

THIS SPECTRED ISLE

Cavan Scott explores the countryside's strangest tales

The Mermaid of Zennor

Every night the fishermen of Zennor in Cornwall would sing praises to God for their catch in the local parish church and every night a beautiful, if awkward, woman would slip into the back of the congregation to watch. The reason she came was Mathew Trewella, one of the fishermen, who was famed for having the finest voice on the coast. One day, the strange visitor couldn't conceal her delight when Mathew sang, and she let out a soft sigh. Mathew turned and on seeing the woman, who seemed to have seaweed woven into her hair, he fell madly in love.

His desire turned to confusion when the girl suddenly bolted for the door, tripping over her dress in her haste. From beneath the gown the parishioners caught a glimpse of shining, silver scales. Crying that they had a demon in their midst, the congregation turned into a mob and gave chase. Mathew ran ahead and found the woman floundering on the shore, a sparkling fishtail where her legs should be. He had discovered that he was in the presence of Morveren, the mermaid daughter of Llyr, king of the sea. The beautiful mermaid had been tempted from her father's underwater kingdom by Mathew's litting voice, but now was in danger. Without hesitation, Mathew



scooped up his love and raced into the sea with her, vanishing beneath the waves, never to be seen again.

However, the fishermen of yesteryear told how they could still hear him singing from beneath the waves. If his song was high then the sea would be calm, but if it was low, then his father-in-law Llyr was sending a storm and the fishermen should stay on the shore.

OCTOBER 2009

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THE BLOODY BRIDE OF BALDOON

On the 24 August 1669, David Dunbar of Baldoon Castle walked up the aisle with Janet Dalrymple, daughter of a local landowner. The marriage of convenience almost hadn't happened as, unknown to her father, Janet had got herself engaged to her lover, the penniless Lord Rutherford. At the command of the family, the engagement was dissolved and as the doors of the nuptial suite closed behind the happy couple, the houses of Dunbar and Dalrymple breathed a collective sigh of relief.

They shouldn't have counted their chickens. An unearthly howl erupted from behind the locked doors of the bedroom. With a makeshift battering ram, the threshold was finally broken, but what a sight they found. David Dunbar lay in a pool of blood, stuck like a pig, while his bride crouched against the chimney breast. Her white gown was smeared with gore but that was nothing compared to the look of malevolent glee that was plastered over her face. Giggling insanely, she could only repeat one sentence over and over again: "Take up thy bonny bridegroom".

Janet's mind never returned and she died still raving, just two weeks later on the 12 September, while David, who unbelievably survived his injuries, never explained what really went on in that infamous chamber. Some say that she had stabbed



him in spite, while others claimed that David, wild with jealousy, attacked her first. Servants of the family even suggested that they had spotted the spurned Lord Rutherford hot-footing it from the scene, while the more fanciful suggested that the Devil himself had appeared just as the marriage was to be consummated. Whatever the reasons, if you visit the ivy-clad ruin of Baldoon Castle on 12 September you should keep an eye out for a spectral bride, steeped in blood.

SEPTEMBER 2009



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BEWARE THE LANTERN MAN

Joseph Bexfield was a Wherryman on the River Yare in Norfolk, spending his days sailing his barge between Norwich and Yarmouth. By night, Joseph would join his fellow sailors for a drink in the White Horse Inn at Thurilton Staithe, their boats safely tied up at the staithe until morning.

On the 11 August 1809, after many a flagon of ale, Joseph noticed something out on the marsh. A light was bobbing in the gloom. He peered into the darkness and could make out a small figure scurrying this way and that, a tiny lantern in its hand. Was this a ne'er-do-well trying to make off with their moored wherrys? In a fury, Joseph was ready to storm out of the pub and see them off, but his friends stopped him. They'd heard legends of the Lantern Men, evil pixies who would lead unwary souls to their death. If they didn't drag you to a watery grave, the little people could steal the very breath from your lungs. "If a Lantern Man is upon ye," said one of Joseph's compatriots, "throw yeself flat on ye face and halt ye breathing."

Joseph laughed off the warnings, and finishing his drink, he set off to grab a parcel for his wife that he'd left on the wherry. His drinking buddies begged him not to go, but Joseph wasn't one to be put off by ghosts and goblins and headed off into the night, whistling brightly. Three days later, his body was washed up at the exact place he usually moored his wherry.

To this day, locals say that on warm August nights, you can hear a nervous whistle on the wind or see a ghostly figure wandering lost near the Yare. Today some would say the dancing phosphorescent lights are just gas spontaneously combusting as it escapes from decaying matter, but can you really be sure that the light on the marsh is not a Lantern Man searching for another human soul?

AUGUST 2009



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THE GIANT OF SOMERLEYTON

Forget the Jolly Green Giant and the BFG, according to legend much of England and Ireland was once terrorised by vicious and cruel giants. No wonder the famous Jack the Giant Killer of Cornwall became such a hero of the past, felling many mammoth bulls with such wonderful names as Cormoran, Thunderdell and Blunderbore. His modus operandi was to lure giants into huge pits filled with spikes.

As news of this heroic giant slayer spread the land, it's no wonder that a lad in Somerleyton, Suffolk, decided to try his hand at a bit of copycat pest control. The only snag was that the pest in question Gradabor, Blunderbore's non-identical twin, was 10 times the size and 20 times as nasty as his sibling. As the wannabe giant-slayer dug his pit, Gradabor sat watching on a nearby hill. Although his brain was as tiny as his body was gargantuan, the giant twigged what was going on and when the boy stopped to take a breather, Gradabor plucked the unfortunate lad up and ground his body between his hands until his blood turned to red flour and fluttered down from the sky like rain.

