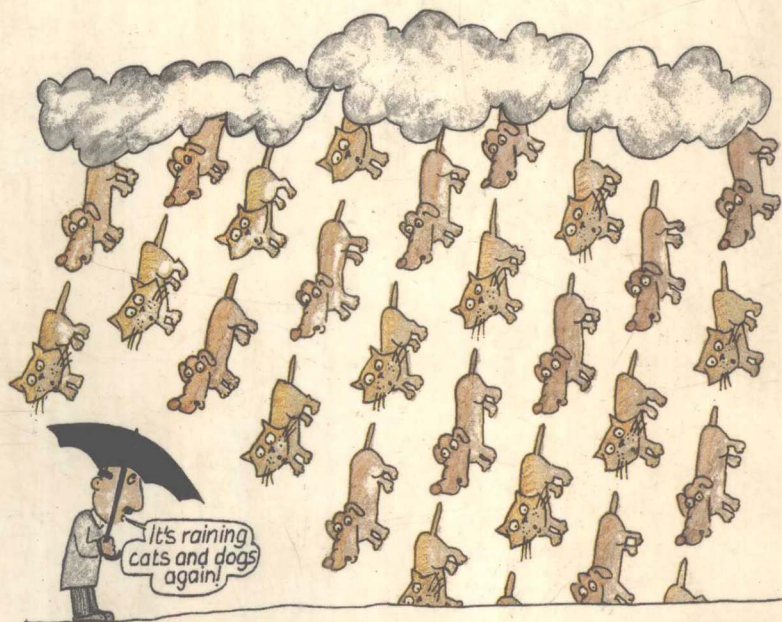


DICTIONARY OF ENGLISH COLLOQUIAL IDIOMS

F.T. Wood and R. Hill



Dictionary of English Colloquial Idioms

Frederick T. Woo

revised by Robert J. Hill

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Introduction

The title of the original version of this book was *English Colloquial Idioms*. It lacked a preface or introduction as F. T. Wood died before it was completed. As in his other books, its explanations were informal, avoiding abbreviations and grammatical terms where possible.

Title

In producing this revision, I have given a slightly changed emphasis. When I compared the contents of the earlier edition with F. T. Wood's *English Verbal Idioms*, I discovered that there was some duplication in the two books. Where appropriate, the verbal idioms are marked 'colloquial' in the other book, and by omitting such duplicates in the revised book, there was space to put in many new items.

Presentation

In deference to F. T. Wood, I have basically retained his style: explanations are of a kind which would be suitable in a lesson. As a dictionary of colloquialisms, it was in serious need of being brought up to date. Entries are written especially with the needs of the foreign student in mind. (It is interesting to see how many of the nouns are uncountable—it would seem that English tends to prefer them to countable nouns!) In a few cases, I have grouped a number of near synonyms under one heading (see *drunk, nervy, telephone*), as I felt users would find them more useful when seen together.

Register

In working on the revision, I was repeatedly reminded of the clear distinction between what we used to call 'written and spoken English'. While still in part referring to the same things, teachers and linguists are now likely to refer to different 'registers'. This dictionary mainly deals with informal/familiar/friendly English, whereas most text books of English for foreigners present English of the formal/written, and of the standard/'safe' middle register only. This informal/colloquial English is not so often written, though it is to be found in personal letters, direct speech in fiction, advertisements, and in popular newspapers. It is the spoken English used between equals; it implies friendliness, varies very

little in different regions of Britain, and its use gives humour and zest to a conversation.

Slang

Slang is usually considered the next register away from colloquial, and is more to be heard among people of the same age group, (especially the young) to reinforce their intimate group feeling. Slang words and phrases may have a comparatively short life and are only given here if I felt they bordered on being colloquial. There is little need for foreigners to learn slang because of its unpredictable survival, and the danger of using it in the wrong social situation. Care is needed even with colloquial English: although formal expressions are sometimes used in informal situations as a joke, informal expressions must simply not be used in formal situations, except possibly when talking about yourself. It is wise to test any new expressions with a native English speaker so as to judge its social suitability.

Idioms

Since many of the entries are idioms, it may interest the reader to note that they may be defined firstly as phrases which allow no element to be replaced by a synonym—we look forward to a holiday, but not ‘see/watch forward to a holiday’; secondly, they are phrases in which the individual parts (if taken separately) do not suggest the meaning of the whole—if your proposals are ‘cut and dried’, you have in fact neither cut them nor dried them; and thirdly, no part can be omitted—‘we must just soldier’ requires ‘on’ to give it meaning.

