

## ***Witch archetypes in English folklore*** ©

The following article considers the place of the witch within English folklore, disregarding similar tales of Scottish, Welsh or Irish origin. This is not the place for the Brothers Grimm or Charles Perrault, as interpreted by Disney or other film-makers. Likewise, this is not intended as a social polemic on the various persecutions in English history that were responsible for the deaths of many so-called witches. That subject has been addressed by such eminent writers as Professor Ronald Hutton in his history of modern pagan witchcraft.

That is more of a developmental account of paganism in Britain, whereas this article is all about *perception* through the ages and, more important, how the social view of witches was reflected in the folk tradition. There are two main folk traditions, diametrically opposed – the wise woman and the evil hag – and this article looks at both traditions. Incidentally, a witch may be male or female. The terms of *wizards and warlocks* appeared later. Here is a typical example of a witch archetype in an English folktale.

*The story of Betty Chidley hales from Shropshire and concerns a family by the name of Ambler. The folk tale was published in the 1890s, but was also a story handed down by generations of Amblers from earlier in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the present; the tale is also quoted by Professor Hutton.*

*The Ambler family had a farm near Church Pulverbatch, close to Shrewsbury. In a little cottage in a neighbouring valley lived an old woman, known as Betty Chidley, who often begged for food scraps at the farmhouse. Usually, she was successful in getting what she asked for.*

*One day, Betty came by as usual and found Mrs Ambler mixing some feed for the calves. Betty watched the good meal and milk stirred together over the fire and begged for a share. Mrs. Ambler was a bit annoyed, spoke sharply and refused to give her any of the calves' feed. Betty replied in an emphatic tone, "The calves wenna eat the suppin' now" and left the farm.*

*Little notice was taken of Betty's comment at the time, but when the maid carried out the pail of carefully-prepared feed to the calves, they utterly refused to touch it. Three times the attempt was made to give it to them, but in vain.*

*Then Betty's ominous words were called to mind and, as quickly as possible, she was sent for to come to the farm. Mrs Ambler asked Betty to bless the calves. At first, she refused, "Me - bless your calves! What have I to do with your calves?", but at last she yielded to their begging and said: "My God bless the calves." The calves still refused to eat and Mrs Ambler begged Betty to omit the word, my.*

*After much pressure, she gave way and repeated the simple words: "God bless the calves." Mrs. Ambler then took the feed herself to the hungry calves and, to her delight, they came to meet her at the door of their stable - and ate all their feed with a hearty appetite.*

## **Wise women**

A good place to start might be the small village of Hascombe in Surrey. The place name means *valley of the witches*, according to Ekwall. The linguistic provenance here is Old English, ie *hætse* or *hægtesse* (witch or person that uses magic) plus *cumbe* or *coumbe* (deep hollow or valley). The village itself is mentioned in the Charter Rolls of 1232 (Hescumb) and 1307 (Hascoumbe) and the Feet of Fines for the County of Surrey in 1266 (Hasecoumbe). It is not beyond a stretch of imagination to suggest that this area was once a place in which a witch lived.

The nomenclature of Old English derives from Anglo-Saxon roots, largely spoken from the 5<sup>th</sup> century up to the 11<sup>th</sup> or 12<sup>th</sup> centuries in England. And it is with the Saxons that we should start to trace the place of the witch in local communities. Much of the history from 449-1066 is recorded in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle and in the work of the historian, Bede. Most Anglo-Saxon medicine was administered by clerics who could read earlier Roman guides on healing, but many remedies comprised simple herbal infusions or salves. Here is an example of a typical eye salve from *Bald's Leechbook* in the 9<sup>th</sup> century.

- 1) *Take cropleek and garlic equal amounts of both*
- 2) *Pound well together*
- 3) *Take wine and bull's gall equal amounts of both*
- 4) *Mix with the "leeks"*
- 5) *Then put in a brass vessel*
- 6) *Let stand for nine nights in the brass vessel*
- 7) *Wring out through a cloth and clear well*
- 8) *Put in a horn and, about night time, put on the eye with a feather.*

What is known is that every Anglo-Saxon community would have had a person who knew how to use plants for medicine. This knowledge would probably be handed down from generation to generation within the family. For example, garlic was used for infections, lichens for bad chests and for healing broken bones, and chamomile for digestive illnesses. Plants were used to make salves, poultices, infusions and other medicines to be swallowed.

And here is the archetype of the witch as we know it – the wise woman who was the source of advice to the community and who could provide either wise advice or a remedy. Midwifery might also be part of her knowledge. Here is an example of an ancient tale from Surrey to illustrate the point – it was quoted by William Cobbett in 1830 and also in a book, *Bygone Surrey*, from 1860.

*Old Mother Ludlam was a wise woman who lived in a cave near Frensham village – many villagers came to her for healing potions, which she made in her large healing cauldron.*

*One rainy, cold night, she was stirring her cauldron and thought that it was such bad weather, not even the Devil would come out. At that moment, a stranger appeared at the mouth of the cave and demanded the loan of her large healing cauldron. When she refused, he came forward into the light and she could see his cloven hoofs and horns. It was the Devil, he snatched the cauldron from the fire and ran off! As he put his foot down for each stride, the earth was marked and these became known as the Devil's Jumps.*

*Old Mother Ludlam was shocked, but determined to get her cauldron back. She picked up her broomstick and flew off after the Devil. As she caught up, she snatched the cauldron back. The Devil was surprised and furious and stamped on the ground until there was a huge hole – and he disappeared back to Hell – this was how the Devil's Punch Bowl was formed.*

*Old Mother Ludlam held her cauldron tightly, but was sure that the Devil would return again another night. So she hid the cauldron by the font at the Church of St Mary the Virgin at Frensham. The villagers did not know where the cauldron had come from, but it stayed by the altar for many years, holding holy water. And Old Mother Ludlam went back to making healing potions in her next largest cauldron. And if you visit the church now, the cauldron is still there towards the rear of the church.*

## Evil hags

However, not all witches are portrayed as good or helpful and the following tale is an example of the witch as a diametric opposite of the wise woman. Gedney Dyke is a small village near Spalding in the Lincolnshire fens. During the 1700s, it would have been isolated with everyone knowing about everyone else and gossip was rife.

