

On Boatswains, Backstays and Baggywrinkles

A Landlubber's Primer

By Dennis Payton Knight

There are ample subjects on which I should never be asked to write an essay. Among them are basketry, beekeeping, bird classification, blasting and boating, and of those, boating sails the furthest out in my sea of ignorance. I comprehend fore and aft, and the word knot with a k refers to speed on the water and it derives from the word nautical with an n, but that's about it.

I found a lexicon on boating terminology and on the first page I met abaft, as in "abaft the fore hatch." One can also go abaft the beam, which means further aft than the beam.

I know what aboard means because my family has a history in railroading, but I about got lost wondering about how sailors use the word about. It seems to mean something about going about. In that context, about is sometimes called 'boutship, and it refers to an order to prepare for tacking, which may involve a hammer, but probably not, because hammer is not on the list.

I got the drift of going adrift, and believe I understand the difference between ahead, one word, and a head, two words. Alee stranded me on the wrong side of the boat. Anchor and anchorage didn't drag me down, but, anchors aweigh left me wandering in azimuth circles.

Under B I encountered backstays, baggywrinkle, barbette and barca-longa before I finally alit on the familiar barge. A batten is defined bewilderingly as a stiff strip used to support the roach of a sail. A second definition of batten is a thin strip of any material that comes in handy when an order comes to batten down the hatches, but I wonder why they don't just put doorknobs on them.

Beam is the width of a vessel at its widest point, coinciding with the landlubber's lexicon that describes a female anatomy as being 'a little broad in the beam.' Or is that 'a little beam in the broad?'

But I digress, and I'm not even out of the B's, which includes berth, bilander, bilge, bimmy and binnacle. Boatswain comes before bollard, boom and bottlescrew. Brig was a bright spot of recognition that distracted me before I ran into bulkhead. Why did they have to put a wall there?

Sailing through Chapter C I met a coxswain in the conning tower. Forecastle, freeboard and grog made me groggy, as did gyb, halyard, hard-a-lee, hawsepipe, heave to, jacklines, jetsam, kedge, keelhauling, ladder, lanyard and leeward. The glossary didn't explain why a life jacket is called a Mae West, but it didn't need to.

I fell overboard at mizzenmast, parbuckle, pintle (which rests in the gudgeon), poop deck, purser, quarterdeck, rabbet, salty dog, scuttle, seacock, sennet whip, tweendeck, wake, windage and yardarm. In exasperation I jibbed back to the front of the book and, lo and behold, ahoy and blimey, I found what I was looking for all along! Abandon ship!