangular (lateen) sails with a forecabin and a sterncabin. They were smaller and lighter than the Spanish *galleons* (see below) of the 1500s and capable of sailing closer to the wind.

Christopher Columbus sailed with three ships, two of which, the *Niña* and *Pinta* were *caravels*. *Caravels* were also used by other great explorers – Prince Henry the Navigator (who began the Age of Discovery), Bartolomeu Dias (first to sail around Africa, 1488), and Vasco da Gama (first to link Europe to Asia by sailing to India, 1498). It can be argued that the development of *caravels* kickstarted the Age of Exploration, gave the kingdoms of Spain and Portugal huge power through their colonies, and gave us the Age of Sail as they were really the first ships to

venture far from their home ports and link Europe with North and South America.

The word *caravel* entered English in the 1520s from Middle French *caravelle* which came from Spanish *carabela* and Portuguese *caravela*. Both those terms came from *caravo* (small vessels) in Latin which evolved from Late Latin *carabus* “a small wicker boat covered in leather” and which came originally from Greek *karabos* (beetle or lobster – presumably a reference to a rounded, shell like hull of early boats).

Carrack

The *carrack* was a three or four-masted ocean-going ship from the 1200s to the 1400s and mainly built by Portugal. She was initially used for European trade routes but later was used in the African slave trade before evolving in design to be a *galleon* (see below).

Carrack entered English in the late 1300s from Old French *caraque*, Spanish *carraca*, and Medieval Latin *carraca* which may originate in Latin or Greek words for load of cargo or timber.

She was large enough to contain supplies for longer voyages and stable enough to deal with rough seas on long crossings.

Catamaran

A *catamaran* is any boat with two parallel hulls. Many modern racing yachts are twin hulled and there’s also the concept of a *trimaran* with three parallel hulls.

Catamaran entered English in the 1670s but the word’s origins are from the Tamil language which is a Dravidian language spoken by Tamil people in India and Sri Lanka.

The Tamil word *kattu-maram* is a compound word of *kattu* (tie or binding) and *maram* (wood or tree). The original *catamarans* were log rafts used in the East Indies.

Clipper

The *clipper* ship is the classic sailing ship of the 1800s, known for its elegance and speed. The design started with the *Baltimore clipper* (a type of schooner) which was a packet ship (see below) but it evolved in American, and later British, shipyards as shipwrights sought to design a ship fast enough to challenge overland routes across North America to the goldfields, and to bring tea back from China as fast as possible (hence their other name, *tea clippers*).

The *clipper* has a slender, streamlined hull with a large spread of sail on three tall masts. The design worked, by the mid 1800s the *clippers* were crossing the Atlantic in just twelve days.

Clippers could outrun steamships on long voyages in particular as they didn't have to stop for more coal. Races began between *clipper ships* racing to bring the new season's tea crop to Europe, with many betting on the outcomes.

The era of *clipper* development only spanned the 1840s to 1869 as with the opening of the Suez Canal and increasing steamship numbers, demand for new *clipper ships* died away.

The ships appeared to *clip* along the waves and the word *clip* was already associated with speed so it's hard to tell if the ships gave us *at a fast clip* or vice versa. In falconry, which predates *clipper ships*, to *clip* is to move fast.

Coracle

A *coracle* is an impossible looking boat. It's small, seating one passenger only, and rounded. Light enough to carry on your back, it's propelled by skilful use of a single oar. Traditionally a Welsh boat it is also found on the River Boyne on the east of Ireland, Scotland, and similar boats are used in India, Vietnam, Iraq, and Tibet.

The frame of the boat is made from split and interwoven willow rods tied with willow bark. The outer hull was typically horse or cattle skin with a light painting of tar for waterproofing although modern craft may have canvas or fibreglass hulls. There's no keel and it can travel in even a few inches of water which makes it particularly suited to river work. The Asian variant is made with woven bamboo and waterproofed with resin and coconut oil.

The word *coracle* is an English spelling of the original Welsh name *cwrwgl*.

Coracles were observed in Britain by Julius Caesar during the first century and may date back to the Bronze Age.

Corvette

A *corvette* is a small warship and typically the smallest one classed as such. The size above is a *frigate* (see below). In modern times a *corvette* would be used for coastal patrols and in fast attacks. From 1600s wooden sailing ships to boats used in World War Two is quite a history in seafaring.

