Folklore in Royston & the surrounding area

Throughout the world people tell short stories and use particular sayings to explain features within their local landscape, the changing seasons, their everyday lives, and even to explain aspects of life that they do not understand. These tales, legends, traditions and sayings are a reflection of the beliefs and fears of our ancestors. This exhibition opens the lid on some of these local stories.

Traditional Hertfordshire

This exhibition forms part of the Heritage Lottery funded *Traditional Hertfordshire* project which is exploring the folklore and stories that make Hertfordshire unique. This year events and exhibitions are being held across the county to celebrate local legends and folklore, as well as traditional crafts and skills.

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Jack O’ Legs

*Jack O’ Legs* was a giant who is reputed to have lived in a cave near to the village of Weston.

He used to walk into town to talk to his friends, but was so tall that he had to talk to people through their first floor windows.

So Jack lay in wait for the bakers on *Jack’s Hill* (then an infamous vantage point from which to look out for rich travellers to rob!). He caught the bakers, got the flour off them and gave it to his friends in Weston. The bakers from Baldock weren’t happy about this so they caught him and took him to Baldock. They poked out his eyes and said they would hang him.

One year there was a pretty bad harvest for the farmers in Weston but the bakers from Baldock had plenty.

**Medieval farmers ploughing the land**

**Grain that Weston needed to make bread**

**Trying to get as much grain as possible from a bad harvest**
The bakers decided to grant Jack one last wish. Jack asked that he be pointed towards Weston and where his arrow landed he wanted to be buried. His wish was granted and he shot his arrow and hit Weston church tower, 3 miles away.

Jack’s grave is marked by 2 stones 14ft apart located just inside the churchyard, which can still be seen today. He is also remembered on the village sign in the middle of the village, where he is depicted shooting an arrow towards the church.
Puddingstones, sometimes also known as Breeding or Mother Stones are found all over Hertfordshire. They are formed from glacial gravel and pebbles cemented together with Calcium Carbonate.

One of these pudding stones can be found in Standon. These pudding stones as you can see in the picture, are made out of lots of little pebbles which have joined together to form one big stone lump, a little like raisins in Christmas pudding.

It has been said that if you take out one of the pebbles, another will grow back in its place.

These puddingstones in the past may have been used as sacred standing stones and may have been objects of pagan worship, as well as small pieces of them being kept and used as protective charms to ward off witches.

Within living memory a piece of Puddingstone was traditionally given to a bride and groom as a fertility symbol.
Beliefs

Within Hertfordshire and Cambridgeshire there are some strange beliefs when it comes to generalising events, here are just a few of them:

Millers, bakers & people who sell corn are deemed to be dishonest

If a church bell is rung after a wedding it is a bad omen for the couple.

If you pick Poppies, thunder will follow!!

If you see a hare run downhill, expect a fire!

Bakers cooking bread

Hares are symbols of bad luck

Where rosemary flourishes the wife is said to be in charge

A hive of bees must be told when there is a death in the owner’s family

Flourishing rosemary

A murdered persons’ blood is said to flow when touched by the guilty

Moss folk or wood wives are said to be female spirits who weave the moss which covers trees, for every tree felled, a wood wife dies so the legend says.
Good Luck

There are a few practices which have been said to grant good luck to those who complete them

‘Swearing on the Horns’ was practiced at inns in Ware. In this tradition, visitors to the inns had to take an oath to the landlord, which ended in the kissing of a set of horns or a pretty woman, which was meant to bring good luck to the sworn in individual!

Within Royston hot-cross buns were eaten in connection with goddess Diana who is the Roman goddess of hunting and wild animals.

In Ware there used to be a tradition were anyone was allowed to pasture their animals on common land between 12\textsuperscript{th} August, \textit{Lammas Day}, to 6\textsuperscript{th} April. This was granted after King Alfred’s victory over the Danish in 895 AD near Ware.
Health & Wellbeing

There are hundreds of traditional remedies and folklore tales surrounding cures for illness. Here are just a few:

Socks were wrapped around the throat to help cure a bad throat. Mmm smelly socks!!

