



WORDS FROM WOOD

Wood-related terms have entered common parlance, say **Andrew True** and **John Park**



As thick as two short planks and other words from wood.

But why two, and why short? In the timber trade we should know how essential wood is to the fabric of our society given that we deal in it every day. And it having been one of life's staples with a multitude of uses since time immemorial, it is hardly surprising that it has also had an influence on phraseology and every-day parlance in the English language.

Something was said at a 'board' meeting before lockdown that sent us, Wood Technology Society 'board' members, off at a tangent with discussions, not to mention the consequent e-mails, on the everyday usage of such phrases, some quite obvious, others not so and some we have 'brought to the table'. 'Touch wood' that the phrases in this piece are all correct. Touching wood is said to bring good luck, and it possibly originated in pagan times when trees were thought to be to homes of supernatural beings.

In business, especially in the 'boardroom', many terms derive from the meeting table being simply a timber board. A 'seat at the board'; the meeting is comprised of 'board members' headed by the 'chairman of the board'. (All possibly derived from 'board members' seated on a wooden bench, but the chairman importantly on a chair at the head of the 'board'.) Let's 'table' the accounts. Everything has to be 'above board', and not 'under the table', also applied following consumption of alcohol to excess. Let's discuss this 'across the board', so that this proposal gives a (thin) 'veneer of respectability'. An outer veneer often covers lower quality inner veneers.

Another term adopted by business is 'dead wood' and one might say about another person they are 'barking up the wrong tree' or less politely look what's 'crawled out of the woodwork'. 'Walking the plank' was primarily a naval term, but today it's also applied more generally. At the end of a meeting, 'pull up the stumps' could be expressed, a reflection of the end of the day's play at cricket. Other sporting metaphors, he's in 'pole position'; 'first past the post' (also used in the British electoral system, of course), the striker has 'hit the post', and in bowls another word for bowls is 'woods', often made from *lignum vitae*, until suitable plastic was developed and, of course, golf 'woods' are no longer made of wood. The loser is frequently awarded the 'wooden spoon', although especially useful when cooking.

One of the most common sporting terms is 'under-dog', the origins of which can be disputed. We however would wish to attribute the terms 'top dog' and 'under-dog' to the lengthwise sawing of a log – the dog being the equipment supporting the log above a pit. The saw is held by both the person at the top,

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the 'top dog' and underneath in the pit, the 'under-dog', the latter obviously at the receiving end of all the sawdust, and hence in the worst position. However, he could 'work his way up the ladder' to become the 'top dog'.

In school, in former less-informed times when a student transgressed, it was not uncommon to be 'birched', and the teacher wrote on the 'blackboard'.

Further to more recent times, we are 'not out of the woods yet', and indeed some 'can't see the wood for the trees'. And in some circles, it would be quite helpful if we could 'clear out the dead wood'.

Following another 'branch' of language, our colleague Gervais 'Sawyer' (nominative determinism if ever I saw it and deriving from ancestors who sawed logs) has reported that a colleague of his manufactures doors. The business is taking 'a lot of knocks' at the moment, and because it all 'hinges' on the market he cannot see any 'openings' for new employees. But business is not 'open or shut', so you never can tell. Leave 'the door on the latch', and let's not 'close the door' on these discussions until the appropriate moment.

We hope that you have enjoyed this article, and that 'by hook or by crook' and considering 'what is at stake', we haven't got hold of the 'wrong end of the stick'!

With grateful thanks to the board of the Wood Technology Society. ■

Below: Touching or knocking on wood is said to bring good luck



The Wood Technology Society

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