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The meaning and origin of the expression: POSH - Port out, starboard home

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Meaning

Elegant, swanky, rich.

Origin

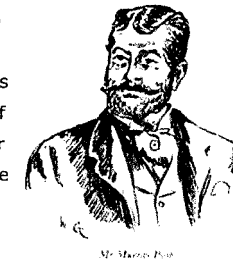
'Port out, starboard home' might be rather a strange inclusion on a website about phrases, for, as we shall see, it isn't much of a phrase at all. The much-repeated tale is that 'Posh' derives from the 'port out, starboard home' legend supposedly printed on tickets of passengers on P&O (Peninsula and Orient) passenger vessels that travelled between UK and India in the days of the Raj. Another version has it that PO and SH were scrawled on the steamer trunks used on the voyages, by seamen when allocating cabins.

Britain and India are both in the northern hemisphere so the port (left-hand side) berths were mostly in the shade when travelling out (easterly) and the starboard ones when coming back. So the best and most expensive berths were POSH, hence the term. A very plausible and attractive explanation and it would be nice to be able to confirm it. The belief was widespread enough in 1968 for it to have been included in the lyrics of the song 'Posh' in the film *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*:

> O the posh posh traveling life, the traveling life for me
> First cabin and captain's table regal company
> Pardon the dust of the upper crust - fetch us a cup of tea
> Port out, starboard home, posh with a capital P-O-S-H, posh

There is no evidence to confirm this story though and it appears to have been dreamed up retrospectively to match an existing meaning. Whoever thought it up must have been quite pleased with it, and it appeals to enough people to get repeated endlessly. It also panders to the popular craving for the employment of acronyms as the explanation of common phrases - golf ('gentlemen only, ladies forbidden'), cop ('constable on patrol') etc. These are nonsense but they keep cropping up. It's worth remembering that acronyms are a 20th century phenomenon and researchers are hard pressed to find any examples before the 1920s. The word acronym itself wasn't coined until the 1940s. Any such explanation of older words, like 'golf', or indeed 'posh', is sure to be false.

P&O say they have never issued such tickets and, although many tickets from that era still exist, no 'POSH' ones have been found. These have the status of an etymological Holy Grail and occasionally someone claims to have seen one. Needless to say that hasn't yet been backed up with any evidence. Mind you, even if this mode of travel were the source of the phrase, there's no particular reason that tickets would have been stamped with POSH, so the absence of such tickets doesn't prove anything. The same goes for the alleged chalking of POSH on steamer trunks. The evidence for this is even less likely ever to come to light. The finding of luggage from that period with the appropriate chalkmarks is hardly evidence, as the marks could have been added ten minutes previous to the find. We would need photographic evidence that could be dated to the period of the Raj - needless to say, no such photos have come to light. The lack of any citation of 'port out, starboard home' in any of the numerous letters and literary works that remain from the British Raj is a more convincing argument against that origin.



The true origin of 'posh' is uncertain. The term was used from the 1890s onward to mean a dandy. George and Weedon Grossmith's *The Diary of a Nobody*, which began publication in serial form in the English satirical magazine *Punch* in 1888, has a character called Murray Posh, who is described as 'a swell'. The book is a satire of the times and most of the character's names are intended to match aspects of their personality, so it is quite probable that the Grossmiths used the name Posh with the meaning we currently know. The said Murray certainly looks posh enough.

The first recording of 'posh' in print that seems unequivocally to fit the current meaning of the word is a cartoon which contains this dialogue between an RAF officer and his mother, also in *Punch*, September 1918:

> Oh, yes, Mater, we had a posh time of it down there."
> "Whatever do you mean by 'posh', Gerald?"
> "Don't you know? It's slang for 'swish'"

In his 1903 *Tales of St. Austin's*, P. G. Wodehouse used the word 'push' to mean much the same as we now use 'posh':

> "That waistcoat... being quite the most push thing of the sort in Cambridge."

Posh is also the Romany word for money and this was current throughout the 19th century. This originally meant halfpenny, which, inflation allowed for, is a long way from poshness.

The English gentlemen poet Edward Fitzgerald is another possible source of the word. He had what newspapers of the day (around 1908) described as 'most unaccountable admiration and friendship' for his boatman Joseph Fletcher, who was known as 'Posh'. In Fitzgerald's words, Posh was "A great man. A man of the finest Saxon type, blue eyes, nose less than Roman, more than Greek, and strictly auburn hair that any woman might sigh to possess". Later writers have accounted for that admiration and, in these more permissive days, it wouldn't be necessary to read between the lines of Fitzgerald's quote.

Whatever the origin is, it isn't likely to match the appeal of the P&O story and, although it is evidently wrong, that's the one that people prefer to repeat.