



# Knot News

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## The Sailor's Traditional Ditty Bag

An overview of their history and form

by Louie Bartos

The Ditty bag is a "small bag in which a sailor keeps small tools and equipment, also personal articles" according to John Rogers in *Origins of Sea Terms a modern glossary of seagoing terminology*. But what is a ditty bag and how did it evolve?

The ditty bag and the sea bag, a relative of the ditty bag, were the first projects for an apprentice either in the sailmaker's trade or a working seaman. The reason for this is that these items incorporated primary skills required when making and repairing sails. According to Mcleod (1947), "Apart from the use of the gear, making a bag is good practice for other jobs where cutting out is involved", referring to the sea bag itself, "among the 'old-timers' there is a tradition that a 'proper sailor's bag' must contain five flat seams, the bottom also being put in with a flat seam." Besides learning the techniques of seaming, making twine grommets and sewing eyelets, the bags were an essential part of the sailor's sea-going wardrobe.

There are innumerable variations of the ditty bag; some are very intricate but most are simple and functional. They did have, and still do have one common purpose and that is to hold the sailor's personal possessions and some tools of the trade. It was said that the old sailor referred to his ditty bag as a 'housewife', because in it he had all the essentials for repairing his clothing, personal belongings and generally everything on deck. For an unknown reason the bag was also referred to as a 'jewing bag' and was hung from a hammock ring, or perhaps a hook or peg next to his bunk in the forecabin. These bags generally were companions to the sailor's sea bags or sea chests. Though these items were widely used, little is known about their origin and how they evolved.

The ditty bag goes a long way back in history as do many traditional maritime methods and implements. The origin of the name is lost in the fog of time. It is stated by Admiral Smyth (1867) however, in his *Sailor's Word Book*, that the ditty bag got its name from the word 'ditties' or Manchester stuff, from which it was once made. This too is somewhat obscure, since little is known of 'Manchester stuff'. The manufacturers of textiles in Manchester deny ever making such cloth. It was said the bag was cut and sewn by the sailmakers and was twelve inches in length and five inches in diameter. This varied greatly however, as I observed when investigating early and later day bags in museum collections. In 1923 an answer to a query in the *Mariners Mirror*, on the origin of the ditty bag, emphasized the ambiguity of the origins of these names. They pursued the word dight, in the *Oxford Dictionary*, a word with many meanings, but one is, "to repair, put to rights, put in order". It is



said that this word's latest use in general speech was in 1850, but that it occurs in dialect as late as 1877. It can be assumed that from these sorts of origins the word found its way afloat. An alternative theory suggests that the word came from Scotland or northern England, and that it could have been derived from the term 'duds', 'duddies', or 'duiddies' denoting cloths, especially working cloths. This seems unlikely however since ditty bags were not large enough to carry clothing. There seems no solid evidence pointing to the word's true origin.

The general contents of the ditty bag varied little from the sewing basket of a frugal housewife ashore (with the exceptions of some sea going paraphernalia); hence the name 'housewife' which was given to it. It is said that in the Royal Navy they contained beeswax, varied needles, buttons of different types common on clothing of the period, pins, white tape, Dutch tape, thimble, whited brown thread, black thread, worsted blue and scraps of light duck. These items were generally carried in a small wooden box, round or square, or rolled in cloth, tied, and carried in the ditty bag along with the owner's other personal items. An interesting quote from Bechervaise (1839) referring to 1820, "Thursday, making and mending cloths occupies the whole day, when Jack has a fair opportunity... of examining his ditty bag and having a view of all the little presents 'ere he left home".

There are other historical references to the contents of the ditty bag - a marlinespike, a fid, a palm and needles, a bullock's horn full of grease and sundry other articles to make the work easier; Holmes (1903).

Moffat (1910) noted, "I wonder how many sailors of the present day carry the ditty bag which, in my time, was hung up at the head clew of every sailor's hammock, and which contained marlinespike, pricker, palm, seam rubber, sailhook, a case with needles, usually hitched all round with twine, the tip of a horn full of grease, and a fancy little serving board."