Cross references

F. T. Wood listed some entries under their nouns, others under verbs, and quite a number under their initial prepositions and there were only a few cross references. Though I have not usually altered the position of his entries, this revision has a far more systematic cross reference system, which I hope will make the dictionary easier to use.

Use

It is not expected that this dictionary will be much used ‘productively’. I have not tried (as some larger new dictionaries do) to give explanations and notes so that the user can know exactly what changes or ‘transforms’ a phrase may undergo, nor with what range of collocations. I assume

items will normally be looked up because the user has already heard them in a context, or merely for casual reading.

Neologisms

New words and phrases often have single inverted commas when first used in print. If they become accepted at all they are, even so, more likely to be heard than seen in print, so they continue to have a colloquial feel about them. I have included a number of them, (e.g. *all systems go*, *catch 22*, *cliff-hanger*, *drag*, *demo*—probably none of these was known to F. T. Wood) though clearly I have not tried to make this a comprehensive dictionary of neologisms. Many would be technical and of minor importance to the majority of foreign students.

Omissions

For the record, the following types of English are generally omitted here: slang, taboo words, vulgarisms, dialect words, drug scene words, and American English (with a few exceptions, e.g. *lame duck*, *knock up*).

Abbreviations

These have been kept to a minimum:

e.g.	for example
i.e.	that is
adj	adjective
adv	adverb
n	noun
prep	preposition
v	verb
cf.	compare

Idioms or uses marked with an asterisk are those which are not recommended to be used by foreigners in ordinary speech—in some cases for reasons of register but more often because they now appear dated.

In conclusion, it must be said that the dictionary can in no way claim to be comprehensive. What is included, is a compromise between the modest size of the original edition, what I felt could be omitted, and what should be added. I hope it will be of at least as much value as the original, and only I am to blame if it is not.

Robert J. Hill Cambridge June 1978

a

A1

(pronounced ay wun) excellent, first-class, good in every respect; originally used by Lloyd's Register of Shipping in the classification of vessels as regards general condition, seaworthiness etc.

A to Z

see from A to Z

about

note the colloquial construction *it is + adjective + about + noun*, where *about* refers to a notion implied in *it* + the noun, and understood from the context or situation

- ☐ It's very sad about Mrs Brown, isn't it? (i.e. she has died, been injured or suffered some misfortune)
- ☐ It's unfortunate about your holiday. (i.e. that you have had to cancel it, change the date etc.)

absolute

used for purposes of emphasis, with a meaning approximating to 'complete'

- ☐ He's an absolute fool.
 - ☐ It was an absolute treat.
- hence *absolutely*: completely
- ☐ It is absolutely stupid to say that.
 - ☐ It absolutely poured with rain.
 - ☐ You can trust him to be absolutely fair.

ace (*n or adj*)

first-class, excellent (person)

aches and pains

a cliché used to denote physical pains of various kinds

- ☐ I wish she would be a bit more cheerful; she is always complaining of her aches and pains.

acid test

a test that shows true worth (originally a test with acid to ensure a metal was gold)

- ☐ You've passed your exams, but the first few months on the job will be the acid test.

across

see **get across someone** and **get something across to someone**

across the board

across the board

with no exceptions, through all sectors (used in pay negotiations)

- It was the union's policy that all the workers should be treated alike, so they demanded a 5% increase across the board.

actually

used to suggest that the fact stated would seem incredible

- He actually robbed his own mother.

NOTE *Actual(ly)* has an entirely different meaning from the similar words in other languages.

Adam

as old as Adam: of great antiquity; going back a long way in history (sometimes used in the literal sense of 'to the beginning of the human race', but more often as hyperbole)

- That custom is as old as Adam.

I shouldn't know him from Adam. I should be quite unable to recognise him.

- I knew him when we were at school together, but that's many years ago. If I were to meet him today I shouldn't know him from Adam.

This is sometimes used also, though illogically, of a woman. There is no equivalent idiom *I shouldn't know her from Eve*.

admin

short for *administration*

advert or ad

short for *advertisement*, mostly heard in spoken English

- I saw your ad in the newspaper.

affair

piece of work, performance, sometimes even in the sense of 'object'

- The concert was rather an amateurish affair.
- What's that strange-looking affair over there?

usually used disparagingly, though not necessarily so

after all

1 contrary to what was supposed or expected

- I managed to get to the meeting after all.
- We took our raincoats with us, but we did not need them after all.

