

The Flying Dutchman

The *Flying Dutchman* is a legendary ghost ship that can never make port and is doomed to sail the oceans forever. The myth is likely to have originated from 17th-century nautical folklore. The oldest extant version dates to the late 18th century. Sightings in the 19th and 20th centuries reported the ship to be glowing with ghostly light. If hailed by another ship, the crew of the Flying Dutchman will try to send messages to land, or to people long dead. In ocean lore, the sight of this phantom ship is a portent of doom.

There have been many reported sightings in the 19th and 20th centuries. One was by Prince George of Wales, the future King George V. During his late adolescence, in 1880, with his elder brother Prince Albert Victor of Wales, he was on a three-year voyage with their tutor John Neill Dalton, temporarily shipped into *HMS Inconstant* after the damaged rudder in their original ship, the 4,000-tonne corvette *Bacchante* was repaired. In the pre-dawn hours of 11 July 1881, off the coast of Australia in the Bass Strait between Melbourne and Sydney, the princes' log (indeterminate as to which prince, due to later editing before publication) records:

“July 11th. At 4 a.m. the Flying Dutchman crossed our bows. A strange red light as of a phantom ship all aglow, in the midst of which light the masts, spars and sails of a brig 200 yards distant stood out in strong relief as she came up on the port bow, where also the officer of the watch from the bridge clearly saw her, as did the quarterdeck midshipman, who was sent forward at once to the forecastle; but on arriving there was no vestige nor any sign whatever of any material ship was to be seen either near or right away to the horizon, the night being clear and the sea calm. Thirteen persons altogether saw her ... At 10.45 a.m. the ordinary seaman who had this morning reported the Flying Dutchman fell from the foretopmast crosstrees on to the topgallant forecastle and was smashed to atoms.” [Meyer-Arendt

1995, p. 431]

Probably the most credible explanation is a superior mirage or Fata Morgana seen at sea.

“He [the Captain] explained to the sailors that this strange appearance was caused by the reflection of some ship that was sailing on the water below this image, but at such a distance they could not see it. There were certain conditions of the atmosphere, he said, when the sun's rays could form a perfect picture in the air of objects on the earth, like the images one sees in glass or water, but they were not generally upright, as in the case of this ship, but reversed—turned bottom upwards. This appearance in the air is called a mirage.” [Frank R. Stockton, *Round-about Rambles in Lands of Fact and Fancy*] [http://pirates.wikia.com/wiki/Flying_Dutchman]