The word *corvette* (also spelled *corvet* at the time) entered English in the 1630s and at that time described a wooden warship, frigate-rigged with only one tier of guns. The word came direct from French *corvette* (small fast frigate in the 1400s) which may have been inspired by the Middle Dutch *korver* (pursuit) or the Dutch word *corf* (small ship) which in turn came from Latin *corbis* (basket).

Currach

The *currach* is a traditional Irish rowing boat with a wooden frame covered in stretched animal hides or canvas. Tar is used to cover seams in the outer hull and such boats are nearly always painted black and some add an outboard motor to oar power in more recent times. There are also versions with a planked hull. Working boats, they are used in the Atlantic coastal waters, among Ireland's western islands, and up rivers inland.

Currachs are also raced.

It's likely that the boat St. Brendan used for his legendary journey to America in the 6th century (well before Columbus) was an oversized *currach* design with added sails.

Cutter

A *cutter* is a small, single-masted, speedy sailing vessel similar to a *sloop* (see below). It has a narrow hull and a long bowsprit. The design dates back to the 1700s and the word was listed as a surname in the 1100s for families who made their livelihoods by cutting items such as cloth and wood.

The US Coast Guard boats, of a certain size, are still called *cutters* because their early revenue and anti-smuggling ships were of *cutter* design. In naval terms a *cutter* is a utility boat usually propelled by motor or oars and capable of being taken on board a ship when not in use.

It is likely that *cutters* were so christened because they *cut* quickly through the water with their sleek hull design.

Derelict

Derelict is more likely these days to be applied to an old, broken-down property, or a homeless person, but the original *derelict* was a ship either abandoned at sea or stranded on the shore.

Derelict came to English from Latin. First you take *linquere* (to leave), then you add *re* (back) to get *relinquere* (to leave back or abandon) which is related to *relinquish*. Then you add on *de* (entirely) to get *derelictus* (to abandon or forsake).

The most famous *derelict* of all time was the *Mary Celeste* in 1872, but stories abound of other vessels found floating without their crews on the waves. For added drama they are sometimes called Ghost Ships. One of the most recent was found in 2006 off the coast of Italy. These maritime mysteries intrigue but remain largely unsolved.

By the 1660s *derelict* applied to abandoned properties on land and by 1864 it could be applied to an unfaithful person, but it all started with ships.

Dhow

A *dhow* is a one or two-masted sailing vessel used on the Arabian Sea, Sea Red and the Indian Ocean. Larger *dhow*s are called *booms* or *baggalas*. The word *dhow* (also spelled *dow*) entered English in 1799 but the original source language is unknown.

Dinghy

Dinghy is a general term for a small boat which may be driven by oars, sail, or small motor. It generally has a rounded bottom and a pointed prow. Small inflatable lifeboats are often called *dinghies* and *racing dinghies* are usually equipped with a rudder and possibly a centreboard to aid handling.

Dinghy entered English in 1810 from the Hindi word *dingi* (small boat) which was used to describe several different native craft in the East Indies which were, and are, used to carry passengers and cargo around sheltered coastal waters.

Dingi may have origins in Sanskrit *drona* (wooden trough) which is related to *dru* (wood or tree).

Dory

Defining a *dory* is a tricky business as this popular boat style has been adapted for local conditions by boat-builders and shipwrights worldwide for centuries and the resultant fleet of *dories* is vast and varied.

A narrow tombstone-shaped, flat bottomed hull is fairly typical, as is an element of curve to the hull enabling it to turn easily. A *dory* is usually small, light, and often stackable. A *dory* rarely carries sails and is oar-powered, or perhaps with an outboard motor. If you're thinking "standard row boat" you're on the right track. They are widely used for light fishing duties.

The word *dory* entered American English around 1709, possibly from a West Indian or Central American Indian source. It is worth noting that the fish called *dory* is a flat fish and the design of the flat bottomed boat may have reminded fishermen of the fish.

The *dory* fish is also known as St. Peter's fish with legend holding that the black thumbprint mark on its side was left there when St. Peter, a fisherman by trade, touched the fish.

Dreadnought

A *dreadnought* is a literal compound word to identify somebody fearless who *dreads nothing*. *Dreadnought* was a name of a ship in the Royal Navy as early as 1596, but it wasn't until 1916 that it became a synonym for battleship. It came to

identify a specific class of battleships armed completely with big guns rather than a mixture of sizes. The original *dreadnought* of that type launched in 1906.

