

Myths and Legends of Leicestershire

Many of the stories told to us when we were children date back to ancient beliefs or superstitions that have been passed down through the generations, and Leicestershire has a rich store of such myths and legends.

One such legend was about the origins of the name of Leicester itself, which was written about by Geoffrey of Monmouth in the 12th century. The River Soar was called originally the "Leir", a name that came from the Celtic word for river – Ler, or Llyr – the Celtic name for a water-god. King Leir ruled in Britain in the late 9th/early 8th century BC and was reputed to have founded "a city built upon the River Soar", called in the British tongue, Kaeleir, in the Saxon, Leicestre. Shakespeare wrote his play "King Lear" based upon King Leir, the story of a king who had to decide to which of his three daughters he would leave his kingdom. The River Soar was dedicated at the time of the Roman occupation of Leicester to the Roman god Janus, who was the god of beginnings (giving rise to the name of the month at the beginning of the year, January) and it is likely that there was a temple dedicated to Janus in Leicester. After the Romans left in the fifth century, it is possible that the early inhabitants of Leicester replaced Janus with Leir as their god of beginnings and Geoffrey reports that an annual festival dedicated to Leir took place in an ancient temple in Leicester. He also says that King Leir was laid to rest in a cave on the banks of the River Soar¹. This cave is associated with another of Leicester's legends – that of "Black Annis" or "Anna".

The story of "Black Anna's cave or bower" is another legend rooted in Celtic beliefs. The names Anu, Danu or Don were given to one of the deities of the Celts who was regarded as the mother of all their gods, presiding over the earth and the crops. "Black Anna", or "Black Annis", as she is now known, was said to have been an old hag who lived in the cave and preyed upon young children if they were out late at night. The story goes like this:

"Little children who went out to run on the Dane Hills were assured that she lay in wait there, to snatch them away to her 'bower' where she scratched them to death with her claws, sucked their blood, and hung up their skins to dry."² The Dane Hills is an area of Leicester situated between the city and Glenfield.

Anna or Annis was supposed to haunt the area around St. Mary de Castro Church and lived in tunnels reputed to lead to Leicester Castle. Long after Dane Hills was built up after WWI, she was still supposed to haunt the area.

There are many stories and legends associated with two standing stones in Leicestershire – the "Humber" stone and "St. John's" stone. Both are thought to be 'erratics' – large granite stones left by glaciers as they retreated from Britain. For hundreds of years, local people are believed to have used these stones as places of worship, sacrificial altars or have stories of ghosts and misfortune attached to them. The "Humber" stone was at one time known as Hellstone – Hela being the Saxon word for "death". One story attached to the Humber stone is that of a local landowner who around 1756 and 1766 supposedly broke off the upper parts of the stone in order that a plough could pass over it. He never prospered after this, being reduced to abject poverty and the workhouse – a victim of the "curse of the Humber stone"! It is also associated with

the druidic festival of "Beltain," still held in Scotland and the Isle of Man on May Day, the 1st of May. This festival begins with the May Queen slaying the "horned god". Curiously, there is a story of a small boy who lived near the Humber Stone being awoken by images of a horned goat-like creature!!

There was another standing stone near Leicester Abbey, named St. John's stone – originally seven feet high (there is a drawing by John Flower of the stone in 1815) but which has now disappeared. This used to be visited on Midsummer's Day, June 24th, for a festival, but there are legends that it was frequented by fairies who danced around it at sundown as part of a pagan ritual. The historian Charles Bilson says that the stone was used in a festival 'celebrating fire and sun worship'³.

It has been suggested that both stones may have been deliberately positioned in Neolithic times around 3,000BC so that grooves on the stones were aligned to the rising of the sun on May Day and that practices thus associated with May Day have been carried down over the centuries⁴.

