

Fishing superstitions

Maybe it's the dangerous working conditions, maybe it's just something in the water, but fishermen have always had their superstitions. Chris Carey has the good luck to tell us all about it.

Us fishermen are a superstitious lot, always have been and still are when it suits. Our superstitions are sometimes based on religion but more often they come about due to a coincidence or a chance sequence of events. Either way it has resulted in a plethora of omens, forewarnings or taboos - things you shouldn't say or shouldn't do...or be it on your head!

Take whistling for example. Whistling at sea will whistle up the wind - it's a proven fact! We know that but how did it come about? Probably pure coincidence. A fisherman, happy in his work, would have been whistling away one fine, calm day when a Southerly front came through. The Skipper, who hadn't heard the latest coastal Met warning, found himself in a furious gale of wind. The fishing boat foundered and lives were lost...all except one who survived to tell the tale: "It were th' whistlin' wot dun it. I hears 'em Sir, 'fore the wind comes up." No doubt about it at all.

So here are a few more the wise fishermen would do well to pay heed:

Blessings and protections

Originally blood was used as a blessing during the launching of a new ship with slaves or prisoners sacrificed to ensure the Gods were going to be favourable. The Vikings tied prisoners to the launchways or skids so when the hull passed over them, their blood entered the sea as an offering. Now that would be spectacular! The Greeks also used the blood of slaves but the Romans used water as a symbol of purity. When this practice became unpopular, or they just ran out of slaves, wine, usually red, was used, splashed over the decks prior to launching. Today a bottle of champers is broken across the stem. The use of the lanyard only came into play in recent times when a spectator was injured by a badly thrown bottle. The spectator sued the Admiralty... and won!

The placing of a coin under the heel of the main mast of a boat ensures good luck. The use of coins is a reminder of the longest and final voyage that we will take. It harks back to Greek legend where the souls of the departed paid *Charon* the ferryman to carry them across the river *Styx*. Those who couldn't pay were left behind so a gold coin was placed in the hand or mouth of the dead.

Talismans and rituals

To protect themselves and to ward off evils spells, fishermen are advised to carry a talisman with them. Scandinavian fishermen might carry a talisman of *Thor* to protect them against storms; the horned skipper of the *Skidbladnir*, the mythical Viking ship of *Frey*, is another.

Chinese fishermen swear by horse figurines. Crucifixes, and ivory images of saints and the Virgin Mary are used by French, Portuguese, Spanish and Italian fishermen.



Blessing a ship

Kiwi fishermen often wear whale bone or greenstone 'fish hook' pendants or other representations of *Tangaroa*.

Because few fishermen can swim, or swim well, it is widely believed that carrying a caul, the foetal membrane of a child, will protect them from drowning. Many fishermen believe that to learn to swim would be to tempt fate because if the sea wants to take you it will not be cheated and there is nothing you can do to prevent it.

Japanese fishermen will kneel before the trawl winches and offer bowls of sake to the Gods, then sprinkle rice and sake over their winches and gear before the trawl is shot away on the first tow of the trip.

Women and children

Women play a big part in fishing superstitions. It's a scientifically proven fact that a woman on a fishing boat, other than the Skipper's wife, is unlucky. A woman whistling whilst on board; well that just isn't worth thinking about! However, a partially clad woman will calm a storm which is why female figureheads had one or both breasts exposed.

Breaking the rules with respect to women has been known to lead to tragedy. The story goes that a young fisherman was bewitched by a boat owner's daughter. Leaving his fiancée bereft with grief (for they were to be married the next day), he snuck the owner's daughter aboard and sailed. A storm blew up and all were lost. Apparently she hated the rest of the crew and had whistled up the wind to spite them. Unfortunately for all concerned, it ended up drowning everybody. For her part in this she was turned into a four eyed cat destined to forever haunt the fishing fleets. So that is why fishermen in parts of the British Isles will toss a bit of fish back to the sea to appease the cat.

Families must not wave goodbye, or even say anything as final as 'goodbye' nor point to the boat or other boats, or count them or watch them sail out of sight.

It is strongly recommended that women should not see their men off but if they do they must not go aboard before sailing. They should, however, be there to welcome them home.