2 when everything else is taken into consideration

- Jack may have treated you rather badly, but if he is in serious difficulties I think you should help him. After all, he is your brother.

afters

pudding or dessert after the main course

age(s)

a very long time

- ☐ It has taken me ages to get this garden in order.
- ☐ That happened ages ago.
- ☐ I have not been to the cinema for ages.

An age is also used with a similar meaning:

- ☐ She was away for a few minutes that seemed like an age.
- for *this day and age*, see **day**

aggro

spoken short form of *aggression*

agog

(often *all agog*) in a state of excited expectancy

- ☐ The children were all agog to hear the story.

aid

see **in aid of**

ain't*

This frequently heard word is definitely substandard usage, but you need to be aware of its meanings. It provides the negative of *be* and *have*.

- ☐ I ain't stupid; he ain't stupid.
- ☐ I ain't got to go yet; they ain't got to go yet.

In this 'have not' meaning, it is usually used with *got* and frequently with a second negative:

- ☐ He ain't got no car. (i.e. hasn't got a car)

You are not advised to use any of these forms yourself.

air

see **hot air** and **in the air**

airy-fairy

vague, out of touch with reality

alec

see **smart alec**

alive and kicking

very vigorous and active

- ☐ 'I thought your grandfather was dead.' 'Far from it; he is very much alive and kicking.'

The reference may originally have been to a new-born baby. It is also suggested that this originated as the cry of a fishmonger advertising his fish.

alive with

filled with living creatures of various kinds

all along

- ☐ All my best cabbages were alive with caterpillars.

figuratively:

- ☐ The town was alive with rumours of one sort and another.

all along

from the very beginning of an affair, project etc.

- ☐ I said all along that he was not a person to be trusted, but you would not listen to me.

all and sundry

strictly, all taken collectively and individually, but in colloquial usage merely used to mean 'everyone'

- ☐ We shall have to restrict the number of guests; we can't invite all and sundry.

all at once

suddenly

- ☐ I had been puzzling over the problem for over an hour without any result, when all at once the solution flashed across my mind.

All at once I saw a crowd,

A host of golden daffodils.

(Wordsworth, *The Daffodils*)

(But this idiom must not be confused with the same sequence of words in such a sentence as *We shall have to make several journeys for the goods; we cannot take them all at once*. Here *all* is the object of *take*, and *at once* is an adverb phrase meaning 'in a single operation'.)

all at sea

completely confused

- ☐ The guide was ready enough with his usual talk on the history of the place, but as soon as you began to question him on anything outside that, he was all at sea.

all being well

not exclusively colloquial, but very frequently used expressing hopes that nothing will impede plans

- ☐ 'When shall we arrive?' 'We should get there by teatime, all being well.'

see also **hopefully**

all but

nearly, almost (used mainly before adjectives and past participles, but sometimes also before finite verbs)

- ☐ The new building was all but complete when it was destroyed by fire.
- ☐ She all but wept when she heard the news.

all for

entirely or completely in favour of

- ☐ I'm all for anything that makes life easier.
- ☐ As usual, John was all for going; taking the risk, and getting out of Germany. But Peter was cautious. (Eric Williams, *The Wooden Horse*, phase II, ch 9)

all in

1 everything included

- ☐ I reckon it costs me two hundred pounds a year to run my car, all in.
- ☐ On top of his wages he gets tips and various other perks, so that he probably makes the equivalent of about fifty pounds a week, all in.

2 *be all in*: be exhausted

- ☐ I was all in after running so far.

all in good time

in due course; when a suitable or opportune time arrives

- ☐ 'When are you coming to do those repairs to the roof of my house? It was over a fortnight ago that I asked you about them.' 'All in good time, madam; I haven't forgotten.'

all my eye

a term of contempt, used to show that one does not believe a story, a statement etc.

- ☐ He told you he was never given the instructions? That's all my eye. Why, I gave them to him myself.

A variant is *all my eye and Betty Martin*.*

all of a . . .

(followed by a verb stem) having an (uncontrollable nervous movement)

- ☐ I was all of a tremble before the exam.
- ☐ She is always all of a dither before giving a party.
- ☐ He was all of a twitch.

(occasionally followed by a noun)

- ☐ The bad news struck me all of a heap.

all of a sudden

suddenly

- ☐ All of a sudden a man burst out of the hedge, and made off down the road.

all one can do

preceded by *it is/was* and followed by an infinitive or infinitive construction, to suggest great difficulty in doing what is stated in the infinitive

all out

- ☐ It's all we can do to keep ourselves in food and clothing; holidays are out of the question.
- ☐ It was all I could do to refrain from laughing.
- ☐ The thieves drove so fast that it was all the police could do to keep up with them.

all out

see **go all out**

all over

1 covered with

- ☐ His shoes were all over mud.
- ☐ His hands were all over grease.

