

‘PRISONER SAYINGS’

There are plenty of phrases heard in *The Prisoner*, plus others which are quite apt. Here are the ones heard or seen in episodes, plus more suggestions:

Above the law (Once Upon a Time): someone who thinks the law does not apply to him or her, or a person claiming immunity from prosecution.

According to Hoyle (Free For All): following the rules or established procedure. Edmond Hoyle in 1742 published a handbook on the card game Whist. His book became a metaphor for abiding by all rules.

Back to square one (unused): doing something over again, as with a board game, requiring a player to return to the starting point.

That's the way the ball bounces (unused): originating in the USA in the middle of the last century, meaning the unpredictability of the direction in which a ball will bounce in a game such as football.

Beyond the pale (Once Upon A Time): outside the bounds of something, such as decency or accepted behaviour. Derived from the Latin palus, meaning stake, such as that which would be used in forming a fence, hence 'beyond the boundary'.



Brainwashing (unused): To 'clean out' unwanted data from a person's mind, controlling their thinking and ideas. The condition is brought about either by physiological or physical torture, or perhaps disorientation and even forms of coercion.

Cat got your tongue? (unused): a suggestion is that the 19th century punishment whip "cat-o'-nine-tails" would silence a victim through fear, another claim is that the domestic pet's habit of staring quietly would cause an onlooker to fall silent pondering what the cat might be thinking.

Checkmate (Checkmate): Making a move to put an end at once to an opponent's plans. A decisive and instant course of action, preventing any further manoeuvring by the other side.

Turn back the clock (or put back) (Dance of the Dead): to recapture an earlier period of time (a phrase found in use 150 years ago). Often with young people it is said that it's not possible to return to former times and it is pointless trying to turn back the clock.

Not cricket (Girl Who Was Death): unfair and unsportsmanlike, being a phrase linked with the bat and ball game from around 100 years ago.

Free for all (Free For All): a disorganized or unrestricted situation or event in which everyone may take part, especially a fight or discussion; a situation without limits or controls in which people can have or do what they want they want; a fight, argument, contest, etc., open to everyone and usually without rules; any competition or contested situation that is disordered, impulsive, or out of control: a free-for-all at the buffet table.

From cradle to grave (Once Upon a Time): meaning throughout one's life, nowadays used by politicians to promise benefits throughout the lives of voters.

Grasp the nettle (Dance of the Dead): to tackle a difficult or painful task, demonstrating courage; one takes hold of a nettle knowing that a painful sting will result.

A tough (hard) nut to crack (Arrival): an intractable problem or person to overcome. If a person is difficult to convince, they would be described as a hard nut to crack. The term simply refers to the task of cracking open a nut by hand and finding that one or two will not crack easily (an expression going back to the early 18th century).

By hook or by crook (opening dialogue): By any means, fair or foul, originating from the mediaeval right of people to sever dead branches or collect fallen ones by using a reaper's hook or a shepherd's crook.

It's (or that's) your funeral (It's Your Funeral): an impolite expression to tell a person that a problem is their misfortune. It can suggest that someone is taking a risk e.g. they go out without an umbrella and it's going to rain, so it will be their funeral if it does.

Keep the ball rolling (unused): taking action to keep a conversation or activity going. The phrase is relating to the rolling of big balls in US political parades, or in British sport keeping the ball in the air.



Lone wolf (Once Upon a Time) "belongs to the wilderness": Someone having no companions or being a solitary person. An individual standing apart from others, isolated and not part of the crowd or community, is a loner or a lone wolf. The latter term would suggest an animal no longer part of the pack, as with a person cast out of the tribe. However, the term can apply to somebody who chooses loneliness, which does not necessarily mean that loneliness also applies. However, in A Change of Mind, No. 6 was certainly lonely while he was a social outcast and a loner.

Many Happy Returns (Many Happy Returns): wishing a person that they will have many more birthdays i.e. to live a long life. However, in modern times the saying seems only to be a pronouncement that it is the person's birthday, such as "Congratulations" or "Greetings".

Six of one a half a dozen of the other (Arrival): meaning one thing is much the same as the other (a saying which can be traced back 200 years), or a phrase describing no difference between one course of action or another.

At sixes and sevens (unused): in disarray and uncertain how to proceed; bewildered or hopelessly confused, or chaotic. Origins are traced to a 15th century dice game, the expressions used in the 17th and 18th centuries, as well as a passage in the Bible (Job 5:19) "He shall deliver thee in six troubles; yea, in seven there shall be no evil touch thee."

Six of the best (Once Upon a Time): six strokes with a cane delivered as a school punishment. The expression can also become a pun such as a person giving birth to 6 children, suggesting that it is both a punishment and a blessing.

The sky's the limit (unused): spoken by McGoohan in his LA Tape when he 'explained' the scope of The Prisoner. The phrase means that there is no limit and appeared in Don Quixote from 400 years ago (a book quoted in the episode Hammer Into Anvil) which contains the phrase "No limits but the sky".

Square peg in a round hole (Arrival): not spoken but seen, when the 'square circle' closes to fit the round peg during the aptitude test in the Labour Exchange. The phrase means a misfit and can be traced back into the 19th century. In the Village there are no misfits, everybody is made to conform!

Pop Goes The Weasel (Once Upon A Time): the most common version refers to the Eagle pub on the City Road in London. It has been suggested that the significance of the rice and treacle is their use in making cheap home-made alcohol. However, another possibility is the pawning ("popping") of a pressing iron ("weasel").

*Half a pound of tuppenny rice,
Half a pound of treacle.
That's the way the money goes,
Pop! goes the weasel.
Up and down the City road,
In and out the Eagle,
That's the way the money goes,
Pop! goes the weasel.*



Roger Langley