'Kiss blessings' spoken or chanted by a fisherman's children was another way to make sure Dad came home: "I see the moon, the moon sees me, God bless our father on the sea," after which they would blow a kiss to him at sea. In Somerset, England a hymn was said and an apple thrown into the Bristol Channel: "Come high tide or low tide, whatever it be, Oh God bring my father home safely to me."

Plan your trip carefully

A fisherman must be very careful on his way to the boat because it's very unlucky to meet a clergyman, a lawyer, a tailor or dressmaker. Or for that matter anyone mentally defective, cross-eyed or squinting.

Should you meet a hunchback though, count your blessings because that is fortuitous. Pray you don't see a drowned animal, a rabbit or hare; that's not good at all. Looking back must be avoided as well so it's a case of "you pays yer money, you takes yer chances."

Sailing on a Friday is to be avoided if at all possible, and beginning a trip on Friday the 13th is simply out of the question.

It's even considered pushing the boundaries to unload a boat, to take on stores and fishing gear or carry out any work on board on a Friday and no fisherman in his right mind will sail on a boat whose keel was laid on a Friday.

But the worst day of all to sail on is Holy Innocents Day (28 December), which is not surprising because this is the day that King Herrod supposedly slaughtered all the children.

In northern Scotland it was believed that no fisherman should sail if a clipping of his hair wouldn't burn if thrown on the fire. Should a woman burn any of her hair clippings when blood relatives were at sea she would almost certainly have guaranteed they'd drown.

Things to avoid

While at sea there are numerous things you simply shouldn't do. Talking in plain terms about the size of a catch, how good you're doing or when you're going to fill up is to be avoided as it is just tempting fate.

Tying the codend on the way home or on the way out is also inviting trouble. Codends should not be tied and left on deck, rather tied just before shooting away.

There are many words that simply should not be spoken out

Southern Seabird Solutions
An alliance of industry, government and environmental interests that work with fishermen to develop and promote fishing practices that are safer for seabirds.

Southern Seabird Solutions Trust is financially supported by the New Zealand Seafood Industry Council and the Department of Conservation. The Trust is also supported by the DeepWater Group, WWF, the Ministry of Fisheries and Te Ohu Kaimoana. Funding for the Trust's projects comes from a variety of sources, both within and outside New Zealand, and includes financial contributions from supporters, grants, sponsorship and services in kind. To learn more visit: www.southernseabirds.org

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Ross Tocker, General Manager,
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loud. It is considered bad luck to quote from the Bible while at sea unless of course is during a burial. The most feared Psalm is Psalm 109, known as the 'Cursing Psalm'. A sailor wrongly condemned to death, stood with the noose around his neck and recited it out aloud, cursing his Captain and crew all the while. The ship foundered soon after.

One of the strongest taboos is the word 'pig' and fishermen (and their families) should take all care not to say that word using synonyms such as 'porker' or simply spell it out instead. No part of a pig should be taken on board and to see a pig on the way to the boat before sailing is very unlucky.

Some colours are regarded as omens. Wearing a green jersey or green wet weather gear on deck is inviting trouble. Painting a boat green or brown isn't good either; they are earth colours and the land is generally considered an hostile environment as far as boats go. Blue is a lucky colour.

Fishermen should never carry their gear in a black bag for it is not a fortuitous colour. Black is worn by priests and priests conduct funerals. Say no more.

The dreaded phantom ship

Lastly, one of the most feared portents of evil a fisherman or sailor could witness is a phantom ship; the Flying Dutchman perhaps the most famous of many. If you were to see a ghost ship, the best thing you can do to protect yourself (and your vessel) from harm is stay close to the ship's figure head which carries the heart and soul of your vessel. If your boat doesn't have one, and most fishing boats don't, hang a crucifix from the quarter deck, gantry or fantail railing. It works, and



Fishermen should avoid the cross eyed and cats. Cross eyed cats must be particularly bad! Picture by Emery.

even today it is customary for an officer boarding a vessel to salute the quarter deck.

There you have it. To some they may be a bit of fun; a quaint relic of the past but to others they still hold water. Not only do we have to wade through a minefield of compliance issues, we have all of the above to contend with. Who said the job was easy?



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