2 finished (suggesting defeat, failure or death); preceded by *it is/was/will be* and followed by *with*

- ☐ If the patient has another relapse, I am afraid it will be all over with him.
- ☐ When our opponents scored another goal only a few minutes from the end of the match, we knew it was all over with us.

3 everywhere; over a wide area (probably a shortened form of **all over the place**)

- ☐ We've been looking for you all over.

4 exactly characteristic of the person in question

- ☐ You say he refused to buy the goods unless he was allowed a discount? I'm not surprised. That's John all over. Always wanting things on the cheap.

all over the place

in many different places

- ☐ When you've finished playing with your toys, put them back in the toy cupboard; don't leave them lying all over the place.
- ☐ I've searched all over the place for that lost ring, but I've not found it.

Variants, bordering on slang, are *all over the show* and *all over the shop*.

all over the shop/show

see **all over the place**

all right

1 satisfactory

- ☐ Will it be all right if I let you have the information by next Friday?
- ☐ If the arrangement is all right with you, it's all right with me.

2 in a satisfactory state, condition or position

- ☐ I've not been very well, but I'm all right now.

☐ Are you all right for money?

☐ He doesn't care what happens to anybody else, so long as he's all right.

3 used to suggest, in a general way, the absence of any objection, or of any need for concern or alarm

☐ Is it all right for me to see the patient for a few minutes?

☐ It's all right; don't make a fuss; there's no harm done.

Sometimes if people talk very quickly, you may hear for *It's all right* something sounding like *sore eye*.

4 used to express approval, consent or agreement

☐ All right, I'll meet you at seven o'clock, then.

☐ 'Might I leave a quarter of an hour earlier today?' 'All right, but see that all the letters are ready for posting before you go.'

sometimes used sarcastically, or to express impatience or annoyance

☐ All right, do it your own way, but don't blame me if you fail.

5 to link one stage of an explanation, a piece of exposition etc. to the next

☐ You have followed the explanation so far? All right, now we come to the second stage.

In speech the stress is on *right*.

6 to introduce a threat

☐ All right, my lad, if you won't do what you're told you must take the consequences.

7 to convey the idea of 'going the right way', 'on the right road'

☐ Am I all right for Bristol on this road?

☐ Is this train all right for Birmingham?

8 used for purposes of emphasis: 'certainly', 'without doubt'

☐ He's dead all right.

9 used to express the idea of 'quite capable of doing whatever is specified' (usually implying that there is a common belief of pretence to the contrary)

☐ Don't take any notice of the excuse that he could not understand the document because it was in English. He can understand English all right when it suits his purpose.

10 used in the expression *I'm all right, Jack*, a contemptuous remark, showing total disregard for other people's troubles

NOTE This meaning is only given by including *Jack*.

all round

1 to every member of a group or company

☐ The organiser of the expedition stood us drinks all round.

all systems go

2 in every subject, branch or department

□ It is difficult to say which is his best subject; he seems equally good all round.

hence (attributively) *an all-round sportsman* or *an all-rounder*

all systems go

all ready to go, and about to start

□ It's all systems go—turn over your exam papers and start writing.

This was popularised during the launchings of spacecraft during the late 1960s and early 1970s.

all that

NOTE In English *all what* do not usually come together. We say *You mustn't believe all that is written in that book* and *You mustn't believe all (that) he tells you*.

1 *not as bad/dear/old/hot as all that*: as would seem to be suggested or implied

□ There is no need to get alarmed; things are not really as bad as all that.

□ Merely because I'm grey-headed, don't imagine that I'm drawing the old age pension; I'm not as old as all that.

□ You needn't open all the windows; it's not as hot as all that.

2 before an adjective or an adverb, with a meaning equivalent to that of the adverb of degree *so*, or the construction *so (as) . . . as that* (regarded by purists as an illiteracy in written or more formal spoken English, but often used colloquially, the *that* referring to something that has been stated before)

□ It wouldn't worry me to go without porridge for breakfast; I'm not all that fond of it.

□ I wouldn't walk all that far, just to see an exhibition of modern art.

3 *and all that*: and other things of that kind

□ By cereals we mean wheat, oats, rye, barley and all that.

cf. the title of the book *1066 and All That*, by W. C. Sellar and R. J. Yeatman, a humorous treatment of various episodes from history

all the answers to all the questions

(generally used sarcastically) To say that a person *knows* (or *has*) *all the answers to all the questions* implies that he tries to give the impression that he can explain away all difficulties, but that his explanations are far too facile.

