

Winter Chills©

By the Storyteller (Nick O'Connor) for Gylden Fellowship, 2022

Foreword

"What big teeth you have, Grandma!" I guess you know which tale that quotation comes from, but did you know that many folk and fairy tales are much more ancient than most people think? Many people believe that such stories were collected about 200-300 years ago by the Brothers Grimm or Charles Perrault. This is not true, because Dr Jamie Tehrani (a cultural anthropologist at Durham University) has studied over 35 versions of *Little Red Riding Hood* from around the world.

Whilst the European version tells the story of a little girl who is tricked by a wolf masquerading as her grandmother, the Chinese version features a tiger instead of the wolf character. In Iran, where it would be considered odd for a young girl to roam alone, the story features a little boy.

Contrary to the view that the tale originated in France shortly before Charles Perrault produced the first written version in the 17th century, Dr Tehrani found that the variants of the folk tale shared a common ancestor that dated back more than 3000 years.

By 2009, Dr Tehrani identified 70 variables in plot and characters between different versions of *Little Red Riding Hood*. He found that the stories could be grouped into distinct families according to how they evolved over time. He said: *"Over time these folk tales have been subtly changed and have evolved just like a biological organism. Because many of them were not written down until much later, they have been misremembered or reinvented through hundreds of generations. By looking at how these folk tales have spread and changed it tells us something about human psychology and what sort of things we find memorable. The oldest tale we found was an Aesop fable that dated from about the 6th century BC, so the last common ancestor of all these tales certainly predated this. We are looking at a very ancient tale that evolved over time."*

The original ancestor is thought to be similar to another tale, *The Wolf and the Kids*, in which a wolf pretends to be a nanny goat to gain entry to a house full of young goats. Stories in Africa are closely related to this original tale, whilst stories from Japan, Korea, China and Burma form a sister group. Tales told in Iran and Nigeria are the closest relations to the modern European version.

Charles Perrault's French version was retold by the Brothers Grimm in the 19th century. Dr Tehrani said: *"We don't know very much about the processes of transmission of these stories from culture to culture, but it is possible that they may be passed along trade routes or with the movement of people."*

Not all similarities in folklore and fairy tales can be attributed to mass migrations like the slave trade or settlers moving from one continent to another. To be fair, some cross-cultural influence can be seen from such migrations and it is possible that, in a century or so, some common folk tales in Western Europe will have their roots in Syrian or Afghan folklore. What is certain is that the oldest known fairy/folk tales in written form date from ancient Egypt in about 1300 BCE, but the key fact is that most such tales were delivered in the oral tradition. The role of storytellers was vital to many ancient communities as a news service as much as a type of entertainment. Storytellers were people who told and wrote stories, were prized by early settlements and were probably responsible for the spread of tales across countries. Did these folktales travel across continents with the earliest Scandinavian explorers or Phoenician slavers? That is a question for future research.

Meanwhile, the question for this storyteller is one of **provenance**. All tellers of tales seek to embellish their stories for their listeners. That holds as true for a Celtic or Saxon storyteller as a performance artist today who recounts Arthurian legends. The stories in this volume all come from England and have been verified through historical research for places and dates. Where possible, actual dates and locations have been included for provenance.

It is worth saying too that these tales are all designed for **performance**, perhaps in a community group setting or for reading to a child at bed-time, albeit some of the tales may be a little scary for younger children! It should be noted that folklore tends to fall into three main types:

- Accounts of historical events.
- Attributed stories, namely tales surrounding real people.
- Tales that reflect common folklore themes.

Some of you may have heard a few of these tales before, perhaps from me telling them at a ***Spriggan Mist Ghostly Tales*** gig or at a moot event. It's like song lyrics – does one lose out through hearing a song again? In the early Middle Ages, storytellers would travel from village to village and the audience would expect to hear stirring tales of knights, dragons, monsters and heroic deeds.

Quite often, I'll be asked by a listener whether a tale is true. With this collection, practically every tale is rooted in verifiable facts or personal testimony. I guess it depends upon whether one believes in ghosts, demons, vampires or werewolves. All I can say is that these tales come from all over England, from the 9th century to present-day and most can be traced, which is the best result for any storyteller!

The collection is dedicated to all those in the Gylden Community who love stories – you know who you are! So, off we go with the traditional opener, "Once upon a time".

Contents

A Christmas Journey

The Devil's Hoof Prints

Yealmpton Church

The Hellhound

The Lady with the Lantern

Gedney Dyke

Ludlow Castle

The Phantom Ship

The Haunted Cinema

The Revenant

The Screaming Skull

The Noisy Ghost of Burton Agnes Hall

The Mistletoe Bough

A Farmer's Murder

Kingley Vale and the Bosham Bell

The Beaminster Ghost

Joseph Hemsall's Ghost

Jenny Greenteeth

The Bird of Death

Chambercombe Manor

Berry Pomeroy Castle

Pluckley Ghosts

Ghostly Nuns

Bleeding Hearts

The Daemon Cat

1. *A Christmas Journey*

This tale comes from North Devon in 1825 and concerns an interesting experience of a Mr Ackroyd and his wife, when travelling from Tawton to Great Torrington for Christmastide. They had chosen to travel on the road by the River Torridge, snow was on the ground and their carriage wheels kept slipping on the ice. It was late afternoon and dusk was drawing in, but 'twas not far from Torrington when the Ackroyds came to a great gateway leading to a wide drive.

The drive had woods on both sides, but beyond the trees, the Ackroyds could dimly see the outlines of a large mansion, brilliantly lit up. Mr Ackroyd decided to stop and call in, just to make sure they were still on the right road.

As the Ackroyd carriage came nearer to the house, both husband and wife could see that there was some sort of Christmas feast going on – hundreds of shining candles could be seen through the large windows and many people in medieval fancy-dress were apparent.

Mr Ackroyd stopped the carriage outside the main door, where two footmen stood to welcome visitors. Mr Ackroyd asked if he and his wife were on the right road for Great Torrington and a footman went inside to ask.

After a moment, the owner of the house came out to greet the visitors. He was dressed in red and black velvet robes, dark of hair and with many jewelled rings on his fingers. He invited Mr and Mrs Ackroyd inside to join the feast, but Mrs Ackroyd declined, claiming their friends would be worried about them.

Mr Ackroyd himself was not keen on staying. He felt that the owner was menacing, even cruel. So, he thanked the owner for his invitation and the footmen, the carriage was turned around and the Ackroyds returned to the main road.

When they reached Great Torrington and told their friends about their journey, they learned that no house had existed in that place since the mid-1300s! **But**, there had been a mansion, Dolton Manor, which had been the residence of a wicked brother and sister who lured visitors inside to their deaths – the manor house had fallen into ruin since then.