There is a story associated with Richard III, that on 21st August 1485, an old woman saw Richard strike his foot against the parapet of West Bridge in Leicester on his way to the Battle of Bosworth. She prophesied that "where he stuck his foot, there shall he strike his head". As Richard's naked body was brought back to Leicester on the back of a horse it is reputed that his head did indeed hit the parapet of the bridge! Legend has it that Richard's body was thrown into the River Soar and there is/was? a plaque on the bridge commemorating this. Of course, we now know that this was not the case after the remarkable discovery of his remains under a Leicester carpark, although there is also a tale that the Greyfriars monks rescued the bones from the Soar and re-buried them!

Bradgate Park and its association with Lady Jane Grey, the "Nine Days Queen", is the scene of another story – that of the ghost of Lady Jane reportedly racing through the park in a "ghostly coach, drawn by four headless horses with a headless Jane inside. Her bloodied head rests in her lap". Pre-covid, you could join a ghost walk in Bradgate Park on the anniversary of the last day of her trial before she was found guilty and beheaded⁵.

There are accounts of many 'holy wells' in Leicester and Leicestershire, to which various stories of healing can be attributed. To mention just two of these, within the city there was a spring known as St. James' Well that lay close to the chapel of St. Sepulchre. This area became the site of Leicester Royal Infirmary – could this be associated with centuries of healing taking place at the well? You may know of the well in Ratby known as 'Holy Well' – the water in the well was reputed 'never to freeze' and it gained fame for the healing of scurvy, which was common in the Middle Ages⁶.

These are just a few of the myths and legends that abound in the county and city of Leicester but if you remember being told other stories, then please do get in touch with any of the committee and tell us about them.

Sources: 1) LAHS article by Col. R.E.Martin in 1933 based upon two wireless talks delivered by the author at the invitation of the BBC

2) Leicester Chronicle 1874

3 & 4) www.thiswasleicestershire.co.uk

5) Bradgate Park Trust information

6) "The Holy Wells of Leicestershire and Rutland", Clive Potter

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The Modest Clockmaker (continued from last month)

Now the acorn doesn't fall far from the tree and Samuel Deacon jr. was imbued with the same religious devotion as his father. During his time at Normanton, he worshipped at several Baptist chapels in the area, including one at Barton-in-the-Beans. Here he met, and fell for, Miss Elizabeth Adcock. On 16th September 1771, they were married. Elizabeth's father, William Adcock, was a carpenter and property owner in Barton and a Deacon in the chapel there. William was able to lease a property to his new son-in-law, so Samuel and Elizabeth had somewhere to live, but importantly, there was room to make it the premises for Samuel to set up business on his own.

It was certainly a risk for Samuel, at the age of just 25, to have his own business in Barton-in-the-Beans. The hamlet had a population of around 116, living in 16 houses, so clearly, he would need to draw trade in from far and wide. That meant establishing a reputation for quality and, if possible, producing clocks that were a little out of the ordinary, which others in the trade were not making. This Samuel set out to do.

Before we continue with the story of the Barton clock and watch business, we need to return to the religious thread, for this also weaves through life in Barton, intertwined with the clockmaking. Samuel preached his first sermon there in August 1777, which, it is said, "was warmly received". Two years later, he became co-pastor with his father and ministered for 37 years. We are fortunate that both church and clockmaking accounts have survived and are available to read at the Record Office for Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland, currently at Wigston but due to move sometime to a site adjacent to County Hall, Glenfield. The price of paper being significant at the time, both accounts were kept in the same book, with spare space being used up wherever possible! This can make chronological interpretation difficult. You also have to understand which records you're reading – on one side of a page may be a clock part supplied to "Mr Quarles, Ravenstone, supposing it for Molly Brewin, £3:15s", whilst on the other it may say "Mary Smith dismissed for adultery" or "Baptised Jno Quarle". Now I have reason to believe that the first of these names should actually have been "Mr Quail, Ravenstone" and the last was "John Quail", who was baptised. These are respectively my great x6 grandfather and my great x5 grandfather. Molly Brewin may be my great x7 grandmother, but I'm not sure about that. I'm not admitting to any of my ancestors being dismissed for adultery, although that is down to my ignorance, not that I have proved that they weren't!