Satisfied that he wouldn't lose his skin after dispatching his adversary, Gradabor set off to find some Suffolk folk to eat for his supper. Local superstition states that if you are unfortunate enough to be in Somerleyton on 17 July, Gradabor returns for one troublesome night, knocking down fences, sitting on churches and chowing down on cows. If that wasn't bad enough, later in the year, on 19 November, the blood of the ill-fated young giant killer rains on the field. That's one prediction you'll never see on the *Countryfile* weather forecast.

JULY 2009



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A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM?

A mile west of Tintagel, Cornwall, Bossiney Mound is all that remains of a Norman wooden fortress, built by Robert of Mortain, half-brother of William the Conqueror. In 1584 Francis Drake climbed the mound to give his parliamentary election speech, but according to legend there is another English icon buried beneath the earth. The windswept location is said to be the final resting place of Camelot's round table, which was buried here when King Arthur of the Britons died. On every Midsummer's Eve, the mound is split asunder as the table rises to the surface once again, accompanied by a suitably noteworthy flash of light in the sky. There the shining, golden table sits waiting for Arthur to return before dawn, and when the Past and Future King doesn't show his face, it sinks back into the bowels of the earth for another year. Reverend Sabine Baring Gould, writer of *Onward, Christian Soldiers* and collector of British tales and folklore, wrote of the table's annual resurfacing in the 1860s, adding that at the end of time the table will pop up once again but it will be scooped up to heaven by arch-angels, so that the saints can have a slap-up meal served by Christ himself.

Over the years, many have spent a chilly night waiting for the table's miraculous appearance, but as yet no one has spotted it. Perhaps part of the reason is that the table has got fed up of being repeatedly stood up by old Arthur. It's no wonder, however, as the mythical monarch is a tad busy on Midsummer's Eve. Up in Somerset, local lore informs that Arthur and his knights lay in eternal sleep beneath the Iron Age hill fort of Cadbury Castle, only popping out every seven years on Midsummer Night to stretch their legs. They ride on horseback to the parish church of Sutton Montis to let their weary horses drink from a spring before heading back to Cadbury, which has been linked to Camelot since the 1500s.

JUNE 2009



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THE GHOST OF ANNE BOLEYN

On 19 May 1536, an sword was brought down on the neck of Henry VIII's second wife, Anne Boleyn. There are a number of legends concerning what happened to her body. Some accounts say that her corpse was stuffed, head beneath her arm, into an old chest and buried in the Tower of London's chapel, while others claim that friends of the family stole it for burial in Norfolk, the county of her birth. In 1836, her heart was even rumoured to have been discovered bricked into a wall of an Elvedon Park church.

Whatever happened to her body, her troubled spirit is said to return to Blickling Hall in Norfolk every year, on the anniversary of her death. A coach, pulled by four headless horses, races up the driveway with the equally headless form of Anne sitting on plump cushions, her decapitated head resting on her own lap. When the steeds have come to a halt before the house, the former queen disembarks and, dressed in white, carries her dripping head into the National Trust property. There she inspects every room until daybreak, looking for the room in which she was born. She is unlikely to find it though, as the current hall was built in the 17th century on the site of the Boleyn family home. Anne isn't the only Boleyn spirit to roam the Norfolk countryside on this fateful night as there is another phantom coach, this time driven by the insane spirit of her father, Thomas. As a penance for betraying Anne at her trial, Thomas is cursed to cross 12 bridges across Norfolk on this night, including the Oxnead, Meyton and Buxton bridges. Thomas also carries his own severed head, although angry flames are said to flash from his screaming mouth. It's no wonder that he's a bit miffed. First of all, his coach is said to be pursued by a pack of demons baying for his blood, and secondly, the curse isn't due to be lifted until 2536, when Thomas's spirit can finally find rest.

MAY 2009



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FACES OF THE NOT QUITE DEAD

Most people think of Easter as a time of rebirth and new life, but in one village in Dorset it has a more sinister tradition. Local legend states that if you dare look into St Augustine's Well in Cerne Abbas early on Easter Monday, you'll see the faces of those who will die in the next year staring back at you.

You can find the spring at the far end of the burial grounds of the old Benedictine Abbey, which was destroyed during Henry VIII's 16th-century dissolution of the monasteries. According to the monks of Cerne, the well sprung from the earth when St Augustine was visiting the area. Wandering the hills, the saint came upon a group of shepherds and tested them by asking if he could offer them beer or water to drink. When the too-good-to-be-true shepherds asked for water, Augustine struck the ground with his staff and water started to flow.

Unsurprisingly, due to its saintly origins, the well also has healing properties connected to it, and at various points in history villagers have dipped newborn babies in its chilly waters for blessing, while local maids have quaffed the holy wet stuff in cups made of laurel leaves in the hope of falling pregnant.

No one knows why the well should give up the faces of the dead on Easter Monday, but it's a trick also shared with a number of other locations across the British Isles this month. If you're visiting the churchyard at Whittlesford in Cambridgeshire on Friday 24 April, watch out for the spirit forms of all that will be buried there in the next 12 months, as they appear and lie in the correct places before sinking into the ground. Meanwhile, in Scarborough, anyone who is set to shuffle off this mortal coil before St Mark's Eve 2010 is expected to materialise in the graveyard of St Mary's on the stroke of midnight and form an eerie procession into the church.

SPRING 2009