2. The Devil's Hoof Prints

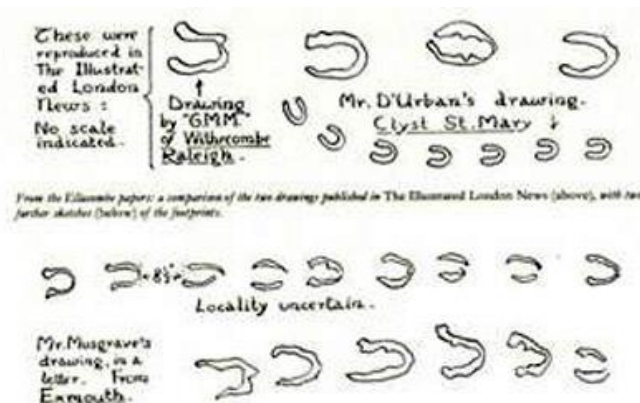
Imagine to yourself to be in Devon during the winter of 1855. It's the morning of 8 February, there was a fall of snow in the night, followed by a slight thaw and then a sharp frost. The ground is both icy and snowy. Your house is on the Exe estuary, just south of Exeter and in a small village and what is the first thing that you see?

Apart from the white covering to the houses and fields, the next thing that catches your eye is the trail of cloven hoof prints that go down the road in front of you – like a small horse or donkey. Your eye follows the hoof prints: not only are there no footprints walking alongside, but the hoof marks are fresh and not covered by last night's snow.

Then you realise something even stranger. The trail of hoof prints is in a straight line and there's a group of people (some of them with guns) following them; so, you decide to tag along and play find the donkey. The prints are about nine inches apart and they continue for miles over gardens and fields. The prints don't stop for any man-made obstacles – the trail goes through walls and haystacks as if they don't exist, sheds have simply been walked through as if there were no back walls. Houses have been walked over and you can see clearly where the hoof prints go up a rooftop and onwards down the other side.

A young man from the village of Clyst St Mary drew a map of the trail and drawings of the prints. The trail started in Totnes and passed through the towns of Torquay, Teignmouth, Dawlish, across the Exe estuary to Exmouth, Topsham and Littleham (a total distance of over 100 miles). The man's name was D'Urban and he went on to become the curator of the Royal Albert Memorial Museum in Exeter. His account was published in the *Illustrated London News* for 24 February 1855.

Woolmer's Exeter and Plymouth Gazette (17 February 1855) described the incident as a "story of a visit from Satan seeking sinners, believed by the superstitious poor" and local clergy were quick to pass off the matter as either the work of hoaxers or as bird markings. Yet the Reverend H.T. Ellacombe who was vicar at Clyst St George also made careful drawings of the tracks. **To date, there has never been a single explanation or theory that covers all the known and reported facts.**



3. *Yealmpton Church*

OK then, our next story happened on 2 March 1947 in the little village of Yealmpton. Yealmpton is about 10 miles from Plymouth and, in 1947, it held slightly more people than today due to those evacuated from the naval base. The church is St Bartholomew; the vicar was Rev. A.T. Byles.

Consider the setting: 2 March was a lovely spring morning with bright sunshine. The church stands on an ancient site, but had been rebuilt in the 1850s – it is mainly grey stone, slate roof and a square Norman tower. The church is on a small hill, surrounded by a gravel path with the graveyard and vicarage nearby. Stone steps go up from the road to the church doors. On this day, Mrs Byles was arranging flowers in the church and the vicar was pacing around the church on the gravel path, thinking about his sermon for Sunday.

Suddenly, he stopped short. There was a hole in the gravel path in front of him, about a yard in width. Carefully, he peered in, fearing subsidence. Then he called his wife to look as well. Both looked in and neither could see how far the hole went down. The vicar threw in a stone and it was a while before it hit anything. Mrs Byles went back to her flowers and the vicar decided to rope off the hole, to stop accidents. He went to get a tape measure from the vicarage, but when he returned, the hole had grown to 9 feet across.

Alarmed by this development, Mrs Byles was called from the church again to witness the larger hole – Mr Byles decided to get some planks and rope from the builder in the village. So, he went down to Yealmpton, spoke to Mr Knight (the builder) and they came back to the church in Mr Knight's truck. Together, they walked up the steps to the church and went around the gravel path – several times, in fact, because the hole was gone! The vicar and his wife pointed to where the hole had been and Mr Knight dug down about 2 feet – no hole or any trace of one.

The incident was written up by the vicar in his parish notes, where it can still be read under the heading of the *Spectral Hole of Yealmpton*.



4. *The Hellhound*

The legend of Black Shuck is another type of historical matter entirely. The name, Shuck, derives from the Saxon word, *scucca*, meaning demon. He is one of many ghostly black dogs recorded across the British Isles.

Its alleged appearance during a storm on 4th August 1577 at the Holy Trinity Church, Blythburgh In Suffolk, is a particularly famous account of the beast, in which legend says that thunder caused the doors of the church to burst open and the snarling dog crashed in and ran through the congregation, killing a man and a boy, before it fled when the steeple collapsed. The encounter on the same day at St Mary's Church, Bungay in Suffolk was described in *A Straunge and Terrible Wunder* by the Reverend Abraham Fleming in 1577.

"This black dog, or the devil in such a likeness (God he knoweth all who worketh all,) running all along down the body of the church with great swiftness, and incredible haste, among the people, in a visible form and shape, passed between two persons, as they were kneeling upon their knees, and occupied in prayer as it seemed, wrung the necks of them both at one instant clean backward, in so much that even at a moment where they kneeled, they strangely died."

There is just one problem with the legend though. On 16 May 2014, it was reported that archaeologists had discovered the skeleton of a massive dog that would have stood 7-8 feet tall on its hind legs, in the ruins of Leiston Abbey in Suffolk, England. The remains of the massive dog, which is estimated to have weighed 200 pounds, were found just a few miles from the two churches where Black Shuck killed the worshippers. From carbon-dating, it appears to have been buried in a shallow grave at the same time as Shuck is said to have been on the loose, primarily around Suffolk and the East Anglia region.

Brendon Wilkins, projects director of archaeological group Dig Ventures, said: "Most of these legends about dogs may have some roots in reality."



5. *The Lady with the Lantern*

In the 19th century, there were many wrecks around St Ives in Cornwall - there had been a succession of severe storms. One evening, just about dusk, a large ship came suddenly out of the mist, too close to the shore and her position was so dangerous as to be beyond hope. That was obvious to those on the shore and those on the ship. The crew made every effort to save the ship as well as the passengers, but the storm was so wild that the ship broke from her anchors and was dashed upon the rocks. The masts fell and waves started to sweep the deck. Many on the ship died at once and each successive wave swept more of the crew into the sea.

A rescue boat, manned by the St Ives fishermen, was launched from the pier. They knew the bay and rowed towards the ship, to pick up any survivors. The rescue boat came near the foundered ship, but it was impossible to get close and they called to the crew still on board to throw them ropes. The ropes were made fast and two or three of the sailors were hauled into the boat.