## THE STRUCTURE OF THE DITTY BAG

As I have mentioned, ditty bags varied in size, quality and intricacy. The one common aspect to all bags was their size and cloth weight. From the measurements and photographs of many ditty bags in maritime museums and other collections I was able to determine the average dimensions of old ditty bags. The average diameter was six inches, with the typical length of fourteen inches. This average, as is the case with so many artifacts of the seafaring trade is variable. Ashley (1944) gave an average bag diameter of seven inches and length of fourteen

inches. The lanyard lengths are possibly the most variable, not only in length but style. That is, they vary from the most rudimentary to the most exquisite in fancy work and quality of workmanship. The average length of the lanyard is about eighteen inches, with each leg length approximately half to two thirds of the circumference of the bag. The fancy work of the lanyard handle is approximately six to eight inches in length. The lanyard was fastened to between four and twelve hand sewn eyelets, generally sewn around handlaid marline grommets. The cloth used in the construction of the ditty bag was generally No. 12 duck canvas or lighter.

There are departures from the common cylindrical flat bottomed bag, the most notable being in the Peabody Museum in Salem, Massachusetts. The bag is made of four panels, measuring five inches in diameter and twelve inches in length. The four longitudinal panel seams are sewn together with a cloth piping of contrasting colour, in this case black. The bottom, though a continuation of the side panels, is cut approximately half an inch greater than half the diameter. These pieces are cut into slightly curved gores which, when sewn together with piping, form a bowl-shaped bottom. It has ten lanyard legs, fastened to quarter inch outside diameter eyelets that were sewn into one and one half inch tabling. This is an outstanding piece of workmanship. Another example similar to this bag can be seen in Ashley (1944), in the preface photographs. (#3677 & #3681) Another bag of similar design is described in Smith (1960). Using a single piece of cloth, a hexagonal bottom is formed by cutting six gores which are then sewn together without contrasting piping. This bag measures seven and one half inches in diameter and twelve inches long, and utilizes only six lanyard eyelets.