Hag stones, or holed flints were hung in barns or with brasses on horse harnesses. They were said to ward off evil spirits and fight off diseases.

Fenmen reputedly carried moles forefeet in their pockets as a cure for Rheumatism!

A mixture of the blood of a lucky black cat’s tail, was said to fight off Shingles!

In a tale about Harpenden, raw meat is described as being rubbed on warts and then buried. As the meat rotted in the ground, the wort would gradually heal!

A 19th century cure for fever was powder made from skinned and dried male mole!

Take a live snail and rub its slime against a burn to treat it

Scraped Alabaster is supposed to be good for some disorders, so a figure of a knight (Lord Scales) in St. John’s Parish Church, Royston has been damaged over time by being scrapped.

To cure a Stye – mix onion or leek, wine and bull’s gall together, let it stand for 9 nights and strain it through a cloth, then apply at night with a feather. That’s going to be a bit pungent!

Best not to try any of these at home!!!
Tunnel Tales

Stories about hidden tunnels always spark people’s interest and Royston is no different. Over the decades, there have been many theories about tunnels, running between most of the town’s key buildings, and theories about the existence of additional Royston caves (after the discovery of the town’s unique stone carvings), but unfortunately, bar an ice house and a few air-raid shelters these claims are unfounded, though they still make great stories. Here a few other tunnel theories:

In Grantchester south of the church is the remains of a 15th century manor. From the cellar under the manor there is reputedly a tunnel which runs all the way to King’s College chapel in Cambridge, which was supposedly an escape route in the event of the plague.

There is also reputed to be a tunnel at the northern edge of Kingston Wood, which runs to the Church of All Saints & St. Andrew, Kingston 1.5 miles away.

Hatley Wilds is an isolated 18th century farm, north of the village of Hatley. There is a legend that from this farm, there is a tunnel which runs to St. Mary’s Church at Longstowe, 2 miles away.
The Blind fiddler of Anstey

A tunnel was said to run from Cave Gate, West of Anstey, for almost a mile to Anstey Castle, a Medieval keep, which once stood close to the parish church.

One day Blind George agreed to go into the tunnel for a bet as no one else dared to explore the tunnel.

Blind George took his dog and entered the tunnel at Cave Gate, playing his fiddle, as he went, so that those stood outside the tunnel walking above, could keep track of him. Once they reached the half way mark to the Castle, his fiddle playing suddenly stopped, and a horrific shriek and then silence followed.

The villagers rushed back to the Cave Gate and saw George’s dog running out of the tunnel howling, tailless, with all his hair singed off. Blind George was never seen again. After George didn’t leave the cave the villagers decided to block up the passage, so no one else could enter it ever again.
Today, Ashwell Springs is a site of special scientific interest. For centuries the springhead has also been considered sacred. In 2002, close to the wellhead, a metal detectorist called Alan Meek, was searching a field at Ashwell End, when he came across a hoard of metal items. The 30 or so items found, have been shown to have been an offering to the Celtic Goddess Senuna and were accompanied by a shattered figurine of the goddess herself.

Senuna is often pictured accompanied by an owl or armed with a spear and shield, suggesting that when the Romans invaded Britain they may have assimilated her into the cult of Minerva. Minerva was the Roman goddess of water, healing, warfare, crafts and wisdom, again usually depicted with a sacred owl, a symbol of wisdom, but also a harbinger of doom!
Local Sayings

Here are some sayings about the people of Hertfordshire and their surroundings:

“Hertfordshire Air” is air that is very healthy and invigorating

“Whomever rides a mare through Hertfordshire pays 2/3rds value to the air.”

“Hertfordshire Thick Heads” the people of Hertfordshire will come to no harm so long as they fall on their head, it also could mean Hertfordshire people are lacking in wit

“Ware and Wadesmill, worth all of London” - attributed to the rise of the malting industry that brought prosperity to these places

Hertfordshire is still known as “the county of opportunity”

“Hertfordshire Hedgehogs” Use to signify Hertfordshire people being bad neighbours, uneducated or having slow-moving ways??
Local Sayings

“A Hobby Lantern” this is the Hertfordshire name for a Will O’the Wisp, these are said to lead travellers from the paths into marshes.

