

Dear Cap'n Drew: Concerning "four sheets to the wind". The expression is three sheets to the wind and it is not a nautical expression. It refers to windmills. Windmills had four blade structures that could variously be covered in canvas, or sheets, as wind varied. Two or four sheets would balance, but three would not, thus three sheets to the wind refers to a millwright who is distilling his corn mash, not a sailor after the sun is over the yard arm.

Dave M, Saugerties, NY

Dear Cap'n Drew: I always read your column and enjoy it. I hope further to add to the base of knowledge about the term "three sheets to the wind." Or maybe I will just fog things up a little more. While cruising in New England, we stopped at Nantucket. Following the wife's interests, we took a tour of the island. This tour included a stop at a working windmill of the type pictured in the Netherlands. This windmill has been restored from colonial days on the island. It is a fact that these machines did not use sails in the modern sense, but used a canvas that was spread over a latticework to force the wind to turn the shaft. This canvas was called a sheet. The miller could extend the canvas all the way across the lattice on a quiet day, or extend it only part way on a blustery day.

The important part of the story is that all of these windmills had four blades. In the event of a strong blow, the miller could just extend an opposing pair of the "sheets," and get his work done. On a quieter day, he would extend all four "sheets." He could not extend three sheets. Doing so would make the windmill wobble like a drunken sailor. Hence the term "three sheets to the wind." It may or may not be true, but it sounds good.

BTW, while on the same tour, I was forced to tour a small house. (Settlers' houses were tiny compared to the mausoleums we live in today.) In one bedroom the guide demonstrated the rack which tensioned the parallel ropes under the mattress. This gave credence to the two terms: "Sleep tight and don't let the bedbugs bite!" and "He's in the rack."

I'm sure this was all very useful.

Ellis S. on the Amberjack IV, 40-foot Mainship Trawler, Fort Pierce, Florida



by Capt. Drew Brown

Dear Cap'n Drew: I think that Charles' (from NW Florida) power-boat knowledge has overwhelmed his sailing knowledge. He has the basic idea yet left out a critical portion on the issues of "sheets" in the July 2007 issues. On a standard sailing vessel with one main and one jib there are only three sheets (lines), two for the jib (a port sheet and a starboard sheet) and one for the main to control the boom. So, when three sheets are to the wind, you are sailing without control, probably because the rum had a greater impact than the course.

Wes in New York

Dear Dave, Ellis & Wes: Thanks for the input. It seems that the mystery has thickened. While I was under the impression that the expression "four sheets to the wind" referred to sailing ships, the story involving windmills seems very plausible as well. Here are two more for you:

Back in the age of the British Empire, one of the big trade items between the colonies was manure (that's right) for fertilizer. Merchant ships would frequently haul crates of manure between mother England and the colonies. Early on, these crates would be stored low in the ship to keep the smell away from the crew. Unfortunately, cow manure emanates highly explosive methane gas (even today, fertilizer is a key ingredient in homemade bombs). When the mates would come below decks in the evening carrying a lantern, the ensuing explosion would sink the ship. Once the cause of these explosions was realized, the merchant fleets made it policy to store these manure crates higher up in the ship's hold to allow proper venti-

lation of the fumes- thus preventing any explosions. To ensure that the dock workers who loaded the ships knew to do this, the merchants would write on the manure crates, "Ship High in Transit." Ultimately, this became shortened to the acronym "S.-.-.T." This is the origin of how manure got its slang name which is still used today.

Here's another: In the days of the British Empire, when an individual wanted get to the British colonies (particularly India), they need to book passage on merchant ships. The voyage typically took months of heading south on the western coast of Europe and Africa. On this course, the afternoon sun was unbearable while the morning sun was much more tolerable. Since the sun rises in the east, the port side would be much cooler on the way TO India, while the starboard side would be more pleasant on the voyage home. As such, those with more money would arrange their passage as "Port Out, Starboard Home" or "P.O.S.H." "POSH" accommodations still refer to the higher-end, ritzier fare.

Thought that you all might get a kick out of those little ditties!

More Unpleasant Things to Overhear From Your Guest's Stateroom

"I can fix that. Do we have any glue."
 "Maybe this isn't a swim-suit rash, after all..."
 "This is going to be like a big pajama party!"
 "That's ok. I doubt it's flammable."
 "All this rocking is making me randy, baby!"
 "Fifi had a few ticks when we got here, but they all seem to have dropped off."
 "This medicine really doesn't seem to control my night-sweats."
 "Oh, just wear them. He'll never know."
 "I really wish that you wouldn't do that with the towels."
 "I need that side of the bed so my sinuses drain."

Cap'n Drew Brown has been boating for fifteen years with his wife, Meg (Windlass), and their three children, Fender and Cleat and Stay. He is the author of the boating humor book "What's A Hoy? A Guide to Modern Boating." Send questions via e-mail to capn@capndrew.com or visit his website at www.capndrew.com



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