Ferry

Ferrying people about is not always a water-based pursuit, but when it entered English in the early 1400s, it certainly was. The Old English *ferian* verb described carrying or transporting people and goods, particularly over water. It came from Old Norse *ferja* (to pass over) and from Proto-Germanic *farjan*.

Fireship

A *fireship* is literally a *ship that is on fire* and it was used as a strategy by the Royal Navy against the Spanish Armada and by the pirate Henry Morgan against the Spanish.

The idea was that you had a few less than seaworthy ships in your fleet which could be sacrificed if the need arose. You offloaded the crew and any worthwhile items, added a few flammable items and lit a long fuse. The ship was towed into position using grappling hooks and tow-ropes so it would float on the tide or current directly at the enemy fleet. Once cast adrift the arsonists would escape in a small boat and be gone before the opposing crews knew what was happening. This was typically done after dark to give them cover to escape.

This worked brilliantly against the Spanish Armada who were forced to cut their anchors loose to get out of the way of the fireships. That proved disastrous for them months later when bad weather and prevailing winds blew them onto the Irish Atlantic coastline during their prolonged run for home, leading to many shipwrecks because they couldn't anchor up.

Fireship was also 1600s maritime slang for another danger of nautical life, a prostitute carrying a venereal disease.

Flat-top

A *flat-top* is an American Navy term for an aircraft carrier, for obvious visual reasons and dates to 1943. By 1956 it was also the name for a hair-style of a similar shape.

Fleet & Flotilla

A *fleet* is a collection of related ships and boats. The earliest word for this was *flota* in Old English. Also used was *fleot*. Both words came from *fleotan* (to swim or float) with Proto-Germanic roots in verbs for *flowing* which also gave us very similar words in Saxon, Frisian, Norse, High German, and Dutch. *Flotilla* has the same roots.

Fleot in Old English also described a *flow* of water, such as an estuary or inlet, in particular the one into the Thames near Ludgate Hill after which *Fleet Street* is

named. *Fleet Street*, home to many newspapers and magazines, has been used as a synonym for print media in Britain since 1882. There was also *Fleet prison* – a debtors' jail in the same area which was described by Charles Dickens in "The Pickwick Papers".

Fleet when used as a verb has the same roots. It was sometimes used to describe gliding away like a stream, vanishing, or fading. This would explain the idea of a *fleeting* impression.

Fleet can also be used as an adjective, *fleet of foot* for example. It has been used to describe someone as swift since the 1500s.

Frigate

The definition of a *frigate* has changed over time. Much like castles on land, ships upgraded their designs, opposing fleets changed their tactics, and *frigates* were swept up in that evolution.

Originally a *frigate* was a square-rigged war vessel between a corvette and a ship of the line in size and armament. It would have carried 30-40 guns and unlike the ship of the line (the main warship of the time) they would have served as scouts, as escorts to merchant convoys, or done some light merchant raiding.

Frigate was revived as a ship type in Britain during World War Two when they were equipped with SONAR and depth charges and sent out to protect convoys from submarine attacks.

Frigate entered English in the 1580s from the Middle French word *frégate*, and ultimately the Italian word *fregata* which probably has origins in the sea port of Naples, but nobody really knows where the Italian word comes from. Like many ship names it appears to have arisen around the same time in various Mediterranean languages. For example we find *fragata* in Spanish, Portugese, and Catalan.

In modern times a *frigate* is the name for a warship that's one size smaller than a destroyer, typically with a crew of 200.

Galleon

A *galleon* is a fully-rigged sailing ship associated with Spain and Portugal during the Age of Sail. *Galleons* evolved in design throughout the 1400s and 1500s and they were built primarily as warships but later became merchantmen with cargo. For example, Spanish *galleons* made an annual trip between Acapulco in Mexico and the Philippines for more than 250 years carrying silver west and raw silk east.

The *galleon* had three or four masts with a mixture of both square and fore & aft sails. She carried one or two tiers of guns, had a characteristic high forecastle, and multiple decks for cargo and troops.

The word *galleon* came from *galley* (see below) which had gained meaning as any warship and whose beaked prow the *galleon* retained in its design. It moved from Spanish (*galeón*) to French (*galion* – armed ship of burden) and finally as *galleon* to English in the 1520s.