□ Browning sometimes gives us the impression, especially where religious difficulties are concerned, that he has all the answers to all the questions.

all the more

to an even greater extent or degree

- ☐ His mother asked him to stop teasing the cat, but he only did it all the more.

also used adjectivally:

- ☐ I know you find the subject difficult, but that is all the more reason why you should work hard at it.

all the rage

very popular or fashionable; arousing great interest, excitement or enthusiasm

- ☐ For a few years black leather jackets were all the rage among teenagers; then new fashions took their place.

all the same

1 making no difference, sometimes used to express apathy or indifference

- ☐ I think I should prefer to go on Friday morning, if it's all the same to you.
☐ Well, there's my offer. You can either take it or leave it, it's all the same to me.

2 nevertheless; although that is so

- ☐ The fall in brewery shares this year does, of course, allow for a good deal. All the same, I feel that we shall see many shares go lower yet.
(*Observer*, 26th Sept. 1965)

all the world and his wife*

everyone (usually used hyperbolically in the sense of 'a very large number of people')

- ☐ All the world and his wife seem to be out in the country today.

all there

usually used with a negative (*not all there*) in the sense of 'mentally subnormal', or positively in questions that suggest or presuppose a negative answer

- ☐ He's not all there.
☐ Do you think that man is all there?

The positive use in statements generally means 'having all one's wits about one', or 'intellectually alert'.

- ☐ He's all there, is George, you won't take him in easily.

all to the good

so much the better

- ☐ We have had six offers of help. If more people volunteer, all to the good.

all up with

all up with

the end of one's life, hopes, something one has been striving for etc.
(preceded by *it is/was* etc.)

☐ As the enemy closed in, the faithful band of defenders realised that it was all up with them.

all very well

This is used sarcastically or ironically, to express disagreement, dissent or objection; the idea is that a suggestion, advice etc. seems satisfactory in itself, but in the situation in question it is not practicable.

☐ It's all very well for the doctor to tell me I need a month's holiday, but who's going to look after my business while I'm off?

all well and good

used to express approbation of a possible contingency or situation

☐ If he offers to work on Saturday morning, all well and good, but I shall not ask him to.

☐ I am opposed to spending so much public money on higher education. If a boy or girl can profit from it, all well and good, but so much of what is spent nowadays is just wasted.

all yours

you may have it/them

☐ 'May I borrow that newspaper, please, when you have finished with it?' 'There you are; it's all yours.'

alone

see **go it alone**

alright

This is the usual American spelling of **all right**, often now used in Britain.

also-ran

a person whose performance is mediocre (originally, a horse which is not among the first three in a race)

altogether

in the altogether: without clothes on

and

This is used to co-ordinate two examples of the same noun, to suggest different kinds. The *and* is usually stressed.

☐ There are poets and poets.

☐ There is coffee and coffee.

In most contexts the suggestion is that one is inferior to the other, and should only be allowed the name by courtesy.

and all

including or together with whatever or whoever is mentioned before the phrase

- The elephant swallowed the buns, bag and all.
- Cromwell instructed Sir Peter Lely to paint him warts and all, otherwise he would not pay a farthing for the portrait.

In the regional usage of certain districts of the Midlands, western and northern England, *and all* is appended to a statement to give emphasis, and has something of the same meaning as 'certainly'.

- 'It's warm today, isn't it?' 'It is, and all.'

The *d* in *and* here is not pronounced.

and all that

see **all that**

and Co.

In standard usage this is merely a commercial term, but in colloquial English it is sometimes used to mean those associated with the person named. There is often a disparaging suggestion about it.

- I don't know who was responsible for the damage, but I shouldn't be surprised if it was Johnson and Co.

Although *Co.* is an abbreviation for *company*, it is here spoken to rhyme with *go* and *so*. *And Co.* is most often written as *& Co.*

and that

and other things of that kind or in that class

- We spent over an hour clearing up all the waste paper and that which the picnickers had left behind.

answer back

reply impertinently to an instruction, request etc. when no reply is called for

- He is not really a rude or ill-mannered boy, but he has an unfortunate habit of answering back.

also transitively with a personal object:

- I'm not going to have a child of that age answering me back.

Back must be in the final position.

see also **dusty answer**

anybody

anyone of importance, distinction, social position etc.; both the ordinary and the colloquial sense of the word appearing in:

- Anybody who is anybody would not behave in that way.

anything but

strictly, 'anything except', but when followed by an adjective that