

1. As I was a rollin' down the Ratcliffe Highway
I saw a flash-looking packet from old Wapping
Town.

As soon as I see'd her I slacked me main brace,
And I hoisted me stu'n's'ls and to her gave chase

Her flag was three colours, her masthead was
low,
She was round at the counter an' bluff at the
bow,
From larboard to starboard and so rolled she,
She was sailing at large, she was running free.

**With me riggin' slack, and me rattlin's
affray,
I rattled me riggin' down Ratcliffe Highway!**

2. I fired me bow-chaser, the signal she knew
She backed her main tops'l and for me hove to,
I lowered down me jolly-boat and rowed
alongside,
I found madam's gangway was open and wide.

I hailed her in English, she answered me clear,
"I'm from the Black Arrow bound for
the Shakespeare"

So I wore ship with a what d'yer know?
An' I passed her me hawser an' took her in tow.

**With me riggin' slack, and me rattlin's
affray,
I rattled me riggin' down Ratcliffe Highway!**

3. I tipped her me flipper, me tow-rope and all
And she then let her hand on my reef-tackle fall,
Then she took me up to her lilly-white room
And in her main rigging I fouled me jib-boom

I entered her cubby-hole, and swore, "Damn
your eyes!"

She was nought but a fireship rigged up in
disguise!

She had a foul bottom, from sternpost to fore;
'And betwixt wind and water she ran me ashore.

**With me riggin' slack, and me rattlin's
affray,
I rattled me riggin' down Ratcliffe Highway!**

4. She set fire to me rigging, as well as me hull,
Then away to the lazareet I had to scull.
With me helm hard a-starboard as I rolled along,
Me shipmates cried, "Hey, Jack, yer mainyard's
all sprung!"

Now I'm safe in harbour, me moorings all fast,
I lay here quite snug, boys, till all danger is past;

With me mainyard all served, boys, and parcelled
and tarred,
Wasn't that a stiff breeze, boys, that sprung me
mainyard?

**With me riggin' slack, and me rattlin's
affray,
I rattled me riggin' down Ratcliffe Highway!**

5. Here's a health to the girl with the
black curly locks,
Here's a health to the girl who ran Jack
on the rocks,
Here's a health to the quack boys who
eased me from pain
And if I meet that flash packet - I'll
board her again!

**With me riggin' slack, and me rattlin's
affray,
I rattled me riggin' down Ratcliffe Highway!**

This version of *The Fireship* is sung in a lively way by
Keith Kendrick on the CD [All Tide Up](#).

Listen to a version of this on YouTube by Hulton Clint at
youtu.be/FNi5dRMwhys

Other stanzas

She was blowin' along with the wind blowing free
She clewed up her courses and waited for me.

I tipped her my flipper, I took her in tow
And yardarm to yardarm away we did go.

She lowered her tops'l, t'ga'ns'l and all
Her lilly-white hand on my reef-tackle fall.



Hogarth, William: *The Idle 'Prentice return'd from sea & in a Garret with a common Prostitute*, 1747.
via [Wikimedia Commons](#)

Notes:

Originally a forebitter but used on **capstan** and **pumps**

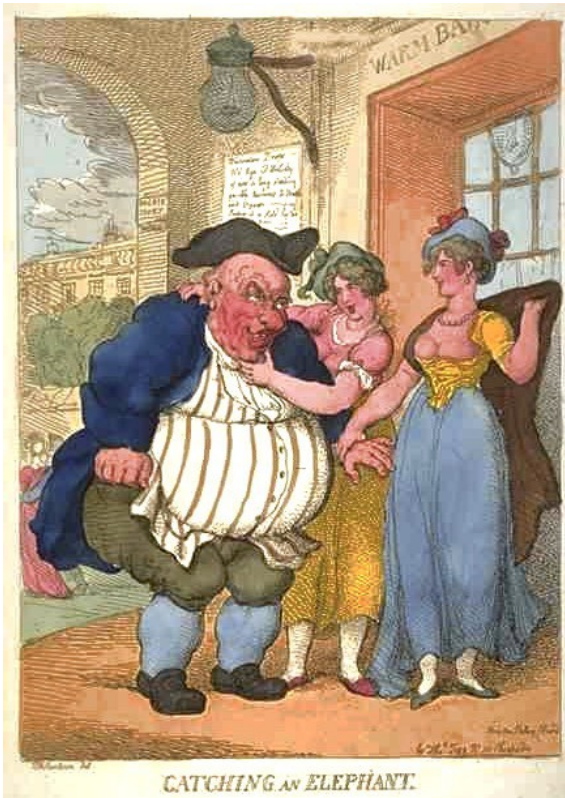
Alternative Titles: The Fireship, Ratcliffe Highway

Hugill, Stan, 1994, *Shanties from the Seven Seas:*

Much of the wording of this forebitter points to a naval original, and that of the censored bawdy parts even more so. However it is possible that the nauticalisms ... may point merely to an East Indiaman since many of these ships carried gunners and topmen and carried out manoeuvres in naval fashion.

Ratcliffe Highway

... was a tough quarter, full of pubs and "dives", its pavements cluttered with drunks, pimps, crimps and prostitutes but to the sailorman its garish delights were something to look forward to when on an upper topsail yard sail-clawing the the pitch of old Cape Stiff. Just the place to spend a pound - there were many Pollies and Sallies waiting to help Sailor John spend it with gusto. Nowadays ... called The Highway.



Rowlandson, Thomas, *Catching an Elephant*, 1812
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Words - naughty and nautical

A Fireship

In this context, one who passes on a venereal disease.

Bow-chaser - small cannon fitted in the bows, particularly of East Indiamen.

Clewed up - raised the lower corners using clew line

Counter - part of a ship's stern extending from the water line to the extreme outward swell. or the part of the stern that overhangs the water aft of the rudder

Course - the sail on the lowest yard of a mast

Cubby – could be a misspelling of Cuddy, a small cabin or cookhouse

Flash packet - a **packet** is a ship carrying mail.

Foul bottom – weed or other marine growth on the hull which slows the ship

Gangway – in this context the ladder rigged down the ship's side to give access from a boat

Hawser - cable or rope used in mooring or towing.

Jib-boom - a spar that extends the bowsprit

Jolly-boat - small boat launched from the ship's deck.

Larboard - port side

Lazareet - in Mediterranean countries, a leper quarter, aboard the term was used for a room set aside as sick-bay, or the store room when no-one was sick.

Main brace - rope that controls the movement of a mainyard and thus the position of the sail

maintops'l - main top sail

Mainyard all **sprung** - cracked

Rattlins – presumably **ratlines**, a series of rope steps up the shrouds used for going aloft

Reef-tackle - tackle for hauling up the reef cringles, or rings, of a sail to the yard for reefing.

Scull – give a small boat headway by working a single oar to and fro over the stern (extended to rowing with 2 oars)

Served, parcelled and tarred - wrapped (a rope) to protect against water and rotting

Sprung – cracked, broken

Sternpost - the principal upright post at the stern of a vessel, usually serving to support the rudder.

Stu'n's'ls - studding-sails, extra sails for use in light wind

T'ga'ns'l - topgallant sail

wear ship - turn the bow away from the wind, as opposed to tacking where the bow is turned into the wind.

Yardarm - either end of a yard