Then a group appeared on the deck, surrounding and supporting a lady, who held a child in her arms. They pleaded with her to give the baby into the strong arms of a sailor who could pass the infant to the rescue boat. The lady could not be persuaded to part with the baby and the ship was starting to break up. So the lady, still holding her child, was lowered into the sea and the fishermen drew her through the waves towards the boat.

Unfortunately the strain of this rescue caused the lady to faint and she was taken into the boat without the infant: the baby had fallen from her arms and was lost in the stormy waves. Many of the crew were saved by these brave fishermen and taken safely into St. Ives. Before morning, the shore was covered with fragments of wreck; the ship had disappeared.

The lady recovered, but without hope when she discovered that her child was gone and soon, she died too. The lady was buried in St Ives churchyard, **but that is not the end of the story**. Shortly after her burial, a lady was seen often passing over the wall of the churchyard, on to the beach and walking towards the shore. There, the figure spent hours amidst the rocks, looking for her child and, not finding it, sighing deeply and returning to her grave. When the nights were stormy or very dark, the figure carried a spectral lantern to help the search. Since then, sightings of the Lady with the Lantern are regarded as predictors of disaster on this shore.

6. *Gedney Dyke*

Many villages of the Lincolnshire fens are isolated, insular places. Everyone tends to know everyone else and strangers are the cause for much suspicion or gossip. During the early 1700s, an old fen woman in the village of Gedney Dyke, became the subject of much gossip and rumour.

The 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 had dared sneak up to her window and peek inside and seen both a caged jackdaw in the window and two cats hissing at it. The old woman gained a reputation as 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 Gedney Dyke. Rose thought it a great joke to lead the lad on before repeatedly spurning and teasing him, leaving him feeling hurt and humiliated. Culpepper's love turned to hatred, so he went to Old Mother Nightshade's cottage to ask for help taking his revenge. The old woman welcomed him in and gave him a box of sweetmeats to give to Rose. She told him he was to report back to her in a few days when the moon was full.

John Culpepper did as he was instructed and watched as Rose greedily scoffed down the sweets. When the moon was full, he made his way to the witch's house for further instruction. 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 yell. 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 screams of terror coming from the witch's cottage, as well as the usual howls.

The menfolk of Gedney Dyke went up to the cottage to investigate in the morning, but all they found were a 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.

7. *Ludlow Castle*

Many ghosts appear doomed to repeat what they did in life until the end of time, perhaps as penance for some great wrong that they committed, and as a warning to others not to follow in their path. In the case of Ludlow Castle, it is the spectre of Marion de la Bruyere that is said to re-enact her final moments, some nine centuries on from her death.

Her blood-curdling screams may be heard upon the anniversary of her fatal dive from the Pendover Tower, although it would seem that the date of her demise is known only to those who have heard her desperate cries. Her spirit may otherwise be glimpsed in calmer and more pensive mood, as dusk falls on some quiet evening.

Marion, it would seem, paid the price for betrayal by being betrayed, and unable to face the consequences of her actions, put an end to herself. The tale has it that she fell in love with a knight who bore a particular animus towards her husband, the then lord of the castle, and that she arranged for her lover to gain access to her chamber by means of a rope which she lowered from the tower late one evening. This night, and upon subsequent nights, she obtained that satisfaction which she sought, but her lover had more on his mind than taking and enjoying that which she so freely offered.

Thus it was, that one particular evening, the rope was left dangling from the tower whilst the two were engaged in their tryst. It was not, however, through some accident, but by design that it was left so, for another man – one of the knight's men – would shortly struggle up its length. Having gained entry to the castle, he took care not to be seen as he made his way to the gates, which he opened to admit a hundred or so of his fellows.

In they rushed, and the castle fell into their hands. Realising that she had been duped by her lover, and that he held no real regard for her, Marion grabbed his sword, and killed him with a slash to the throat. Wracked by guilt, she then threw herself from the tower onto the rocks below.



8. *The Phantom Ship*

In 1843, **HMS Eurydice** (eur-rid-di-see) was built – a wooden frigate of 921 tons with 26 guns and three masts. In 1876, it was refitted as a training ship, since many new warships were made of iron and it sailed to the Caribbean from Portsmouth in 1877 with a trainee crew on board and the experienced Captain Hare.

The ship returned in March 1878 and sailed up the English Channel to the Isle of Wight on 22 March. It reached Dunnose Point (duh-nose) at 3.40pm and must have been a wonderful sight in full sail and all the gun ports open – the sea was calm. But what the crew could not see were the black clouds gathering on the other side of the headland. Some 20 minutes later, all the crew found out about the clouds very quickly **and** the accompanying snow **and** the strong gusts of winds, which turned the ship around.

Even faster, the crew found out about the sea coming in through the gun ports, the ship toppling over in the wind and capsizing totally in a matter of minutes. It happened so quickly that local residents of Ventnor had no time to launch the lifeboat and some 360 crewmen lost their lives. After 10 minutes, the blizzard stopped and all that remained of HMS Eurydice were the very tips of the upper sails and rigging. There were two survivors, but everyone else died in the freezing water.

But this is **Winter Chills**, after all, and the tragedy is not the end of the story. You can still see memorials to the shipwreck in Shanklin. HMS Eurydice was replaced by another 26-gun frigate, HMS Atlanta, which also sailed to the West Indies and was also lost in a storm in 1880 with the loss of 280 lives.

In 1930, Commander F. Lipscombe was in charge of a submarine in the English Channel – he reported that his craft had almost collided on the surface with an antique frigate off the Isle of Wight, which seemed to vanish into thin air.

On the day of the shipwreck, a group of friends were having afternoon tea in Windsor when one of them claimed to have had a psychic vision of a sailing ship capsizing in the Channel with water pouring through the gun ports and the sails being destroyed in a snow storm. Seventy miles away, this actually happened at that time.

Other visitors to Sandown and Ventnor have witnessed the ghost ship sailing into Sandown Bay with full rigging and open gun ports and then disappearing from view – one of these was Prince Edward, who reported seeing the ship while filming an ITV documentary in 1998.

9. *The Haunted Cinema*

Chatham was always a naval base, set up by Henry VIII and then supported by Elizabeth I, but is still the home of a historic dockyard and Medway is part of the University of Kent. Much of the dockyard architecture is Georgian, but the High Street is known for another reason or, to be precise, the site of the old Invicta Bingo Hall.

The Invicta was originally a cinema; it opened in 1916 and lasted until 1939. The Church Army used the building as a temporary hostel during the war for families bombed out of their homes during the blitz. During the war, the hall suffered an almost direct hit from a bomb, which injured many people and killed four of the temporary residents, three of whom were children.

After the war, it became an indoor market and, in the late 1940s, reports had been made of strange noises. In 1962, the Invicta hall reverted to entertainment again, but this time for dancing, wrestling and bingo. In fact, the Rolling Stones appeared here on 8 March 1964, but in 1974, several customers and a member of staff reported that they had actually seen the ghostly figure of a man in green walking about the foyer and upstairs on the balcony.

