

Legend of the Flying Dutchman



The legend of The Flying Dutchman is said to have started in 1641 when a Dutch ship sank off the coast of the Cape of Good Hope. Captain van der Decken was pleased. The trip to the Far East had been highly successful and at last, they were on their way home to Holland.

As the ship approached the tip of Africa, the captain thought that he should make a suggestion to the Dutch East India Company (his employers) to start a settlement at the Cape on the tip of Africa, thereby providing a welcome respite to ships at sea.

He was so deep in thought that he failed to notice the dark clouds looming and only when he heard the lookout scream out in terror, did he realise that they had sailed straight into a fierce storm.

The captain and his crew battled for hours to get out of the storm and at one stage it looked like they would make it. Then they heard a sickening crunch - the ship had hit treacherous rocks and began to sink.

As the ship plunged downwards, Captain van der Decken knew that death was approaching. He was not ready to die and screamed out a curse: "I will round this Cape even if I have to keep sailing until doomsday!"

So, even today whenever a storm brews off the Cape of Good Hope, if you look into the eye of the storm, you will be able to see the ship - The Flying Dutchman, and its captain.

Don't look too carefully, for the old folk claim that whoever sights the ship will die a terrible death.



Flying Dutchman - Selected Sightings

While most people agree the "history" of the ship is a legend, the Flying Dutchman has been sighted by reliable witnesses. All of these were in the Cape of Good Hope area:

- 1823: Captain Owen, HMS Leven, recorded two sightings in the log.
- 1835: Men on a British vessel saw a sailing ship approach them in the middle of a storm. It appeared there would be a collision, but the ship suddenly vanished.
- 1881: Three HMS Bacchante crewmembers, including King George V, saw the ship. The next day, one of the men who saw it fell from the rigging and died.
- 1879: The SS Pretoria's crew saw the ghost ship.
- 1911: A whaling ship almost collided with her before she vanished.
- 1923: Members of the British Navy saw her and gave documentation to the Society for Psychical Research, SPR. Fourth Officer Stone wrote an account of the fifteen minute sighting on January 26th. Second Officer Bennett, a helmsman and cadet also witnessed the ship. Stone drew a picture of the phantom. Bennett corroborated his account.
- 1939: People ashore saw the Flying Dutchman. Admiral Karl Doenitz maintained U Boat crews logged sightings.
- 1941: People at Glencairn Beach sighted the phantom ship that vanished before she crashed into rocks.
- 1942: Four witnesses saw the old ship enter Table Bay, then vanish. Second Officer Davies and Third Officer Montserrat, HMS Jubilee, saw the Flying Dutchman. Davis recorded it in the ship's log.
- 1959: The Straat Magelhaen nearly collided with the ghost ship.

Scientific explanation?

Despite the descriptions of ghoulish glows and the like, scientists have offered a more scientific explanation. Called Fata Morgana (named for the legendary sorceress half-sister of King Arthur) a mirage would occur when warm air rested (in calm weather) right above dense, cold air near the surface of the ocean (though the effect also takes place on the ground in mountainous regions).



The air between these two masses acts as a refracting lens, which will produce an upside-down, distorted image of the upright object within these masses of air. Even though a ship may be beyond the horizon, the observing ship may see an inverted, blurry image of the "mirage ship". The mirage ship could appear several times larger than its actual size, it may appear much closer, and the colours (due to the sun's position) may be distorted.

Despite modern scientific explanations, legends of the Flying Dutchman serve to stimulate the imaginations of sailors, movie audiences, authors, and others in the creative arts. Like the headless horseman of Sleepy Hollow or the creatures of The Village, such legends can serve to entertain us or frighten us into submission. Unlike Pirates of the Caribbean, very few of the tales of the Flying Dutchman involve a giant sea beast, but instead serve as a warning of coming disaster.

Learning Outcome 1

Engage with some text about a Legend

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| When did the legend start ? |
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| How did the legend start ? |
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| Where do the encounters happen ? |
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| What did you enjoy about this text ? |
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| What did you dislike about this text ? |
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Learning Outcome 2

Write notes on two issues raised by the legend

Issue 1

How reliable are eye witness accounts ?

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Issue 2

Can science give us an explanation for everything ?

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Learning Outcome 3

Compare the legend of the Flying Dutchman with one other legend or mystery

Name of other legend or mystery:

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What is similar between the two stories:

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What is different between the two stories:

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