*At this time, an old woman lived alone in a cottage on the edge of the village and never had visitors, but villagers often heard a strange howling coming from her house. A few village children that sneaked a look inside had seen a caged jackdaw in the window and two cats hissing at it. The old woman was branded a witch: the villagers called her Old Mother Nightshade and gave her a wide berth.*

*Also in Gedney Dyke lived a simple lad named John Culpepper who was in love with Rose Taylor, the most popular girl in the village. She led the lad on before repeatedly teasing him, leaving him humiliated. Culpepper's love turned to hatred, so he went to Old Mother Nightshade's cottage to ask for help with his revenge. The old woman welcomed him and gave him a box of sweets to give to Rose. She told him he to report back to her in a few days when the moon was full.*

*John Culpepper did as he was told and watched as Rose greedily ate the sweets. When the moon was full, he made his way to the witch's house for further help. She told him to sit down in the chair and close his eyes until told to open them. John obeyed and, when his eyes were closed, he felt his arms and legs being fastened to the chair. He waited patiently until he heard the old woman's voice tell him to open his eyes.*

*No sooner had he done so than he let out a terrified scream. Old Mother Nightshade had vanished and, in her place, was an enormous grey wolf with a hideous snarl and dripping fangs. That night the villagers heard bloodcurdling cries of terror and agony coming from the witch's cottage, as well as the usual howls. The men of the village went to the cottage in the morning, but all they found were a bloody heap of bones and torn clothing and a wolf's footprints leading away from the house. The villagers buried the remains of the unfortunate John Culpepper and burned the cottage to the ground. Nobody ever heard from the old woman again, but to this day, when the moon is full, the people of Gedney Dyke claim they often hear the eerie howling of a wolf.*

It is this type of tale that was often used as a justification for the persecution of so-called witches throughout the Middle Ages and beyond. After all, there are many instances of Catholic bishops excommunicating certain types of animals that were blamed for ill-luck, eg wild dogs, rats and even beetles! How much more logical is it that an old woman who lived on the outskirts of a village and helped to cure people, should be seen as employing magical practices? Here is another contemporary (and mainly true) tale.

*Molly Leigh was a local woman in Burslem (Shropshire) and had been born in 1685. She lived on the edge of the town and sold milk to raise money. Her parents died young and Molly was regarded as odd by many townsfolk, by reason of a vicious temper, plain features and never attending church.*

*The local cleric, Reverend Spencer, accused Molly of being a witch on the grounds of possessing a familiar (a blackbird kept as a pet) and her unholy behaviour in not coming to church – he blamed her for all and any bad luck that befell his parishioners. Forced from the town and accused of witchcraft in 1746, it is probably fortunate that she died naturally before any trial could occur.*

*However, this was not enough for the good reverend. After Molly's burial, he and some parishioners went to Molly's cottage and apparently saw the ghost of Molly sitting in her rocking chair. They managed to capture her blackbird, killed it and buried it in Molly's grave, after staking her corpse through the heart and re-burying Molly at right angles to every other grave in the churchyard.*

## **Conclusion**

For the few examples quoted in this article, there are many more to be found through the length and breadth of England, not to mention the rest of the British Isles. It is probably true to say that many of the **evil witch** tales came later, aided by persecution paranoia of both Church and State, whereas the older tales emphasise the Saxon experience of a **wise woman** helping her peers with folk remedies.

Perhaps, I'll finish with the tale of Nan Tuck, which is thought by some to come from Sussex, but similar tales exist elsewhere. To be fair though, there is a real Nan Tuck's Lane between Mayfield and Uckfield, but the story dates back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century and you can decide whether Nan Tuck is a witch or not.

*Two young men, sons of wealthy Uckfield merchants, were in a carriage, going to Heathfield for a night of card-playing and drinking. Suddenly they saw a young woman walking ahead of them in the lane and they decided to have a bit of sport with her on the way. So they climbed out of their carriage and followed the girl on foot.*

*She seemed frightened and walked faster, but so did the men, laughing as they went. She ran towards an old hut in a field and slammed the door shut behind her. The young men followed, but when they went inside there was no girl to be seen, just an old woman by her fire.*

*"Hello, my dears. I am Nan Tuck, but I can see that you are both fine young gentlemen," she said to them. Both of them demanded to see the girl, but Nan Tuck asked them to sit by the fire and they'd see the girl soon. As they sat by the fire, they felt compelled to look into the flames and they saw pictures there – pictures of a young girl dancing, an old woman walking, a baby crying and hares leaping.*

*The fire seemed hotter and their faces burned and blistered. Nan Tuck laughed behind them as they rushed out to plunge their faces into the nearest stream and ran back to the carriage. Next day, a group of young men, including the two with burned faces, returned for their revenge, but there was no hut in the field. Neither was there any evidence of building or fire – only a patch of bare ground where nothing has ever grown, to this day.*

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