The ghost was always seen during the evening and had been witnessed more than once by an all-night cleaner, who stated that he had also heard the sounds of children's voices in the building but was unable to locate the source of the noise. Initially, he dismissed his own experience as tiredness until he learned that other members of the staff had also heard the children and two at least had seen the man in a green military-style uniform.

By 1975, interest in the case was so strong that a clairvoyant was called to help with the investigation. The psychic revealed that the presence was called Bill Malan and that he was associated with the hall when it was a cinema. Later research proved that claim: a Mr William Malan had been employed as a commissionaire at the cinema for 15 years until he died in 1955 and he always wore a green uniform. His concern for the children during his wartime service was well-known. Less people have seen his ghost since then, but sounds of children were still heard at night up to the point when the building was finally demolished in 1987.



10. *The Revenant*

A 12th-century Yorkshire cleric, **William of Newburgh**, described the following tale. There was an evil man, Roger de Bully, who, escaping from justice, fled the city of York, but then died and rose from his grave. Pursued by a pack of barking dogs, he wandered through courtyards and houses while everyone locked their doors. Finally the townspeople decided to put an end to the threat by digging up his dead body, mutilating it and burning it.

The frequent connection, in some European folklore, between blood and revenants is amply demonstrated by Newburgh's account of what happened when the townspeople opened the grave. They *"laid bare the corpse, swollen to an enormous corpulence, with its countenance beyond measure turgid and suffused with blood. The young men, however, spurred on by wrath, feared not, and inflicted a wound upon the senseless carcass, out of which incontinently flowed such a stream of blood, that it might have been taken for a leech filled with the blood of many persons"*.

Another event, described by Newburgh, not unlike this, but more pernicious in its effects, happened at the castle which is called Anantis, as I have heard from an aged monk who lived in honour and authority in those parts, and who related this event as having occurred in his own presence. A certain man of evil conduct flying, through fear of his enemies or the law, out of the province of York, to the lord of the before-named castle, took up his abode there, and having cast upon a service befitting his humour, laboured hard to increase rather than correct his own evil propensities. He married a wife, to his own ruin indeed, as it afterwards appeared; for, hearing certain rumours respecting her, he was vexed with the spirit of jealousy.

Anxious to ascertain the truth of these reports, he pretended to be going on a journey from which he would not return for some days; but coming back in the evening, he was privily introduced into his bedroom by a maid-servant, who was in the secret, and lay hidden on a beam overhanging, his wife's chamber, that he might prove with his own eyes if anything were done to the dishonour of his marriage-bed. Thereupon beholding his wife in the act of fornication with a young man of the neighbourhood, and in his indignation forgetful of his purpose, he fell, and was dashed heavily to the ground, near where they were lying.

The adulterer himself leaped up and escaped; but the wife, cunningly dissembling the fact, busied herself in gently raising her fallen husband from the earth. As soon as he had partially recovered, he upbraided her with her adultery, and threatened punishment; but she answering, *"Explain yourself, my lord," said she; "you are speaking unbecomingly which must be imputed not to you, but to the sickness with which you are troubled."*

Being much shaken by the fall, and his whole body stupefied, he was attacked with a disease, insomuch that the man whom I have mentioned as having related these facts to me visiting him in the pious discharge of

his duties, admonished him to make confession of his sins, and receive the Christian Eucharist in proper form: but as he was occupied in thinking about what had happened to him, and what his wife had said, put off the wholesome advice until the morrow -- that morrow which in this world he was fated never to behold! -- for the next night, destitute of Christian grace, and a prey to his well-earned misfortunes, he shared the deep slumber of death.

A Christian burial, indeed, he received, though unworthy of it; but it did not much benefit him: for issuing, by the handiwork of Satan, from his grave at night-time, and pursued by a pack of dogs with horrible barking, he wandered through the courts and around the houses while all men made fast their doors, and did not dare to go abroad on any errand whatever from the beginning of the night until the sunrise, for fear of meeting and being beaten black and blue by this vagrant monster. But those precautions were of no avail; for the atmosphere, poisoned by the vagaries of this foul carcass, filled every house with disease and death by its pestiferous breath.

Already did the town, which but a short time ago was populous, appear almost deserted; while those of its inhabitants who had escaped destruction migrated to other parts of the country, lest they too should die. The man from whose mouth I heard these things, sorrowing over this desolation of his parish, applied himself to summon a meeting of wise and religious men on that sacred day which is called Palm Sunday, in order that they might impart healthful counsel in so great a dilemma, and refresh the spirits of the miserable remnant of the people with consolation, however imperfect.

Having delivered a discourse to the inhabitants, after the solemn ceremonies of the holy day had been properly performed, he invited his clerical guests, together with the other persons of honour who were present, to his table. While they were thus banqueting, two young men (brothers), who had lost their father by this plague, mutually encouraging one another, said, "*This monster has already destroyed our father, and will speedily destroy us also, unless we take steps to prevent it. Let us, therefore, do some bold action which will at once ensure our own safety and revenge our father's death. There is no one to hinder us; for in the priest's house a feast is in progress, and the whole town is as silent as if deserted. Let us dig up this baneful pest, and burn it with fire.*"

Thereupon snatching up a spade of but indifferent sharpness of edge, and hastening to the cemetery, they began to dig; and whilst they were thinking that they would have to dig to a greater depth, they suddenly, before much of the earth had been removed, laid bare the corpse, swollen to an enormous corpulence, with its countenance beyond measure turgid and suffused with blood; while the napkin in which it had been wrapped appeared nearly torn to pieces. The young men, however, spurred on by wrath, feared not, and inflicted a wound upon the senseless carcass, out of which incontinently flowed such a stream of blood, that it might have been taken for a leech filled with the blood of many persons.

Then, dragging it beyond the village, they speedily constructed a funeral pile; and upon one of them saying that the pestilential body would not burn unless its heart were torn out, the other laid open its side by repeated blows of the blunted spade, and, thrusting in his hand, dragged out the accursed heart. This being torn piecemeal, and the body now consigned to the flames, it was announced to the guests what was going on, who, running thither, enabled themselves to testify henceforth to the circumstances. When that infernal body had been destroyed, the pestilence which was rife among the people ceased, as if the air, which had been corrupted by the contagious motions of the dreadful corpse, were purified by the fire which had consumed it. These facts having been thus expounded, let us return to the regular thread of history.

11. *The Screaming Skull*

Bettiscombe Manor, near Lyme Regis, contains a human skull and the legend runs that if the skull is ever removed from the house, disaster follows. The story starts in 1685 when Azariah Pinney was tried and convicted of taking part in a rebellion against the Crown. He was not executed, but deported to the West Indies as a slave on a sugar plantation, but Bettiscombe Manor remained as part of the Pinney family estates.

We jump forward to the early nineteenth-century. Azariah had finally been freed before death and his children had built a large sugar plantation with their own slaves. The latest descendant, John Frederick Pinney, sold his lands and came home to Bettiscombe with a faithful servant.