A Barton clock in a private home



Samuel's "Masterpiece"

My great x6 grandparents, Edward Quail and his wife Elizabeth (née Brewin) of Ravenstone, were baptised as adults at Barton on 26th March 1789. This would have been in the Old Chapel. The New Chapel that stands in Barton today is a much grander affair and was built in 1841.



The Old Chapel at Barton

I think Edward and Elizabeth must have been good friends with Samuel, not merely members of his congregation, as the minute book records that on at least one occasion, Samuel received "potaters" from Edward.

In 1790, Samuel completed what he himself called his "masterpiece". The clock played 65 tunes on 19 bells and wires. It could sound two violins, a violencello, a German Flute and three vocalists. The vocalists would beat time to the music and the three musicians would appear to play their instruments. It had 4 chime barrels and a model boy and girl who would dance to the music. There was also a hand that pointed to the days of the week and it would select a new tune at midday and midnight. The customer for whom this marvel was designed was the Rev. William Severn of Hinckley.

Samuel lived to the ripe old age of 97 and when he died in 1812, he was given the special honour of being buried *inside* the Barton chapel.

Sources: "The Deacon Family of Leicestershire Clockmakers" by P.A. Hewitt and W. John Thornton, pub. The Antiquarian Horological Society, 2008

"Historic Memorials of Barton and Melbourne General Baptist Churches" by J.R. Godfrey, pub. Buck, Winks & Son, 1891, available to read at the Record Office for Leicester, Leics. and Rutland (ROLLR)

Account Ledger of Samuel Deacon, ROLLR ref: 9D51/1/5

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Remembering Bill Hobill

I first met Bill Hobill almost 40 years ago. We had just moved in to Gullet Lane and had often walked up the lane, having previously lived in another part of the village. When walking through the farm to access the fields beyond, Bill was often about, always dressed in his immaculate tweed hacking jacket, plus fours and a tweed cap. Invariably, Bill had a pair of binoculars around his neck so that he could see his fields and make sure that all was well with the cattle. Over the years, we often chatted to him about life in the village and about Fanny Porter, who had previously owned our house for many years. He told us that he had Mrs Porter's rocking chair in his kitchen. Bill asked us if we had any connections to the village and when I told him that my great grandfather was Albert Davey the village builder around the turn of the century, Bill said "Oh, I remember 'Bert Davey", and took us into the yard by his backdoor and pointed to a manhole cover. Yes, it said Albert Davey builder! I didn't ask him if my great grandfather had built Windyridge, his bungalow in the farm yard, but maybe he didn't know. We have lots of memories taking our daughters up to the farm to see the cows with new calves. At the time, it was a very busy working farm. On one occasion, we actually found a cow in our garden. It must have strayed from its field, walked down the lane and ended up on our lawn. I remember ringing Bill and asking "Have you lost a cow?". They quickly came down and walked the cow back up the lane; the cow itself was very content just munching on our lawn. The milk tanker came up and down the road every day, often at quite a speed, but those days are now gone and unfortunately now it is Amazon packages and builders' lorries.

I became very interested in genealogy when our eldest daughter did a project in her last year at Kirby Muxloe Primary School. They were asked to produce a booklet and a family tree diagram. We went to see my paternal grandmother to find out more about our Kirby Muxloe family. I had in the past bought several of Jonathan Wilshire's books in W.H. Smith and I started to think that this was actually very interesting. As a teenager I felt my family was very boring, as much of it centred around Ratby and Kirby Muxloe, so no exotic ancestors for me, just plain old boring Leicestershire ones. But now, my interest in genealogy began to emerge.

