

Contents

Acknowledgements	14
Introduction	15
A	19
Above board	
To have an ace up one's sleeve	
Against the grain	
All and sundry	
To have an axe to grind	
B	25
As bald as a coot	
On the ball	
To bark up the wrong tree	
Bats in the belfry	
The be-all and end-all	
To beat about/around the bush	
To beaver away	
A bed of roses	
To make a beeline for	
To bend over backwards	
To go berserk	
To take the biscuit	

To the **bitter** end
To **blaze** a trail
To **blow** a raspberry
To **blow** one's own trumpet
As **bold** as brass
A **bolt** from the blue
A **bone** of contention
To make no **bones** (about)
'**Break** a leg'
To **break** the bank
To **break** the ice
To give someone a **break**
A **bridge** too far
To **bring** home the bacon
To go for **broke**
Brownie points
To **burn** one's bridges
To **burn** the candle at both ends
To **bury** the hatchet
To **bust** a gut

C 57

Cack-handed
To **call** someone's bluff
A **cat** in hell's chance
To let the **cat** out of the bag
To be **caught** red-handed

Big **cheese**

Cheesed off

A (or an old) **chestnut**

To have a **chip** on one's shoulder

As **clean** as a whistle

A **clean** sweep

To take to the **cleaners**

The **coast** is clear

(A load of) **cobblers**

To get **cold** feet

To give someone the **cold** shoulder

Cold turkey

To **cost** an arm and a leg

Not all it's **cracked** up to be

Crocodile tears

To **cry** over spilled milk

To **cry** wolf

To **curry** favour

To **cut** the mustard

To **cut** to the chase

D 84

A **dark** horse

As **dead** as a doornail

A **dead** ringer

What the **dickens**?

To go to the **dogs**

Double whammy
Down in the dumps
Down to earth
Down to the wire
To **draw** a blank
Back to the **drawing** board
To **drive** someone nuts/to drive someone
 round the bend
At the **drop** of a hat
To **drum** up
To go **Dutch**

E 102

To **eat** one's hat
To **egg** someone on
To make **ends** meet

F 105

To **face** the music
Fagged out
Fair and square
A **far** cry (from)
In **fine** fettle
A **fish** out of water
As **fit** as a fiddle
A **flash** in the pan
Fly-by-night

With **flying** colours
To **foam** at the mouth
To put one's **foot** in it
Forty winks
To have a **frog** in one's throat
Full of beans

G 120

To give up the **ghost**
The **gift** of the gab
To **gird** up one's loins
To get someone's **goat**
To be in someone's **good** books
Goody Two-Shoes
It's (all) **Greek** to me
A **gut** feeling

H 131

Hammer and tongs
Hands down
As **happy** as Larry
To go **haywire**
Head over heels
Heads up
To bring to **heel**
Hell for leather
High and dry

No **holds** barred
(To eat) **humble** pie

K 143

To **kick** the bucket

L 144

A **last**-ditch effort

To **learn** the ropes

To **leave** in the lurch

To do one's **level** best

To go out on a **limb**

In the **limelight**

To be at **loggerheads**

Long in the tooth

By a **long** shot

M 152

Middle of the road

A **moot** point

To keep **mum**

N 156

Neck and neck

Neck of the woods

To get it in the **neck**

To **nip** something in the bud

The **nitty** gritty

O 160

Off one's own bat

Off the beaten track

Off the cuff

P 164

To **paint** the town red

Beyond the **pale**

To **palm** something/someone off

To **pan** out

Part and parcel (of)

Not a **patch** on

In a **pickle**

Pie in the sky

A **piece** of cake

From **pillar** to post

With a **pinch** of salt

To **pipe** down

In the **pipeline**

To go to **pot**

To **pull** out all the stops

To **pull** someone's leg

To **pull** the wool over someone's eyes

To **push** the boat out

To **pussyfoot** around

R 183

To take a **rain** check

Raining cats and dogs

To **rest** on one's laurels

To give one's **right** arm for something

As **right** as rain

To **ring** the changes

Between a **rock** and a hard place

To **rub** someone up the wrong way

Run of the mill

S 192

To get the **sack**

Up to **scratch**

To have a **screw** loose

All at **sea**

To **sell** someone down the river

To **shake** a stick at

Three **sheets** to the wind

On a **shoestring**

Short shrift

As **sick** as a parrot

By the **skin** of one's teeth

To **smell** a rat

Spick and span
A **stamping** ground
To **steal** someone's thunder
A **stick** in the mud
No **strings** attached
A **swansong**

T 209

To a **T**
To **talk** the hind legs off a donkey
On **tenterhooks**
That's the **ticket**
To **toe** the line
Every **Tom**, Dick and Harry
Tongue in cheek
A **turn** up for the books

W 216

Wet behind the ears
A **wet** blanket
To give someone/something a **wide** berth
The **world's** your oyster
The **wrong** end of the stick

Bibliography 222

Website references 223

To make a beeline for

To head directly towards, as bees were once believed to do when returning to the hive. This expression is first found in the USA in the early nineteenth century – about the same time as the Swiss naturalist François Huber’s hugely influential *New Observations on Bees* was translated into English. Huber wrote some extraordinarily personal observations on the mating habits of the queen honeybee, so perhaps, in the days before internet porn, apiarists everywhere were beginning to study their little friends more closely.

By the time Edgar Allen Poe wrote *The Gold Bug* in 1845, the expression was well established. His characters, attempting to decipher an encoded message they have found on a piece of parchment, come up with:

*A good glass in the Bishop’s hostel in the Devil’s seat
– forty-one degrees and thirteen minutes – northeast
and by north – main branch seventh limb east side –
shoot from the left eye of the death’s-head – a bee-line
from the tree through the shot fifty feet out.*

If I tell you that the Bishop’s hostel turns out to be a rock formation, the Devil’s seat a niche in a cliff

and the death's head a human skull that can be seen only through a 'good glass' or telescope, you'll see that working out what 'a bee-line' meant was the least of anyone's worries.

To bend over backwards

To make a very great effort, normally to be helpful/fair/unbiased – *bending over backwards* being one of the most uncomfortable things you can ask your body to do. If you don't believe me, check out the poster for the film *The Last Exorcism Part II*, in which Ashley Bell, playing the girl in need of a second 'last exorcism', bends over backwards far enough to form a graphic figure 2. It looks very painful indeed, but that may be because Ashley is also supposed to be giving the impression that she is possessed by the Devil.

One of the earliest citations for the expression comes from a 1927 edition of the American political periodical *The Nation*; it tells us that 'Stambuliski leaned over backwards in his desire to satisfy Serbian demands.' Aleksander Stambuliski (sometimes written as Stamboliyski, but it's the same guy) was prime minister of Bulgaria in the aftermath of the First World War and you can imagine that trying to