After a while, the servant fell ill with tuberculosis and, as he lay dying, swore that he could never rest unless his body was returned for burial in the West Indies. The servant died, but John Pinney refused to pay for such an expensive burial, despite all the servant's years of loyalty – the body was buried in the local cemetery of St Stephen's Church. Almost at once, a wave of bad luck hit the village (crops failed and cattle died and people fell ill) and continuous screams could be heard at night, coming from the cemetery. At the manor house, even when there was no wind, doors kept slamming and windows rattling of their own accord.

Soon, the servant's body was exhumed and taken to the manor house and the disturbances stopped, but the skeleton has vanished now and only the skull remains to date. The tradition says that if the skull is removed from the house, ill fortune will fall on the family. For example, one of the Pinney family threw the skull into a nearby pond, in the late nineteenth-century, and all the residents of the house were kept awake for the next few nights by the screams and groans from the pond, until a servant was sent to retrieve the skull.

Interestingly, a famous writer (and doubter) spent a night at the manor in the 1960s, in the same room as the skull. Eric Marple said that he heard no screams, but he did have the worst nightmares of his life and he refused to spend a second night there.

12. *The Noisy Ghost of Burton Agnes Hall*

The ghost of Katherine (Anne) Griffith, who died at Burton Agnes Hall (**near Driffield, East Yorkshire**) in 1620, is understood to haunt the Queen's State Bedroom. Anne Griffith was the youngest of the three sisters, daughters of Sir Henry Griffith, who had built Burton Agnes Hall during 1598-1610. Their portraits hang in the Inner Hall,

The story is that Anne had watched the building of the new house and could talk and think of nothing else - it was to be the most beautiful house ever built. When it was almost finished, Anne went one afternoon to visit the St. Quintin family at Harpham, about a mile away. However, she was set upon by robbers near St. John's Well and brought home to Burton Agnes Hall, so badly hurt that she died a few days afterwards.

Sometimes delirious, sometimes sensible, Anne told her sisters that she could never rest unless part of her body remained in "our beautiful home as long as it shall last". She made them promise that when she was dead, her head should be severed and preserved in the Hall forever. In order to pacify her, the sisters agreed to carry out her wishes, but when Anne died, she was buried in the local churchyard, just like everyone else.

Then her ghost started to appear and scared everybody. With Anne's dying words in mind, the sisters consulted the vicar and he eventually agreed that the grave should be opened. Anne's skull was brought into the house and, so long as it was undisturbed, Burton Agnes remained peaceful and untroubled.



Many attempts have been made to get rid of it. Once it was thrown away, another time it was buried in the garden, but always the ghost walked with tremendous noise and upheaval. The skull is still in the house, built into one of the old walls, probably in the Great Hall. Nobody knows for sure just where it is but now Anne can watch over "her beautiful home".

13. *The Mistletoe Bough*

Here's a very well-known tale that has been claimed by several stately homes around Britain, but the most sightings seem to be concentrated at Bramshill House, the former police college. The tale dates back to Christmas Eve 1727, when the household was celebrating the wedding of Anne Cope.

The house was owned by Sir John Cope and his eldest daughter, Anne, married a Yorkshireman, Hugh Bethell, on that Christmas Eve. After the wedding breakfast, it was time for music, dancing and a few party games – including hide-and-seek. Anne hid in the house and the party guests searched high and low for her. No-one ever found her: Anne had vanished completely.



Over 50 years later, Bramshill House was sold and all the rooms were cleaned out, including old furniture. In a disused part of the house, there was an old chest, locked with a self-closing lock on the outside. When the box was moved, it opened to reveal the remains of Anne's body, still in the wedding dress and with her hands still clutching a sprig of Christmas mistletoe. Since then, several people have spotted Anne's ghost, wandering about the house. The old chest is still there too, kept in the front hall of the house.

14. *A Farmer's Murder*

In the village of Melbury Bubb (near Sherborne, West Dorset), there is a road called Murderers' Lane and a small hollow called the Gibbet Pit. Both of these names originated with the horrible murder of a local farmer, Thomas Baker, on 10 November 1694.

On this date, he was driving his horse and cart home from Dorchester Market, having sold his corn crop and cattle for the princely sum of two golden guineas, which were stored safely in his saddlebags. Two men were aware of his riches and lay in wait for him on Bubb Down Hill. One threw a large stone which hit the farmer in the head and killed him outright; he fell to the ground and the startled horse bolted home, together with the saddlebags.

Later, a search party found the dead farmer, but no sign of the would-be robbers, until 7 years on. Then, the landlord of a tavern in Evershot (now the Acorn Inn) heard two drunken customers boasting about the murder. He sent for help and the robbers were convicted of murder at Dorchester Assizes. They were both gibbeted in chains in a cage, fixed to a tree near the scene of the crime and left to starve to death. This is where the Gibbet Pit is now.

However, it is said that the ghost of Thomas Baker and his horse and cart still retrace their journey along the lane on the anniversary of the murder. The best-known sighting of the ghost was in November 1865, when a seven-year-old girl and her parents walked along Murderers' Lane and heard the faint sounds of an approaching vehicle. They heard the breathing of a horse and saw it pulling a cart – here are the girl's reported words.

"The lantern lights were dim at first, but I heard creaking wheels and the lights grew brighter and the horse breathed heavier. My father said for us to step aside and, as we let the cart go past, I shut my eyes. Then I quickly opened them again and the cart 'twas gone – all around was the pitch-black night."

15. *Kingley Vale and the Bosham Bell*

There is a set of records, known as the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, which lists the key points of the history of Britain during the Dark Ages, particularly in relation to Saxon kings and battles. If we look at the record for 895 CE, we see that a raiding party of Danish warships landed in the Solent and the Danes started looting along the coast. They looted Bosham and reached Kingley Vale just outside Chichester where the residents rose up and slaughtered every last Dane – that's what the AS Chronicle says, but the folk legend is far more colourful.

As you know, the Danes were great believers in dragons, particularly the great dragon/serpent that lay at the roots of the world tree, Yggdrasil. That is why so many Danish ships had dragons carved on their prows – as a symbol of bravery, to frighten opponents and to protect the crews against sea monsters.

The Danes were wary of Saxon resistance and approached Chichester by night, stopping in Kingley Vale. While they were among the yew trees, a mist arose and (allegedly) took the form of a ghostly dragon, whilst the trees seemed to menace the invaders. The Danes thought they were being attacked and ended up slaughtering each other in the mist and the gloom. The Chronicle says that the Danes were killed by the Saxon residents, but the yew grove still exudes an air of ancient menace. If you cut into one of these yew trees, the sap has a pinkish red colour like blood and the yew bark is sharp and splintery, just like dragon scales.

At the same time that the Danes were being killed by the Kingley Vale dragon, other members of the same raiding party were busy looting Bosham. At the time, church bells were vital to the life of a village – often new bells were baptised and the sound of bells could drive away demons and thunderstorms. In addition, bells were rung for weddings, funerals, times of services, local celebrations, etc, etc.