“Hertfordshire Clubs and Clouted Shoon” this is about the rusticity of Hertfordshire yeomen and farmers. “Club” refers to a foolish person and “Clouted Shoon” refers to the shoes tipped with iron that the farmers from Hertfordshire wore.

“A Royston horse and a Cambridge Master of Arts gives way to no one” this refers to the fact that these horses which were heavy laden with malt which Royston was famous for, never moved out of the way.

“Hertfordshire Kindness” could refer to the custom of returning hospitality directly afterwards or suggest a reputation for having an unwillingness to spend money.
Witches
There were a number of suspected witches in this area.

Jane Wenham was the subject of one of the last witch trials in England in 1712. She lived in Walkern, near Stevenage for her whole life, and was accused of being a witch at the age of 70.

She was accused of bewitching John Chapman’s livestock as well as his farmhand. She went to trial, but was never condemned as being a witch.

There were also two people ducked using ducking stools after being accused of being witches who were from Baldock, but little else is known of their story.
Several names of suspected witches have been published in regard to Royston. When James I came to town the accounts state that the Royston townsfolk served up 2 witches for him!

The most well known suspected witches in Royston are thought to have been Innkeepers Christina and Alice Stokes (executed in 1604) and Johane Harrison and her daughter (executed in 1606). They were each said to have cast spells, bewitched individuals and have been the cause of several deaths, including that of their neighbours and reportedly a baby.

Within their houses human bones, a drawing of a human body and a drawing of a heart were said to have been found, these were taken as evidence of witch craft.

Johane admitted that she was a witch and was aided by two familiars one for spells against people and the other for spells against cattle. Many admissions of guilt in these types of cases, were often elicited as a result of torture.
Dick Turpin in Royston

Dick Turpin is a name that many people recognise for being a highway man. Many towns and cities in this country have stories related to him, and Royston is no different. He is said to have visited Royston regularly and stayed at an old Inn, known as The Hoops (which has long since been demolished).

The legend goes that Turpin had two similar horses which he used to his advantage to make it seem like he was innocent. After riding into town on one, he is said to have hidden that horse down a well in the yard of The Hoops and then run to his room and got into bed. When his pursuers got to Royston and demanded Turpin surrender he could deny having been out and was able to show them his “fresh” horse in the stables, enabling him to get away with his crimes.

A newspaper report on Dick Turpins Trial
Churches in Folklore

There are lots of folklore tales surrounding local churches.

Hertfordshire parish churches traditionally have no steeples because it is said that the devil would not allow them.

Most church steeples in Hertfordshire have the stunted *Hertfordshire Spike*.

At Kingston, Cambridge the parish church had to hide the church’s stained glass windows beneath the altar before Cromwell and his troops arrived. It has been said that the stained glass is still in its original hiding place.

There is also a story of Cromwell's horse causing a crack nearly all the way around the octagonal 13th century font bowl that is still within the church. The horse supposedly did the damage with its hoof.
In Steeple Morden the church of Saints Peter and Paul originally had a stone and brick spire. The original stone and brick spire fell in the 1620’s. It was believed that when the spire fell in the 1620’s, it went into the earth and formed a well on the other side of the road. Which is where the main well was located until 1936, when the village got running water.

The Church of St. George in Thriplow was originally supposed to be built in a meadow in the village but every time they tried to build it the stones ended up on top of the hill where the church was finally built. It was claimed at the time that the Devil was to blame for the movement of the stones.
Many of the houses in Hinxton have the Hinxton Hall Stag coat of arms on them from manorial times. It is said that when the stag hears the clock on the church strike midnight, it gets down and goes to the nearby river Cam to drink.

Miracle plays about the local legends and folklore were regularly held. One performed in Bassingbourn in 1511, involved people from 28 different parishes, including Royston.