Galley

A *galley* is a ship moved primarily by banks of oars. It's a long, slender ship with a shallow hull and often had sails, but the main engine was the power of many arms pulling the oars. *Galleys* were popular around the Mediterranean Sea with the Greeks, Romans, and Phoenicians and were used right up to the 1800s as their size and design meant they could operate close to shore and swiftly even when winds weren't favourable.

Galley comes from the Greek word *galea* which then moved through Latin to Old French as *galee* and finally into English in the 1200s as a vessel having both sails and oars in the 1200s.

Gondola

A *gondola* means different things depending on circumstances. If you're on a ferris wheel you may be seated in one, bobbing in the breeze. If you're on a ski-slope you can take one to the top of the slope. If you're on a canal in Venice you're in the original and it's probably gently bobbing around too.

The Venetian *gondola* is a light flat-bottomed boat with a high point at each end and moved by one long oar at the rear which also acts as a rudder for steering. *Gondolas* have been used in the city for centuries although a time traveller wouldn't recognise the smartly painted black vessels of today in comparison with the shabby multi-coloured homemade boats of the past. There are fewer now too, and yet there are still about 400 licensed gondoliers afloat on the canals, laden with tourists.

Until the early 1900s many *gondolas* had small cabins to protect their passengers they had louvered shutters too, the original Venetian blinds.

Each element of the vessel's design has a symbolism. The iron prow (weighted to balance the gondolier at the rear) and an S shape in honour of the twists of the Canal Grande. The main blade of the oar has six sections representing the six districts of the city while the curved cap symbolises the Doge's cap.

The profession of gondolier is well-paid and highly-trained. It is regulated by a guild who issue the licenses. Venice only appointed its first female gondolier in 2010.

Gondola entered English from Italian in the 1540s.

Hooker

To be clear, we're talking about ships here, not anything else. Plus that word only entered American English in the 1800s while the surname *Hooker* dates to 975 (probably related to a maker or user of hooks in their work).

The Galway *hooker* boat dates from the 1500s when Galway was a busy trading port with links to France, Spain, and the West Indies. The wooden *hooker* was developed to cope with the wild Atlantic seas off the west coast of Ireland with a bluff bow, single mast with one mainsail and two foresails. Traditionally the boat has a black hull (coated in pitch) and dark red sails. They are still made today and are raced across Galway Bay annually.

The *hookers* were built in four different sizes for different tasks, ranging from fishing to carrying turf and limestone.

The iconic *hooker* is proudly displayed on the Galway County arms.

Hulk

A *hulk* is like any other ship with one exception, it doesn't move. Capable of floating, but not much more, and often bereft of sails or engines, *hulks* were common sights in the 1700 and 1800s when the increase in shipping resulted in many out-dated ships being available.

Often *hulks* had a long, useful life, without further voyages. *Hulks* were used as floating warehouses, temporary hospitals, for storing ship repairs supplies for easy side-along work, recruitment bases for new sailors until they were assigned to a vessel, and even as schools.

Prison *hulks* were also popular in Britain, as featured in "Great Expectations" by Charles Dickens.

Hulk comes from the Old English word *hulc* (a light, fast ship) but in Middle English meaning a heavy, unwieldy ship. Probably connected to Medieval Latin *hulcus*.

The popular green *Hulk* character in the Marvel universe is named after the adjective *hulking* – large and clumsy – for obvious reasons.

Icebreaker

While an *icebreaker* today is more likely to refer to a networking event or "a getting to know you party", in shipping terms the *icebreaker* is a specialist ship for braving dangerous waters.

Icebreakers typically have three components unusual in other ship designs – a strengthened hull, an ice-clearing shape (to push broken ice away from the ship),

and extra power. Usually the ice will break easily against the hull but in thick ice the ship can drive on top of the ice and use the ship's weight to break it.

Even in the days of early polar exploration sailing ships were adapted to be *icebreakers* with extra layers of planking in the hull, strengthening cross beams inside the ship, and sometimes bands of iron around the outside of the hull. Despite this the greatest danger was nipping, when ice floes around the ship are pushed against it, potentially crushing it.

Locals avoided *icebreaking* entirely by using *kayaks and umiaks* (below) which could be carried across the ice.

