The Shipping Forecast
How to use it

Have you ever listened to the Shipping Forecast on the radio? It's a weather forecast for the areas of sea around the UK. The Shipping Forecast began on 24 August 1867, and was originally a series of telegraph messages sent to harbour towns to warn of impending storms. Since 1924 it has been broadcast on the radio.

The whole broadcast is limited to 350 words and has a very strict format, to keep within the word limit. There is a specific forecast for each sea area, or sometimes for a group of areas. A typical area forecast might sound like this:

'Humber, Thames. Southeast veering southwest 4 or 5, occasionally 6 later. Thundery showers. Moderate or good, occasionally poor.'

What does that all mean? First find the areas Humber and Thames on the map. What the forecast is telling us is that the sea areas Humber and Thames are forecast to experience a wind that will be a Force 4 or 5, and occasionally a Force 6 more than 12 hours after the time of issue of the forecast. There will be thundery showers and the visibility (the distance we can see) will vary from more than 5 nautical miles to as little as 1000m.
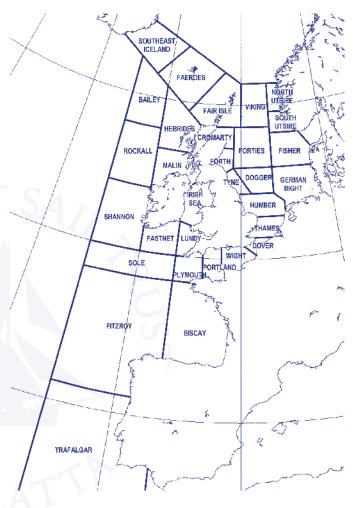
How do we know all this?
The forecast uses special words to give us the maximum information in the minimum amount of words. So words like veering, later, moderate, good, and poor all have specific meanings, shown below.

A map of the sea areas used in the forecast. The sea area FitzRoy was re-named in 2002 (from Finisterre) for the pioneering meteorologist Admiral Robert FitzRoy. FitzRoy was captain of HMS Beagle on which Charles Darwin sailed to South America, and the man who made accurate weather forecasting possible.

Wind Direction
Veering: changing direction clockwise
Backing: changing direction anticlockwise
Becoming cyclonic: direction changing considerably across the path of a depression within the forecast area.

Visibility
Fog: Less than 1000m
Poor: 1000m-2nm
Moderate: 2nm-5nm
Good: More than 5nm
(nm means nautical miles)

Timings
Imminent: within 6 hours of time of issue
Soon: within 6-12 hours of time of issue
Later: More than 12 hours from time of issue