At the Western end of Therfield Heath there are a series of ridges or Lynchets known as the Devil’s Hopscotch. It is said that the devil left behind thunderbolts and toenails, in the form of fossils such as Belemnites. Modern Geology obviously refutes these claims!

The Pasque Flowers are an iconic part of Therfield Heath that can still be seen today, when they flower in April. The saying goes that Pasque flowers “thrive where Viking blood has been spilt.”
Unexplained Hauntings!

In Harston, the tale is told that a ghostly apparition known as the White Lady haunts the area between Mill Road and The Queen’s Head pub and is seen to throw herself off the bridge and into River Cam.

There was also a tale of a headless gliding apparition noiselessly moving around Ashwell Church.

Between Whittlesford and Thriplow there are some burial mounds, known as Chronicle Hill. In 1818 some of these mounds were levelled and a few human skeletons were found. The story is that one of the labourers stole one of the skulls and took it home. Supposedly a headless skeleton knocked that night on his door asking for his skull back.

A number of stories surround Bygrave Hall – one tells of a pedlar who was murdered and beheaded, and then was said to have come back into the village as a headless apparition in 1739.

The hall is also said to be haunted by a murdered mother and her child.
Haunted Royston

Over the years, many books and TV programmes have covered the ghostly goings on in Royston. The old premises of Henrick’s Hairdressers (now Abbot’s Travel) on Fish Hill had a number of incidents over the years of items being thrown or falling off the walls, electrical problems and strange noises, believed to be linked to the spirit of a troubled man. When ghost hunters checked it out they noted strange electrical energy in the building and a child’s voice was recorded saying “help me, help me.” The shop featured in Ghostly Tales of the Unexpected and Derek Acorah’s Ghost Towns.

The Museum itself is said to be haunted. In Victorian times the Museum building was a Congregational Church schoolroom. The story reported in the Crow newspaper in 1900 describes how the caretaker’s wife went to prepare dinner for the schoolroom children. When she failed to reappear, somebody went to look for her and found her dead at the bottom of the cellar steps. According to some, she haunts the Museum.

A Lady in Grey is thought to haunt the Tudor Room, upstairs at Curwen’s Solicitors in the High Street. In the 1970s when it was a hairdressers, a pile of sawn up bones were reportedly found under the floorboards! At one of the other shops in the High Street, a man known as Grosvenor Elston was thought to haunt the shop, having committed suicide in the cellar there.

There are also stories of ghostly happenings at the Manor House (Wetherspoons), Banyers House, Angel Pavement, Adhoc (the old Magistrate’s Court) and the Conservative Club.
Haunted Hinxworth Place

Hinxworth Manor Hall dates from 1390 and was home to a group of Cistercian monks. One of the monks, it is said, was bricked up alive in the walls. There was reputed to be a plaque dating from 1770 (that has since been lost), which said: "This is the place where a monk was buried alive in the wall. His cries can sometimes be heard at midnight."

Another reported haunting at Hinxworth Place is the sound of a baby crying, thump noises and screams. The unfortunate tale is that a nursemaid accidentally killed a young boy.

The child had dressed up as a ghost to give the nursemaid a fright, which he did. The frightened nursemaid struck the "ghost" and he fell down the stairs. The noise woke the baby, who started crying and other servants rushed to the scene, they attempted to revive the boy but he was already dead. These events are said to replay in the Autumn especially on a stormy night.
Local Legends

The Sandon Hero
Across Nastley Green, up a green lane there was a moated space known as Woodley Yards. An old legend says that there was formerly a mansion there, which robbers wanted to steal from. A boy overheard their plan and stopped the robbery by reporting them. The boy was later captured by the robbers who tore the skin from his fingers and toe ends.

The Sandon Tragedy
A man journeying with his man servant dreamt about the death of his wife, shocked he woke up and rushed home to find his wife and two children murdered. A page boy had reportedly hidden away and recounted the story of their deaths to him. An inscription at the church reads – man and wife, John and Elizabeth and their two children died 1st August 1480 / 1483.