So, back to 895 CE and the marauding Danes took everything of value from the town, including the largest bell from the church. The massive bell was lowered into a dragon ship, which sank down under the weight until it was only just afloat. As the ships started to pull out of Bosham Harbour, a group of monks ran back to the church to ring the remaining bells in such a way as to summon a thunderstorm.

At once, the sky darkened, the winds became stronger and the waves were choppy. The Danish ship with the bell was swamped, the bell broke free of its moorings and crashed through the side of the ship. Both ship and bell sank to the bottom of the Bosham Channel.

Hundreds of years later, the villagers tried to retrieve the bell, but it was too heavy for ordinary nets and chains. Today, it remains at the bottom of the harbour, but it is said that when the bells of Holy Trinity church in Bosham ring out on a misty evening, an echo can be heard across the harbour from the sunken bell.

16. *The Beaminster Ghost*

Reported in the *Gentleman's Magazine* of 1774, here's the story of a ghost that appeared in broad daylight and was seen by a lot of people.

On Saturday, 27 June 1728, the boys who attended St Mary's Church in Beaminster for their education were let out of their lessons around noon. Some 12 or so boys went to play ball outside the church and 4 of them went back in to look for old pens. While in there, there was a loud clattering noise, they ran outside to tell their friends and decided that someone was trying to frighten them.

They went back inside, but no-one was there and a similar noise was heard. They ran round the church and also heard the sounds of someone preaching and people singing. The boys gave up and went back to play. After a while, one went inside for a book and he saw a coffin in the schoolroom. He called to his friends – five of them saw the coffin and then they saw the figure of John Daniel, a boy who had died 7 weeks earlier. One of the witnesses was John's half-brother.

All the witnesses were questioned by the local magistrate, Colonel Broadrepp, particularly one boy who had not known John Daniel in real life, but who gave an exact description, including clothes. People who had buried John Daniel were able to verify the clothing – the boy's body had been found in an obscure field, some 300 yards from his home. He had been buried without an inquest as many villagers knew that the boy had suffered from fits.

After the appearance of the ghost, John Daniel's body was exhumed and the coroner decided that the boy had actually been strangled – partly because the bones of the neck were disjointed and partly because burial witnesses said that the corpse had black bruises on the neck. Despite the finding of murder, no murderer or motive was ever discovered, but the ghost has not been seen since.

17. *Joseph Hemsall's Ghost*

Here's another ghostly tale, this time from the Cambridgeshire fenland.

Joseph Hemsall was a true-born fen dweller. He lived in a small cottage on the Soham side of Wicken Fen during the late 17th century. Every evening, Hemsall would cross the fen, known locally as Big Bog, to drink with his friends at a tavern in Wicken.

One night, when he was quite drunk, a thick fog came down over the fens: it was so thick that Joseph's friends begged him not to go home that night, but take a room at the tavern instead and go home the next day. Hemsall wouldn't listen to them – he prided himself on his knowledge of the fens and was convinced he could make it home safely. He set off through the fog towards Soham.

When Hemsall didn't return to the tavern for the next few days, his friends began to worry. Two of them decided to visit Joseph's house and make sure he was all right. They were met by Hemsall at the bank of the fen, but he was different. He was pale and gaunt and, as they walked together, he didn't say a word until they reached the cottage gate. At that point, he turned and announced, "As I am now, so one day will you be. Fetch me from Big Bog and bury me in Wicken Churchyard."

He then vanished into thin air, leaving his companions understandably shaken. On their way back to Wicken, they found Joseph's body at the bank of the fen, at the spot where he'd appeared before, lying half in and half out of the reed-choked water with a terrified expression on his face. His body was buried in Soham Churchyard, but this apparently angered his spirit, because people began to see Joseph Hemsall's mournful ghost, which would tell them, "*As I am now, so someday will you be! Bury my bones in Wicken Churchyard or I will not rest!*"

So many people were frightened by the ghost that his body was exhumed and reburied at Wicken. The frequent haunting stopped, but Joseph Hemsall's ghost still appears in the area, warning people that, "*As I am now, so one day will you be!*"

18. *Jenny Greenteeth*

I guess it all started with the annual apple howling. I'm old now, but I remember the events of that terrible year as if it was yesterday. I used to live in the village, but not since then and only yesterday, I heard that several children have gone missing from there over the years.

Just to explain the custom to you folks, apple howling by night was an ancient tradition in our village, part of the wassail. One local farm had many apple trees and the previous year had produced a bumper crop. But to ensure good apples, you have to drive out the orchard demons from the trees or they will ruin the crop for the next year.

So the whole village set up for the howling and we all followed in a torchlight procession down Pegs Lane to the orchard. The village elders surrounded the oldest tree and everyone shared in the wassail cakes and cider. Then the elders hit the tree with sticks to rouse any demon and other villagers fired their shotguns into the upper branches in case a demon tried to hide up there.

We sang the wassail, ate more cakes and the ritual was over for another year.

And then I saw, at least I thought I saw a movement in the tree – up high, just a shadow really and then it was gone. We all went home, but I saw Old Jen trailing along slowly. Well, that was usual. To me, she seemed about 90 years old anyway and the long walk to the howling in the dark and cold hurts the bones when you're old. I went back to help her, but she snarled at me, pushing my arm away – so I left her alone.

The apple howling was in early January, but when I tell you that the village had its worst run of luck for many years, that was a fact. Not only was the apple crop bad, but rain ruined much of the harvest. One of the inn-keeper's daughters, playing by the mill-pond, fell in and drowned. A cart ran out of control on the village green and hurt some children. There were lots of unexplained fires and that's a problem with hay ricks or thatched cottages.

When did people suspect the truth? Can't really put a time on it, but it seemed to me that we were all avoiding Old Jen. Her temper was never good, but she was always angry and she seemed to be around each time another accident took place. Finally, a group of elders and the local priest went around and we all heard what happened next. Old Jen had gone, left her house and all her goods, but her clothes and walking stick were found by the river that evening.

And I saw the result – just me, out of all the village, but I'll never forget it, because we were mistaken – all of us – the apple howling had not driven out the demon. The demon had just moved into the most vulnerable person there – Old Jen – and then carried on its mischief. I'd crept down to the river that night to see where Old Jen had died and I saw something. It was most like an old woman with green skin, long wet hair and very long sharp teeth. I saw the teeth glow green in the moonlight and it had hold of an animal which it dragged into the water. Nothing surfaced. And that's my story.

19. *The Bird of Death*

A tale from Devon, where I discovered the grim tale of the Oxenham Bird. Just near the northern edge of Dartmoor is the village of South Zeal, wherein one can find Oxenham Manor. The Oxenham family lasted from the reign of Elizabeth I to last century and the ghost that haunted this family took the form of a spectral white bird.

If any member of the family saw the white bird, that person was doomed. For example, the father of Lady Margaret Oxenham saw the bird on the eve of his daughter's wedding. As she claimed not to have seen it, her father stayed silent. During the wedding, a jealous ex-lover rushed into the church and stabbed Lady Margaret to death.