Junk

A *junk* is a flat bottomed sailing boat from the Far East. She has no keel, a high stern, and her rudder can be raised or lowered. The two or three masts carry battened square sails which used to be made from bamboo, rattan, or woven grass. Easy to steer and good at sea the *junk* was the vessel of choice for Far Eastern pirates for centuries.

The word *junk* for this type of ship entered English in the late 1500s from the Portuguese word *junco*, but originally from the Malay word *jong* or *djong* (large boat).

The word *junk* which is now used to describe rubbish also comes from the sea, but not from the eastern sailing ship. *Junk* with that meaning entered English spelled as *junke* in the mid 1300s to describe the oddments of rope which were used to caulk the gaps in the seams of wooden boat's planking. That type of *junk* came from Old French *junc* (rush or reed) for something of little value and originally from Latin *iuncus* (reed).

By the 1660s *junk* described refuse from boats and by 1884 it referred to rubbish of any kind, but usually with an implication of being re-used later. The original *junk shop* was actually called a marine shop in 1800, a place for selling items discarded from a ship. This later gave us *junk art* (1961), *junk food* (1971), and a surprisingly early dictionary entry for *junk mail* (1954).

Kayak & Umiak

Kayaks are small, slender oar-propelled boats designed for one or two persons. Designs vary with adaptations for racing, or ocean paddling versus river riding. They are generally used for sports and leisure purposes now.

Kayak history is long with the earliest ones dating to 4,000 years ago. They were developed by the Inuit, Yup'ik, and Aleut peoples for use in hunting on the waters of the Arctic Ocean, North Atlantic, Bering Sea, and North Pacific. The first boats were constructed from seal (or other animal) skins stretched over a wood or whalebone structure. Each *kayak* was traditionally made by the man who would

use it to his exact size, with help from his wife in stitching the hides. The word *kayak* means man's boat or hunter's boat.

A variant of the *kayak*, the *umiak*, is larger, more open and designed to have more than one paddler and to cope with the rougher seas rather than coastal areas and rivers. The *umiak* was associated with the women.

Ketch

A *ketch* is a two-masted sailing vessel whose mainmast is taller than the mizzenmast. Historically the *ketch* was a northern European square-rigged vessel used in the Baltic Sea and North Sea, usually for fishing or moving cargo. Now they are more likely to be used for pleasure sailing.

The name *ketch* originates from the Middle English *cacchen* (to capture or ensnare). It was spelled as *catch* in the 1400s but became *ketch* by 1650. This is probably related to its main work as a boat for *catching* fish.

There is no relationship between a *ketch* and tomato ketchup.

Lifeboat

A *lifeboat* is any vessel used to save lives, but specifically those operated by the RNLI – the operating body for the volunteer crews who have been saving lives around the coasts of Britain and Ireland since 1824.

Early *lifeboats* were rowing boats, later ones were sailing vessels, and now they are typically powered by engines. While the RNLI does get some contributions from governments their worthy work is primarily funded by donations from the general public.

Lighter

A *lighter* is a flat-bottomed barge used to move cargo and passengers to and from moored ships which were too large to moor directly beside docks. *Lighters* were usually moved and steered by long oars called sweeps. Skilled *lightermen* were common around the London docks until the 1960s when their jobs were lost to technological advances such as cargo cranes.

The word *lighter*, with this meaning, entered English around the late 1400s. It either came from the idea of *lightening* the load on a ship or from the Dutch word *lichter* (to lighten, to unload).

Man o' War

A war ship, various designs. Like all ships, a *man of war* is a "she" to her crew.

Navy

Navy has been an English word since the 1300s. It describes a fleet of ships, with *merchant navy* being used for non-combatant cargo shipping. The more warlike association with the word only arose in English in the 1500s. The word comes from Latin as *navis* means ship and *navigia* is the plural for vessels. It stopped off in Old French as *navie* for a fleet along the way.

Navy is also used to describe a dark shade of blue associated with British *Royal Navy* uniforms.

Packet

A *packet ship* could be of any type. A *steam packet*, for example. The important part was *packet* as these ships' primary purpose was to deliver mail *packets* between British embassies and colonial outposts. The *packet* services delivered cargo and passengers too, but ultimately a *packet* was there to deliver the mail.

One famous *packet* company was the Cunard Line, founded by Samuel Cunard (1787-1865) of Nova Scotia who won the contract to provide deliveries across the Atlantic by steamship in 1839.

