

The Myths & Legends of Shropshire



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S1 - All for a cake

This is the story of two old folk, Simon and Nellie, from Longden Coleham. Whilst their cupboard wasn't exactly bare, they had very few ingredients for their Easter cake. But the recipe wasn't the main bone of contention. It was how to cook it. Nellie insisted baking was the only way but Simon, always an old skinflint, wanted to boil it. A great row broke out until in the end they made their peace and decided to boil and bake the cake - hence inventing the Simon And Nellie (or, for short, **Simmel**) Cake.

S2 - The Golden Arrow.

Every Palm Sunday on Pontesford Hill and Earl's Hill the people of Pontesbury go in search of the Golden Arrow. Ranging over the hills they don't really know exactly what they seek. Some believe it to be one of Robin Hood's lost trophies, others that it is a great treasure left by giants; and others that it is an arrow lost by a King during a battle in 661AD. Still others believe it to be a miraculous shaft of sunlight which joins together the true Celtic peoples by, on that day only, shining down all the valleys that connect Shropshire with Cornwall.

The Golden Arrow was also the name of one of Mary Webb's books, well worth re-examination or even a first read if you have not come across it. Mary Webb was a local girl and lived in Pontesbury and later on Lyth Hill.

S3 - Wild Edric and the Tappers

Wild Edric is based on a true life Saxon Lord of this area who protected his lands and people when the Normans invaded after 1066. When marauders came he lured them down into bogs and burnt and choked them in heather fires. Alas, for some reason he made peace with them eventually and alienated a good few of the locals, who still haven't altogether forgiven him.

Wild Edric guards the Stiperstones like a greying spectre. He is still here today. Whenever freedom is threatened you'll see him. He is seen riding the Stiperstones in times of national emergencies.

If you hear a tapping in one of the many old lead mines beneath your feet it might be Edric and his men roaming the mines looking for a way out. They will never find one until Conover Hall is restored to Edric's descendants, the rightful rulers of this district.

Another story tells of him finding and then losing a fairy bride, the Lady Godda. He has spent the rest of his extremely long life mourning her loss.

S4 - The Devil's Chair.

Here are a few versions – take your pick!

- A coven of witches meet on the Devil's Chair under the chairmanship of the devil himself. Whenever the mist comes down over the Chair they are said to be in session.
- The devil was walking along the top of the Stiperstones one day with an apron full of stones, which he aimed to use to fill up the valley called Hell's Gutter. The weather was hot and he got tired so he tipped out the stones and used them as a chair. If you go there today you can still smell the brimstone on the rocks.
- The devil hated the god-fearing, well-behaved people of Shropshire so much that he brought stones to put on the Stiperstones' back. Eventually he hoped he would have dumped so many rocks that their weight would make the county sink into the sea. As you can see he was unsuccessful.
- One day a giantess came and gathered up all the rocks on the Stiperstones into her apron to take them home to build herself a rockery. However, the devil saw what she was up to and crept up behind her and cut her apron strings. The rocks tumbled down to form the Devil's Chair, and the giantess was never seen in these parts again.

There is also another story that placed the devil's home in this area. It is about a very bad tailor called Slashrags. After cheating some of his customers with his shoddy workmanship he met the devil at Scattered Rocks near to his Chair. He didn't recognise Beelzebub and offered to make him a suit. The devil, however, recognised the sinful tailor and said he would take the suit and Slashrags' soul in one week's time. Slashrags was sent off to the Vicar by his wife and resolved to repent in return for the clergyman's aid in dealing with the devil. On the appointed day, Slashrags delivered the suit, with which the devil wasn't best pleased. Just as Satan was about to despatch Slashrags, up popped the Vicar reciting prayers for all his worth and the last that was seen of the devil was a puff of smoke.

S5 - Mitchell's Fold.

The people of Priest Weston were starving when Providence brought them a magic cow. It could go on milking and never run dry. Alas, the wicked witch Mitchell stole it and took it to her fold on Stapeley Hill. She milked that cow into a bucket full of holes. She aimed to milk it until it dried or died. The cow had other ideas. It kicked Mitchell off her stool and into the milky bog the fold had become. The cow jumped the hills and never came back, but no one starved with all that milk and cheese Providence had already provided.