In 1635, John Oxenham was 22 years old, 2m high and healthy. Seen as "a pious lad with a bright future", he fell sick and died, two days after seeing a bird with a white breast hovering over him. There were several witnesses – two days later, John's sister-in-law had a similar visit.

Many other people (not just Oxenhams) saw the white bird over the centuries. William Oxenham and his friends saw it in the 18th century (1743), but he stated that he was quite healthy, thank you, when the bird was seen – three days later he was dead and buried. The last Oxenham to die in England (Richard), did so in Exeter in 1970 – he and his friends saw a large white pigeon in the death chamber, but could not find it later, despite all the windows being closed.

20. *Chambercombe Manor*

And so, still in Devon, we go to Chambercombe Manor in the 17th century. This stately home is located near Ilfracombe in Devon and belonged to Alexander Otway at the time of this story. Alexander made his money through wrecking = luring ships onto the rocks for plunder.

One night, Alexander & his son (William) caused a large ship to run aground. As his father looted the ship, William Otway rescued a beautiful woman from the wreck. They soon married and had a daughter (Kate). When Kate grew up, she married an Irishman and they moved to Dublin.

After a while, William Otway ran short of funds. He decided to take up the family tradition of wrecking ships for profit. During a terrible storm one night, William caused a ship to run aground and he discovered a badly injured and disfigured woman in the waves. He took the body up to the house, but she died there. After robbing the body of all the jewellery and clothes, he realised that it was the body of his own daughter. Overcome with guilt, he hid the body in the house and left Devon forever.

Fast forward 200 years to the 1860s, when the new tenants of the Manor were exploring the house and they discovered some secret rooms and false walls. Inside one of the secret rooms was an old four-poster bed and the skeletal remains of Kate, William Otway's daughter, who is said now to haunt the house on stormy nights.

21. *Berry Pomeroy Castle*

Berry Pomeroy castle is in Devon not far from Totnes and it has two well-known ghosts. The 12th century castle was home to the Pomeroy family for nearly 500 years after the Norman Conquest, but the family lost their lands in 1549 when Thomas Pomeroy took part in a religious rebellion. The castle passed from owner to owner until it was damaged by fire in the 18th century. It is now reported to be one of the most haunted buildings in the UK.

One ghost is the **White Lady**; she haunts the dungeons, rising from St. Margaret's Tower to the castle ramparts. She has been identified as the ghost of Lady Margaret Pomeroy, who was imprisoned in the dungeons by her sister, Lady Eleanor. Eleanor was insanely jealous of her younger (and prettier) sister. So, she imprisoned her in the castle dungeons over a love triangle. Lord Pomeroy was away on a crusade and Eleanor had been left in charge. Margaret was locked away for nearly 20 years, until Eleanor decided to starve her to death. The ghost causes feelings of depression and fear by all who have seen her and her light has been seen in St Margaret's Tower at least once every year.

Another ghost is the **Blue Lady** and she has been seen there as far back as the 18th century. Dressed in a long blue cloak and hood, it is claimed that her appearance foretells a death. She is reported to be the daughter of an early Norman lord, who gave birth to a child after an incestuous relationship. Shortly after its birth, she strangled the baby herself and now her spirit cannot find peace.

In the late 18th century, a well-known doctor (Sir Walter Farquhar) saw the ghost. He was treating the ill wife of a steward and he saw a young woman in a blue dress, wringing her hands in obvious distress, moving up a staircase. He asked the steward who the woman was and the steward explained that the ghost was an omen of death. The steward was upset as he thought his wife would die, but the doctor dismissed the idea as ridiculous. The wife had been recovering well, but she died without warning later that day!

22. **Pluckley Ghosts**

Pluckley is a small village in Kent, not far from Ashford. In 1989, the *Guinness Book of World Records* listed it as the most haunted village in England, with some 12 different ghosts. Other sources, such as *Mysterious Britain and Ireland*, have noted the reported sightings of up to 15 different ghosts. Of all the ghosts, the only repeated sightings over the past two decades have been the monk and the phantom coach. It is not possible to detail every sighting, so I'll describe the 12 main ghosts in summary form.

Let's start with the **phantom coach**, which haunts Maltman's Hill – many people have heard the sounds of a horse-drawn coach there and the coach itself has been seen in Pluckley. One October night, a married couple were returning home by car from babysitting their grand-daughter. At Pinnocks Crossroads, the woman saw a coach being pulled by horses with light coming from its windows. On another occasion, a local resident (using back roads to drive home) had the coach pass straight in front of him. In early November 1997, around 7.00pm, someone who was driving through Pluckley had the inside of their car filled with the sound of horses' hooves on cobbles: the road wasn't cobbled, but would have been in the past.

Next, we come to the **monk**, who is supposed to haunt Greystones House or, to be more precise, the grounds of the house. The house was called Rectory Cottage when it was built in 1863, as a home for the rector of St Nicholas's Church. It became Greystones in 1924.

Another oft-sighted ghost is the **highwayman** at what used to be Frith Corner. The unknown highwayman was ambushed by either the law or by other criminals and killed with a sword, pinning him to a hollow oak tree that once stood in this area. In some accounts, there was a fight between the highwayman and his attackers and, in others, he was trying to hide in the hollow tree and when it was pierced through the tree. According to legend, several ghosts appear in a re-enactment of the killing.

The ghostly figure of the **gypsy woman smoking a pipe** (also known as the watercress woman) is usually seen at the Pinnocks Crossroads Bridge. It is said that the woman once sold watercress that she found in the stream, but there was an accident one night when a spark from her pipe set fire to the alcohol in her drink. She burned to death and has haunted the site since. Witnesses have described her as being a misty figure that sits on the bridge.

Some other Pluckley ghosts are listed below.

1. A **black shadow** has been seen near the ruined windmill by The Pinnocks. The mill was closed in the 1930s and burned down in 1939 after being hit by lightning.
2. After the First World War, **a schoolmaster** from a nearby village committed suicide in Pluckley by hanging himself and his ghost is supposed to walk here. This ghost is sometimes confused with the story of a military man who hanged himself in Park Wood, for reasons unknown.
3. Several versions exist of the accident at the clay pit and brick works. What is agreed is that a man was killed there either because he fell into the clay pit and was trapped or a wall of clay fell on him. This ghost takes the form of **ghostly screams in the disused clay pit**.
4. Rose Court is another haunted Pluckley house that has a ghost from a suicide, this time from Tudor years. The **ghost is a lady**, believed to be part of the Dering family who ate poisonous berries to kill herself. Her phantom can be seen in Rose Court or its grounds in the late afternoon, calling for her two dogs.
5. The **White Lady** has two localities to haunt – the site of the Dering manor at Surrenden Dering, which burned down in 1952 and the inside of St Nicholas's Church, where there is a tunnel between church and manor. During 1918-39, the manor was used as the American Embassy and several official visitors saw her ghost – one of them shot at her and the bullet hit the wood panels behind her.
6. The Black Horse pub is old and was once a farmhouse, the home of the local bailiff. It is haunted by a **poltergeist** that takes clothes away and returns them much later.
7. The Dering Arms was once an old hunting lodge is said to be haunted by **an old lady in a bonnet**. This ghost is often mistaken as a customer whilst sitting at a table.
8. The Blacksmiths Arms is haunted by **a cavalier** in one of the upstairs rooms.