His family were early North American settlers, having come to Pennsylvania with Penn in 1683. Samuel's grandfather changed his name from Conrad to Cunard and fled America to Canada as a British loyalist on the defeated side after the American Revolution.

Punt

A *punt* is a flat-bottomed boat with a square bow designed for use in small rivers and shallow waters. The *punter* moves the *punt* by pushing against the river bed with a long pole. This is not the same as how a gondola is moved (they use a single long oar, see above, as the waters of Venice are not shallow enough for *punting*).

Punts were originally used for moving cargo and angling but now are mostly pleasure craft and are particularly associated with lazy days on the rivers in Oxford and Cambridge in England.

The origin of *punt* in English is lost in history. It may be a borrowing from Old French (*pont* – a large flat boat) or Latin (*pontem* – bridge – related to pontoon).

The slang name of *punter* for a racing enthusiast or member of the general public is unrelated to the *punt boat*.

Raft

Unlike Captain Jack Sparrow's fictional *raft* to escape his marooning constructed from sea turtles and lashed together with his own hair, most *rafts* are made of logs lashed together with ropes.

Raft entered English as *rafter* in the 1300s and only became *raft* in the late 1400s. *Raft* came from a Scandinavian source with Old Norse providing *raptr* as the word for log. It should be noted that *pt* was pronounced as *ft* in that language so it would have sounded more like *rafter*. Sounds like the Vikings wouldn't have approved of Jack's sea turtle plan.

Schooner

A *schooner* is a sailing ship rigged fore and aft on two, or more, masts and often with one of more triangular jib or Bermuda sails rigged to its bowsprit at the front of the ship. The first *schooner* was built in the North American colonies, probably in Massachusetts, in 1713.

Schooners were perfect for the varying conditions of coastal trading and fishing and soon spread worldwide as a design. When married to the old three-masted merchantmen they contributed to the development of the clipper ships (see above).

The word *schooner* is of unknown origin but may come from the Scottish verb *scon* – to send over water, to skip stones.

Schooner is also a term for glassware – either a tall beer glass or a double port glass with flared top.

Ship

Generally speaking a *ship* now is seen as being larger than a boat but the definitions varied during history. For example, during the 1800s a *ship* had a *bowsprit* and three masts with each having a lower, top, and topgallant section.

The first instance of *ship* in English referred to a much smaller craft and may even go back far enough to refer to one of the earliest forms of vessel – the hollowed out tree - thanks to the root word *skei* meaning cut or split. The same root word also gives us *schizophrenia*.

What is likely is that the word *ship* in Old English was spelled as *scip* and came from German origins which also gave similar sounding words to Norse, Saxon, Danish, Swedish, and Dutch so it would be easy to assume that ship arrived with the Vikings, or perhaps even the earlier Saxon invaders of what became the British Isles.

The Viking link appears likely in the case of Ireland anyhow as the word for *ship* in Irish is *long*. Sounds a bit like a Viking *longship*, doesn't it?

Skiff

It's virtually impossible to define a *skiff* except as small because the term covers so many different boat designs throughout world history. There are *skiffs* with oars or engines or sails. There are fishing *skiffs* on rivers as well as seas. They're even used in modern piracy. There are racing *skiffs* and there's a regatta at Henley for them.

Skiffs have a literary history too. In the famous "Three Men in a Boat" comic novel by Jerome K. Jerome their boat was a *skiff*. The poet Percy Bysshe Shelley drowned while sailing his *skiff* off the Italian coast. They're mentioned in "Moby Dick" and "The Old Man and the Sea".

It's simpler to discuss the *skiff's* word history and even that's convoluted.

Skiff has meant small boat since the 1570s. It came from French (*esquif*), from Italian (*schifo*), from Old High German (*scif*). Originally a *skiff* was the small boat associated with a ship, for loading supplies and entering shallow ports.

Sloop

A *sloop* is a sailing boat with one mast and a fore & aft rig. If you think of a child's drawing of a sail boat with one triangular sail on either side of a mast, you're imagining a *sloop*.

Original designs built the *sloop* for speed, primarily for evading Caribbean pirates. Modern yachting *sloops* maintain that tradition with many taking part in famous races such as the America's Cup and Volvo Ocean Race. The largest yachting *sloop* built to date is the Mirabella V which has a 90m (289 feet) high mast.