Fast forward to 2008 when our Local History Group was formed. When I attended the inaugural meeting, my interest grew. Someone mentioned the bombing of the village and the idea of interviewing people who lived through that time was very appealing. Bill Hobill was one of my first interviewees. He invited me into his sitting room where a coal fire had been freshly stoked, we sat down and he began to recount his memories. I soon began to realise that Bill was a collector of many things - clocks, coins and newspaper clippings, relating to the village. He had clippings going back to 1945, all in a pile on a small side table. I was very lucky, as he allowed me to take the clippings home and scan them before returning them to his table. Bill also found some old interesting photos, which I also took home and scanned. The main thing I remember happened after I had visited a few times and we were talking about the bombing. Suddenly, he opened a drawer in a cabinet beside his chair. First, he took out a Special Constable's arm band that had belonged to his father in WWII. Then, a WWII metal earplug followed, and finally a small square of parachute silk from 1940.



Bill delivering milk on the Queen's Silver Jubilee in 1977

He told me that the day after the bombing, he and his friends cycled up Blood's Hill and into the fields to the area where some of the High Explosive bombs had dropped. They picked up bits of shrapnel and anything else that looked as if it might be of interest to other boys. His piece of parachute silk must have come from the village as the parachute bombs only landed on and near to the Free Church. As boys, they all traded their bits of string, rope, shrapnel and silk. Quite a lucrative trade, he said! Bill also told me of the two German planes that crashed landed in the field behind the farm. I think most of the wreckage is still there, buried beneath the ground. During WWII, Bill and his family were living at Grange Farm, Leicester Forest East. He described the continuous circling of pilot training planes over the area. They came from Braunstone Aerodrome, which was used for pilot training during WWII. There were often as many as 25 planes in the air, usually Tiger Moths. He spoke of frequently seeing planes landing short of the airfield and ending up in a hedge, and also of planes landing too fast, hitting the ground and then bouncing back about 12 feet into the air, before finally coming to rest back on the airstrip. After the war had ended, some young pilots, who were still stationed at Braunstone and had some spare time, offered to take youngsters such as Bill and his friends for a ride in an aeroplane around the training circuit! They cost 10/- a time!

After this and some more interviews, and conducting additional research, suddenly what had started out as a pamphlet became a 48 page booklet entitled "Kirby Muxloe - The most bombed village in England". The book was printed and sold out very quickly. We were even featured in the Leicester Mercury and Radio Leicester; it was all very exciting. Bill sent me a lovely letter upon receipt of his book to say that it had brought back many memories - I still have the letter today.

The last time I saw Bill, before he became ill, I went up to visit him and he was there with his group of gentlemen friends, all about the same age. They had known each other since childhood. Bill's housekeeper had cooked a lovely lunch for them all and I went away leaving them to eat and reminisce about old times.

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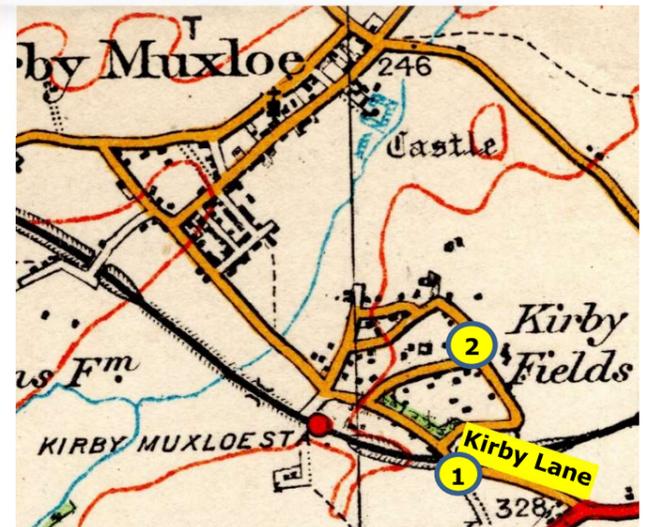
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Hi and welcome to our latest KMLHG Newsletter.