23. Ghostly Nuns

Thinking about ghosts in unlikely places, brings another similar case to mind, namely the nuns of the Roundshaw Estate in Croydon. Before the estate was built, this was the site of Croydon Airport, which had been an amalgam of two First World War airfields at Waddon and Beddington.

Croydon Airport was taken over by the RAF in 1939 and was vital during the Battle of Britain. After the war, it was used for commercial flights until 1959. Nowadays, there's a small aircraft museum, not far from Fairfield Halls, in fact on the A232.

And this was the cause of the trouble – a Dakota crashed in foggy weather in 1948 at Heathrow whereas at Croydon, a Dakota crashed during a snowstorm in January 1947. The Spencer Airways Dakota was travelling to South Africa, but collided on the runway with another plane bound for Czechoslovakia. Twelve people died in the crash, including three nuns from the *Congregation des Filles de la Sagesse*, who were travelling to Nyasaland.

The phantoms of the three nuns have been seen walking around Roundshaw Estate and were reported frequently in the mid-1970s. On one occasion, a nun was seen in the bedroom of a new-built house, telling a bedtime story to a little boy. A phantom nun has also been seen in the lounge of another house, causing the occupant to ask the authorities to be transferred to another house, but most of the sightings have taken place on the estate's roads.

24. Bleeding Hearts

Here's a tale from the 18th century now, first quoted in "*Gentleman's Magazine*" for 1827. There was a pretty young woman who was the daughter of a yeoman farmer in Buckland. She was so pretty that she caught the eye of the son of the local lord of the manor. Her father tried to warn her, but she thought that she was in love and they would be married. At first, the young man was flattered and played along, even though he knew they could never marry. The couple kept their meetings secret from both their families and met by a large stone on the brook at Buckland.

The young man continued to make all sorts of promises to the girl about their marriage, right up to the day when they met by the brook as usual and he didn't ask for her hand in marriage, but demanded a more physical expression of her love. The girl refused at once, but her shock at being betrayed by the man she thought loved her was too much and she instantly dropped dead by the stream.

Suddenly the young man realised that he did love her and was truly sorry for his behaviour. He took his knife and plunged it into his heart, watching his blood trickle over the large stone where they used to meet. Next morning, that is where both the bodies were found – by the brook with the stone all covered in blood. Both young people were given Christian burials and the stone was washed clean by the next rain.

However, the traumatised spirit of the young lady continued to haunt the spot for many years and the stone seemed to be bleeding always into the brook. It was a popular tale and many people saw her spirit, known as the White Lady, including numerous farmers whose horses refused to pass the spot.

In 1900, the then lord of the manor removed the bleeding stone to his garden, had a bridge built over the brook and the White Lady's ghost was not seen again. Today, the brook runs under the A25 at Buckland and a garden centre is located just where the bleeding stone used to lie.

25. *The Daemon Cat*

Let's finish in the little Essex village of Hatfield Peverel in 1565. The Witchcraft Act of 1563 was still new, but there weren't any trials. You might say that everything started with the cat.

Elizabeth Waterhouse had a black cat and she named it Satan. The cat, reputedly, had the power to grant its owner's wishes. So, Elizabeth loaned the cat to her sister, Agnes.

Agnes did what anyone might do in the circumstances – she opted to test the claim on one of her own pigs: the pig died, as Agnes requested. That seemed like a success, so Agnes went large (you might say) by wishing for the following.

1. The death of three pigs belonging to the local priest.
2. The death of three geese belonging to a neighbour, following an argument.
3. The death of another woman's cow, following an argument.
4. When someone in the village refused to sell yeast to Agnes, she wished for the brewing to fail.
5. When someone in the village refused to give butter to Agnes, she wished for the dairying to fail.

Note: each wish came true and, in each case, Agnes rewarded the cat with lots of milk and treats. The details of the wishes were recorded from a later confession by Agnes.

Things went sour for Agnes in 1566 when her 18-year-old step-daughter (Joan) decided to test out the cat too. Another village girl refused to give some cheese and bread to Joan, so Joan wished for a dæmon to torment the girl. According to the village girl, she was harassed by a dæmon dog that ruined the butter-making and carried a knife. The Waterhouse women (all three of them) were accused of witchcraft, despite Joan saying that she'd sent an ordinary dog over to disturb the other village girl.

In addition to the witchcraft, Agnes Waterhouse also confessed to two murders – her own husband and another local man – plus various acts of petty revenge against her neighbours over the years since she inherited Satan the cat.

As you might expect, Agnes was found guilty of both murder and witchcraft; she was hanged on 29 July 1566, as the first person to be executed in England for witchcraft. Joan was acquitted and Elizabeth was sentenced to a year's imprisonment, only to find herself on the gallows in 1579 for further witchcraft-related crimes.

About the storyteller

Let's try to visualise the scene. It's market day in a small country town and the traders are setting up their stalls, putting out their stocks. It's a lovely sunny day in the town square, with cobbled stones underfoot and an Eleanor Cross in the centre. There are old buildings all around and roads off to the side.

And the first person we meet is the **Storyteller**, who is here to entertain the passers-by and children with magickal tales. With him, you can always count on tales of dragons, the faery folk, goblins and witches, plus stirring tales of adventure with highwaymen, sea serpents, giants and unicorns. The Storyteller himself is a mysterious person – a cunning man of Irish ancestry, who travels from place to place with his stock of tales, but he's often found here on market day.

And now he takes up his usual place, just at the foot of the Eleanor Cross, dressed in his habitual brown cloak, wooden pendant on his neck, silver rings on his fingers and with his deer-antler staff by his side. Already, a few people have stopped to listen as he announces himself with an ancient bodhran and launches into a wondrous story of long-ago times and a king who was beguiled by the dwarfish realm.

Let's stop for a minute to listen to part of his tale: *"After another year, King Herla received a summons from his dwarf friend, so he gathered his best men and a host of wedding gifts. They set off into a wild country where few men ventured and travelled for days, through twisting forest paths until reaching a solid sandstone cliff. Suddenly, there was a sound like the peal of a bell and a doorway opened in the cliff face; the company rode through the opening and found themselves in a large cavern, lit by flaming brands hung at intervals on the sandy walls. There was a passage, which led from the cavern into the depths of the earth."*

Nick O'Connor is a registered member of the Society for Storytelling and also the Sussex Centre for Folklore, Fairy Tales and Fantasy. He can be heard at numerous pagan events, community meetings and festivals. He can be booked for storytelling at corporate functions, in schools, in the care sector or for private celebrations via **Gylden Fellowship**.