Sloop entered English to describe this style of boat in the 1620s. *Sloop* came from the Dutch word sloep (*sloop*) and before that probably from *chaloupe* in French which came from *chalupe* in Old French (a small, *sloop*-rigged vessel). Do you spot the flaw? The origin of *sloop* refers to *sloop*.

It gets worse. *Chalupe* possibly comes from *shallop* (according to the Oxford English Dictionary) but that word is English. Somehow we have *sloop* entering English, from English.

One other source suggests *sloop* came directly from *slupen* in Middle Dutch which means to glide. We might settle on that one for simplicity, and sanity's sake.

Smack

A *smack* in sea-going circles is a traditional sail-powered fishing boat with either cutter or ketch rigging. They were used off the coast of Britain and North America for most of the 1800s and in smaller numbers up to World War Two.

Large fleets of *smacks* operated from the English ports of Brixham, Grimsby, and Lowestoft. The sails were typically made of white cotton but when waterproofed they turned red and made a striking appearance in fleet format, something which proved attractive to artists of the period.

The word *smack* in a nautical context has nothing to do with the sound of lips or slang for hard drugs. *Smack* has German roots either from *smakken* (to fling or dash) for the sound of its many sails, or from *smak* (sailboat). Either way it transferred into English in the 1610s and also penetrated French (*semaque*), Spanish (*zumaca*), and Italian (*semacca*) in similar fashion.

Tender

A ship's *tender* is the small boat associated with it which ferries cargo and passengers between it and the shore. This is somewhat akin to a lighter barge (see above). With smaller boats the *tender* may be a dinghy, but for larger vessels like cruise ships the lifeboats on davits above deck are also equipped to act as *tenders* when the cruise ship cannot come in to dock in smaller ports or due to weather conditions.

The word *tender* entered English in the late 1400s as someone who *tends* another from the Middle English verb *tenden* – to *attend* to. The meaning of it being a small boat *attending* a larger vessel was first recorded in the 1670s and thereafter is moved to refer to locomotive train engineers (1825) and bartenders (1883) but always retaining the idea of service to another.

Trawler

A *trawler* is a commercial fishing vessel which drags a *trawl* fishing net behind it along the seabed, or at a specified depth, to catch particular species of fish.

Trawlers vary vastly in size from 30 horsepower up to giant factory ships where the fish are processed on board.

Trawl came to English in the 1560s from the Dutch word *tragelen* (from Middle Dutch *traghelen* – to drag) and *traghel* – a dragnet. Latin also had *tragula* for dragnet so the Romans may have had an influence too.

Modern fishing *trawlers* were invented in the 1800s in Brixham, England, a port which has a long fishing tradition dating back to the Middle Ages. During both World Wars many *trawlers* were converted to use as a mine-sweepers.

The Internet *troll* appears to combine the old meaning of *trawl* (to lure and entice, perhaps along the murky bottom of the sea) with the idea of a Norse folktale *troll* being a troublesome creature living underground.

Windjammer

The term *windjammer* arose in the 1880s as a derogatory term among steamship crew for any square-rigged sailing ship. It's a collective name for various types of

square-rigged sailing ships built in the late 1800s to carry large amounts of bulk cargo such as timber, grain, or ore, between continents using the prevailing winds. They're not the same as the earlier sailing ships, the clippers, which carried less and traveled faster. *Windjammers* had between three and five masts and often circumnavigated the globe on their voyages.

The steamship crews didn't need to mock the *windjammers*. Once steam was perfected the days of sail were sadly numbered. The steam ships could round Cape Horn (the tip of South America) in 1,000 miles but under sail it would take 1,500 miles. Heading east, with the winds, would take a week. Heading west, against the winds, could take three weeks. In 1914 the *Edward Sewall* took 67 days, twice being blasted back to a position she'd already passed and finally covering 5,000 miles in the trip.

There are two stories about the origin of the word *windjammer*. The first, and most likely to be true, is that it came from English - the sails *jammed* the *wind*, i.e. blocked it, because there were so many of them.

The second, while less likely to be correct has a certain romance. The idea is that the word comes from Dutch and German verb *jammern* which means to wail and refers to the sound of strong winds blowing through all that rigging.

Wreck

A *wreck* is perhaps the most tragic of all types of ship, a broken one.

The word *wreck* started in English in the 1200s as a name for the goods cast ashore after a ship sank and it came to English from the Old Norse *wrek* (flotsam) via Anglo-French *wrec*.