Mike Gould (Chair) Val Knott (Secretary)
Kate Traill (Treasurer) Judith Upton (Archivist)
Kerry Burdett

① We resume our stroll in 1945 by travelling back down the opposite side of Kirby Lane, until we arrive at the entrance to Forest Rise. At present, Forest Rise is the only road with houses in this area, but by 1960, the Masters and Titmus development of houses and bungalows will appear stretching up to the Hinckley Road. At the top of Forest Rise, which was originally a tinder track, we come to the large house that at present is owned by Mr Partridge. During WWII, Mr Partridge, who was originally Head A.R.P. Warden for Kirby Muxloe, was promoted to Divisional Warden for Leicester South. The house was probably built between 1861 and 1871 (more research needed). By 1891, the house was home to the retailer Joseph Johnson. Joseph was born in 1849 in Husband's Bosworth and after firstly taking employment as an apprentice at Adderley's store in Market Place, Leicester (later Marshall and Snelgrove), he went into partnership with a Mr Halsall and opened a fancy draper's store in Market Street, Leicester. After two years of trading, he became the sole proprietor. Now, trading as Joseph Johnson, it is a very popular up-market store. Market Street is in its heyday - a smart street with shops such as Leah Marks (ladies costumers) and George Tarratt (high-class jeweller). George established his first jeweller's shop here in 1913 and we will see the shop continue to thrive well into the 21st century. Leah Marks will eventually close and the premises named Leah Marks House will be taken over by Lumbers, another old established high-class jeweller. Joseph Johnson will be taken over by Fenwick of Newcastle in 1962 and eventually close down in 2017. In the 1920's, Forest Edge was occupied by George Ernest Ellis and in the late 1960's the house will be demolished and a housing development will be built on the site. The name will be Ellis Drive. At one time, the whole road from Station Road right up to the Red Cow was named "Blue Pots" Lane. The name is said to come from the blue chimney pots on the ale house named "Blue Potts", near to the railway line. The original station, opened in 1849, was also called "Blue Potts" but its name was changed in 1850, when the station was moved around 100 yards to the north. At present, there is a wall mounted letter box, with the name "Blue Pots" on it, at what is called Red Cow corner (formerly Sheen's corner). This will eventually be replaced by a pillar-box on the opposite side of the road and although originally the name will be removed, after protests the name "Blue Pots" will be reinstated. We think that Blue Pots farmhouse was up on Hinckley Road, somewhere near the Red Cow, but can anyone confirm this or tell us otherwise?

Our thanks go to KM Parish Council for financial assistance with the production of these newsletters.



② As we continue to stroll through our village of Kirby Muxloe in the year of 1945, it is now time to take a look at Kirby Fields. If we were to travel back to the mid 1870's, Kirby Fields as we know it did not exist. At the time, it was an area of pasture land which belonged to a Georgian Farmhouse named "Kirby Fields". In the 1841 census, we are told that the farmhouse was inhabited by George Hale and his wife Mary, George was a grazier and so it is likely that he farmed the land. By 1851, the house had been sold to Edward Pares Miles, a young man who had been a student at Worcester College, Oxford. Edward is listed as a "Landed Proprietor" (usually a gentleman who owns a farm or land and employs people to do the work). He had been born in Willoughby Waterless in 1818 and when he died in 1887, the house and surrounding land was sold to John Brady, a boot and shoe mercer from Leicester. The house name was changed to Lara House, with Kirby Fields becoming the name of the estate. The original Kirby Fields estate covered an area of 77 acres and in 1887, John Brady divided half of the land into 41 lots, ready to sell to businessmen who wished to move their families to live in a healthy place in the countryside. Leicester at this time was plagued by fog, especially around the Victoria Park area, and at the time many of the county's businessmen lived in and around Stoneygate, in close proximity to Victoria Park. Kirby Fields was an attractive alternative, and thus it grew. Sources include Jonathan Wilshire's "Old Kirby Muxloe".

JU

David and Gill Baron have contacted us about the bridge on Honeypot Lane, off Kirby Lane. Apparently, it was constructed in 1847 to reach accommodation works for James Goode, due to the severance of his land by the railway line, and to provide access for agricultural vehicles to Kirby Fields. James lived at Forest Ville, later called The Towers. The bridge was also known as "Goodie's Bridge" as well as being called the "bumpy bridge", given its undulating shape. It is now owned and maintained by Network Rail. Thank you, David & Gill, for this interesting snippet.

MG