Nuthampstead Zodiac
First described by the occult writer Nigel Pinnick in 1968, it is said that shapes in the landscape form signs of the zodiac, linking local mystical sites. Based on the earlier idea of the Glastonbury Zodiac, he used maps and aerial photographs, to identify symbolic figures in the patterns of the lanes, field boundaries and streams. Often there was a bit of artistic licence used, as they included modern landscape features in their drawings, which wouldn’t have been there pre-19th century.

Royston Cave
Our own Royston Cave is shrouded in mystery as to how it was created and what its purpose was. Many believe in a Knights Templar connection and a number of mystical theories around the ley lines (paths of energy) there, though in reality there is little if any archaeological or historical evidence to support many of the theories. To find out more about the cave, you can go on one of their guided tours. Cave leaflets can be collected at the Museum shop desk.
More ghostly tales from Thriplow have recently been collected by Shirley Wittering, Archivist of the Thriplow Society. One of the earliest tales she found in the archives was of a White Lady who so frightened men going to the chapel in Balls Lane in 1770, that they used to travel to church in groups to give them courage!

A white bear reportedly kept at the Bury in Cromwell’s time, was apparently forgotten and starved to death, and a ghostly version ended up roaming the top drive at night. Tales are also told that a female apparition in rustling silk used to walk down the front staircase of the Bury at midnight. She was supposed to have been imprisoned in the attics and come out to haunt her tormentors. There is reportedly also a mark on the stairs like dried blood! Many local people still tell ghostly tales about the Bury.

There are also ghostly tales about Bacon’s Farm, Thriplow, where a lady was seen walking through a sitting room wall, and a man’s arm with heavy gauntlet and outstretched fingers was said to have come out of the cupboard towards its modern day resident!!
Litlington and Robin Hood

On the road between Litlington and Royston, just south of the village is Limlow Hill. Up until 1888 there stood a burial mound there that was known as Limlow or Limbury.

There is a legend that says that it was from this burial mound that Robin Hood fired his arrow.

There are two versions of this story with the arrow landing in different locations, which shows how stories evolve over time.

The earlier story says that the arrow fell on Ermine street near where the tollgate used to stand, 1½ miles away on a spot marked by an ancient hawthorn bush.

The second story tells that the arrow landed in the village chalk pit (now disused), a few 100 metres away, and the arrow then grew into a thorn tree.
Harvest

In South Cambridgeshire at the end of harvest there was a ceremonial bringing of the last load or *Horkey*. The lord and his queen, who could be a man dressed as a woman or a girl with a wreath of corn, would ride into the village on a Horkey cart. The Queen was originally a puppet which was made of corn but was replaced by a human queen by the 19th century!

Whilst this parade is going on the villagers was shout “Horkey home! Now water!” and would throw water over the cart which may originally have meant to encourage rain to fall on the next harvest.

In the 19th a new tradition of creating *Corn Dollies*, there are two types of corn dollies named after Cambridgeshire, the Cambridgeshire hand bell and the Cambridgeshire umbrella

Corn dollies were made of the last corn to be cut and were kept until sowing the seed the next year when the dolly was broken up and sowed with the new seed to give good luck to the harvest
Folk Songs

This is a local version of the Guy Fawkes rhyme that was chanted in November by children who took an effigy of Guy around the streets asking for coins:

Remember, remember the fifth of November,
   The gunpowder treason and plot;
There is no reason why gunpowder treason
   Should ever be forgot.
Guy, guy, stick him on high,
Hang him on a gibbet and there let him die.
   Speak, man, speak; that shall be done;
He has oil on his head and tar on his bum.
   Now give us something to buy a match
   So we can fire his greasy thatch.
Ladies and gentlemen you’ll never get fat
   If you don’t put a penny in the old guy’s hat.
If you haven’t a penny a halfpenny will do;
   If you haven’t a halfpenny, God bless you.
Holler, boys, holler, make the bells ring;
Holler, boys, holler and God save the Queen.
   Hip, hip, hooray, for gunpowder plot
   Will never be forgot,
So long as frumenty’s cooked in a pot.
So holler, boys, holler, Old Guy will burn bright
   Time men get tight on Bonfire Night.