## MAKING A TRADITIONAL DITTY BAG

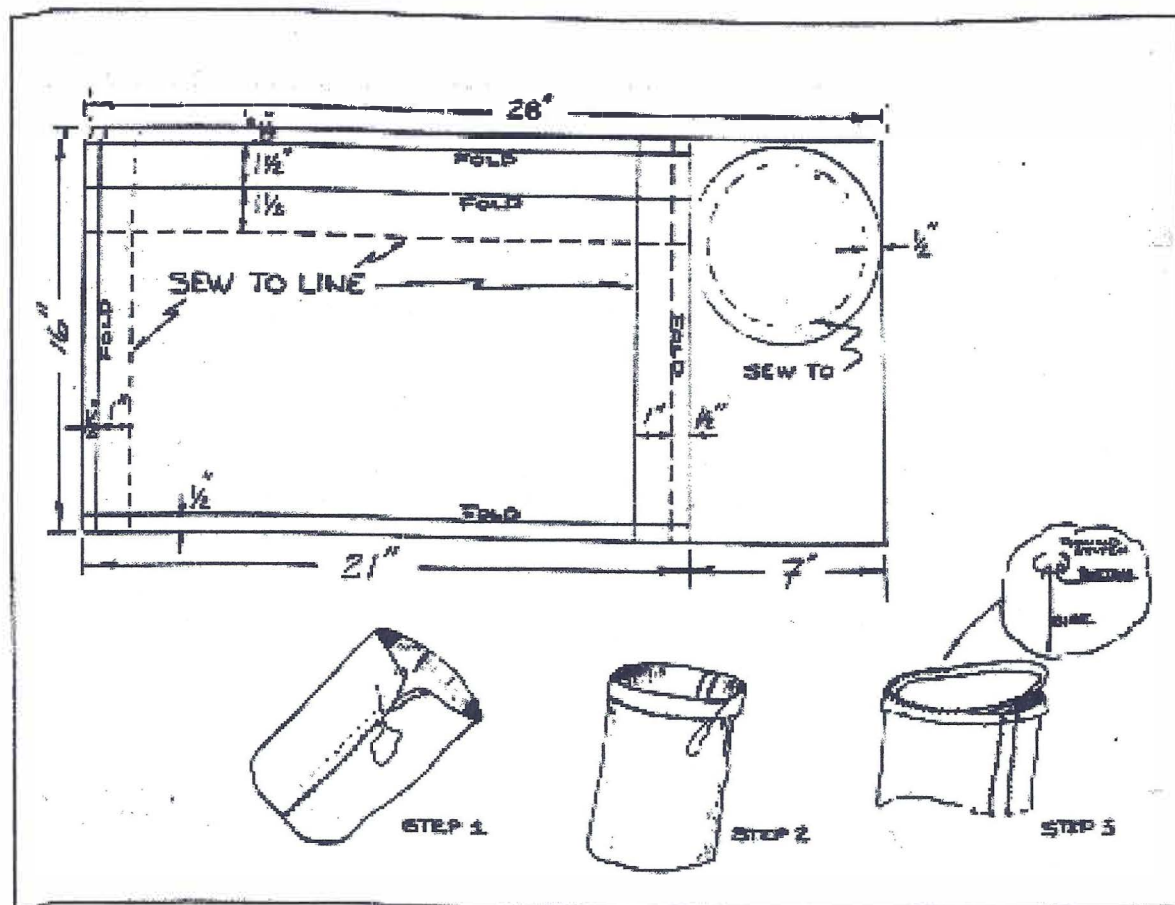
For those readers interested in making a traditional sailor's ditty bag, the following pattern can be used.

In order to make a bag the measures six inches in diameter and fourteen inches high, a piece of light canvas sixteen by twenty-eight inches is required. From this canvas two pieces are cut as shown in the plan drawing. One is sixteen by twenty-one inches, and from the remainder a circle seven inches in diameter is made. To make the construction of the bag easier, it is best to mark and fold all the seam 'sew to lines' and grommet holes.

Since this is not a 'how to' article, I will not go into the method of construction, sewing

techniques, grommet and lanyard making etc. This is well documented in books listed in the accompanying reference section.

This article merely scratches the surface of the history, form, and variations of the sailor's ditty bag, and should not be considered in any sense definitive. If any readers have any further information regarding these items I would be very pleased if they could contact me.



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My thanks to the staff at the Peabody Museum, Salem, Massachusetts, Blunt White Library Mystic Seaport Museum, the Library of the San Francisco Maritime Museum for their assistance, and especially to the many old sailors and sailmakers who have helped me in the past.

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I found this knotting word search on the Internet and I thought it might be fun to see how many knots YOU can find without an answer key. My thanks to the Greater Victoria Region of Scouts Canada. I'll give the answers in the next issue.

E	D	B	D	A	E	H	S	K	R	U	T	O	E	V
K	S	N	A	M	R	E	H	S	I	F	V	Y	W	T
I	S	H	E	E	P	S	H	A	N	K	E	M	T	M
P	F	Q	H	B	P	K	P	I	L	S	O	I	Y	W
S	S	B	S	K	K	M	T	O	P	N	M	L	M	H
E	W	U	K	T	K	C	N	L	K	B	F	L	I	D
N	C	O	R	T	H	G	I	E	E	R	U	G	I	F
I	E	I	A	G	S	C	Y	R	E	V	H	O	T	R
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A	L	I	E	I	S	U	N	Y	W	W	C	R	T	L
M	C	B	S	E	B	K	M	S	F	L	A	H	L	I
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E	O	G	K	S	H	E	E	T	B	E	N	D	E	N

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