Using *wreck* to indicate a *shipwreck* didn't happen in English until the 1400s and it also took up the verb use then as meaning to take vengeance on something or to destroy or ruin something. By the late 1700s it could also be used to describe a person who had *wrecked* themselves through wild living.

The idea of a *wrecker* as being somebody who salvaged cargo from *wrecked* ships arose only in the early 1800s and gained overtones in British English as being somebody who might help cause the *wreck* in the first place, but there's very little historic evidence of such evil work ever being done despite its popular place in legend and fiction.

During the same century *wrecker* was a legal occupation in the Bahamas and the Florida Keys in the field of nautical salvage work.

From the late 1800s it also applied to the work of those who *wrecked* and plundered institutions – something like an early corporate raider, perhaps?

With the advent of motor vehicles the word *wreck* applied to accidents on the roads as well as at sea.

Shipwreck is compounded from *ship* and *wreck* but the earlier word for it in Middle English was *schipbreke* (ship break) from various North Sea languages *skipbrek* (North Frisian), *schipbroke* (Middle Dutch), *Schiffbruch* (German), and *scipgebroc* (Old English).

The idea of salvage rights was there from the start as Old English also has *scipbryce* – the right to claim goods from a *wrecked* ship. The debris and cargo from a *wrecked* ship has always been too valuable to simply let it float away on the tide.

Yacht

Thanks to its inclusion for the letter Y in teach-the-alphabet books and posters, the *yacht* is possibly the first type of vessel to spring to mind for many landlubbers.

The Cambridge English Dictionary says it's "a boat with sails and sometimes an engine, used for either racing or travelling on for pleasure".

Undoubtedly sailing experts would provide more detailed definitions but that's close enough, and leaves a casual observer with the idea of a luxury boat belonging to the wealthy and used for messing about on the water.

The word origin of *yacht*, however, paints a different picture. *Yacht* entered English in the 1550s as *yeaghe* (a light, fast-sailing ship) which is much earlier than you might expect.

Yeaghe evolved from either the Norwegian or Early Dutch words *jaght*, both of which came from Middle Low German *jacht* which is a shortened form of *jachtschip* which was a "fast pirate ship" and a literal translation of "ship for chasing" as *jacht* means "chase" from the verb *jagen* "to hunt or to chase" from Old High German.

The word origin tells us that long before *yachting* became a leisure activity for racing before the wind, it had a more sinister purpose. If you had a faster ship than somebody else, it made it possible to catch them and plunder them. It brings a whole new meaning to *yachting*.

Yawl

A *yawl* is a two-masted sailing boat whose mainmast is taller than the mizzenmast. Compared to the similar ketch (see above) it is a larger vessel, with a smaller mizzen sail.

Ketches are more popular in Europe whereas the *yawl* is more popular in North America. Both were originally working fishing vessels but are now primarily pleasure boats.

The word *yawl* is derived from the Dutch word *jol* (a Jutland boat) or Middle Low German *jolle* (same meaning). Originally seen as a ship's boat, or tender (see above) the word moved into English as *yawl* in the 1660s and also crept into French (*yole*), Italian (*jolo*), and Russian (*yal*) so clearly the boat was popular across the seas of Europe.

Enjoyed this article about vessel names?



Since 2009 I've been blogging about the history and origins of unusual English words every Monday on the **Wordfoolery Blog** <http://wordfoolery.wordpress.com>.

I also create a newsletter "**Wordfoolery Whispers**" once a month with the inside scoop on my writing and history adventures, contests, bonus content, book reviews, and a plethora of unusual words. If you want a sneak peek inside Wordfoolery HQ you can subscribe at subscribepage.io/wordfoolerywhispers. Don't forget to click on the confirmation email, it might land in your spam folder.

I write books about the history of the English language which are widely available in paperback and ebook editions. All the ways to get them (including signed copies) are available here <https://wordfoolery.wordpress.com/my-books/>.



- **"Words Christmas Gave Us"** (festive words and traditions through history)
- **"Words The Vikings Gave Us"** (norse nouns and Viking verbs)
- **"Words The Sea Gave Us"** (nautical words and phrases)
- **"How To Get Your Name In The Dictionary"** (extraordinary lives of those whose names entered the English dictionary)
- Coming soon **"Words the Weather Gave Us"**, **"Words Stories Gave Us"**

Thanks for reading!
Grace Tierney, February 2024