

# Idioms – some interesting meanings and histories

## at the end of your tether (Unit 9)

A **tether** is a rope used to tie an animal to something. If the animal is at the end of its tether, it cannot go any further. If a person is **at the end of their tether**, they have no patience or energy left to deal with something; they feel they cannot continue.

## a black sheep (Unit 56)

You very often see a black sheep among the white sheep in a field, and indeed there is an old English proverb: 'there's a black sheep in every flock'. The wool from black sheep was probably less valuable than the wool from white sheep, so black sheep would not have been welcomed. Today, if somebody is the **black sheep** of the family, their behaviour is considered by the family to be bad or embarrassing.



## nip something in the bud (Unit 28)

A **bud** is a flower or leaf that has not yet opened. The verb **nip** means to pinch or squeeze something, or to remove something by pinching it and breaking it off. If you nip the buds off a plant, you remove them so that they cannot open. If you **nip something in the bud**, you stop it before it becomes damaging.



## full of beans (Unit 15)

An early (1870s) dictionary of English slang stated that somebody who had become rich, and behaved badly as a result, was **full of beans**. The dictionary said that the expression was first used by staff working in stables, perhaps with reference to the energetic behaviour of horses when fed with beans. Today the idiom is used approvingly to say that someone is full of energy and enthusiasm.

## Activity

Complete the sentences with the idioms above. You might have to change some of the words to make them fit.

- Is that you whistling, John? You're in a very good mood this morning. What makes you so .....
- Stuart's school report is atrocious! He failed English and Maths and only got a C for Science. His teachers say he talks too much and never does his homework. We've got to ..... and make sure he starts studying soon for his exams.
- I'll tell you a very strange story about my uncle. He was ..... of the family and my father, his brother, was the favourite son. One day when they were children ...
- Elizabeth has complained to the boss about how much work she has to do. This morning she walked out of the meeting in tears because Ben asked her to do another report. She's .....

1. Is that you whistling, John? You're in a very good mood this morning. What makes you so *full of beans*?  
 2. Stuart's school report is atrocious! He failed English and Maths and only got a C for Science. His teachers say he talks too much and never does his homework. We've got to *nip his behaviour/this kind of behaviour in the bud* and make sure he starts studying soon for his exams.  
 3. I'll tell you a very strange story about my uncle. He was *the black sheep* of the family and my father, his brother, was the favourite son. One day when they were children ...  
 4. Elizabeth has complained to the boss about how much work she has to do. This morning she walked out of the meeting in tears because Ben asked her to do another report. She's *at the end of her tether*.