S6 - *The Treasure of Stokesay.*

There were two giants of Stokesay who shared a box of treasure. One lived at Hilltop one side of the castle where the chest was hidden, the other high atop the opposite hill at Norton Camp. When one giant wanted to count his gold coins he would call to his friend to throw him the key. One day the throw was short and the key fell with a splash into Stokesay Castle moat. They searched but never found the key. Their treasure is still under the castle, guarded by the giant's ravens.

S7 - *Robin Hood's Arrow*

Even Robin Hood had his bad days. That arrow atop the chapel at St Laurence's Church is one of his. Some say he had a score to settle with the clergy, others that it was a challenge. He climbed to the top of that great tree on the mound out at Bromfield and let loose his shaft. He wanted to hit the weathercock up on the steeple but his arrow fell short. He said he wouldn't miss a second time and went to fetch his arrow but it was stuck fast. He never came to Ludlow again. It reminded him his aim wasn't always true.

S8 - *The Flying Prince.*

In 1139 during the Civil War between King Steven and his cousin, Maude, the King laid siege to Ludlow Castle. Prince Henry of Scotland aided King Stephen and, while the two were walking close by the Gatehouse discussing tactics, a grappling hook was flung down and snared in the cloak of the young Scottish Prince. Like a hooked fish he was being hauled up and stolen away. But quick as lightning King Steven jumped up and cut the rope, freeing the Prince. Although there was great rejoicing, it did not last, because Ludlow Castle was not taken.

S9 - *And The Water Gushed Forth (St. Milburga's Well, Stoke St. Milborough)*

St. Milburga was on her way from her nunnery at Much Wenlock to the church at Godstoke when robbers set her upon. She ran her horse straight at them and managed to get away. But as she neared her goal the horse stumbled and she was thrown to the ground cracking her head on a rock. Although unconscious her divinity allowed her to raise her hand to command her chestnut steed. It brought its hoof down on a boulder and healing waters gushed forth.

S10 - *A Hiding Place.*

When the Romans invaded Britain the tribal leader Caratacus fought tooth and nail to save his kingdom. He was finally surrounded in an impossible position in his hill fort high atop Caer Caradoc. The Romans believed they could take him prisoner but he outwitted them even in his hour of defeat by hiding in a cave on the steepest face of the hill. He disguised the cave mouth with bracken. The Romans never found him and thought his escape had been brought about by a miracle. The cave is known as Caratacus' Hole.

Other stories suggest the cave as the hiding place for Diancecht's Magic Cauldron, which restored battle-scarred heroes to life. In one story King Arthur discovered the Cauldron in the cave as part of his trials before becoming King. Another version suggests that Arthur in fact found the Holy Grail hidden in the cave.

A story about a godless city at Bomere Pool has the Cave as the source of a purging fire and a tidal wave, which enveloped the city, killing all the sinners within.

S11 - The White Lady

The White Lady is a young woman who haunts Longnor Hall. Jilted on her wedding eve, she fled the ball held in her honour and drowned herself in Black Pool. Although the pool has been filled in she still haunts the house and grounds. Whenever a dance is held she tries to join in and partner an eligible young man. Alas when the young men reach out to take her in their arms there is nothing for them to grasp.

S12 - the Bloody Hand

Back in the times of Queen Elizabeth I, the Lord of the Manor at Condover fell victim to his evil son, Sir Harry Knevett. However, Harry didn't make a clean job of murdering his father, who stumbled off down the stairs trying to escape his son, leaving a bloody hand print on the wall as he went.

Sir Harry very nearly got away with his heinous crime, blaming John Viam, his father's servant. Viam faced trial and was executed at the gallows, but in his last words cursed all future owners of Condover Hall, saying no son would ever succeed his father there.

About ten years' later a popular young lawyer, one Thomas Owen, took up the case and studied the evidence and found the real truth. This time the rightful murderer faced the gallows, but this was not to be the end of the curse.

As a reward Thomas Owen was given Condover Hall but never had a son to inherit the Hall from him.

And no one could ever wash away that bloody hand print left on the wall by the stairs. Finally the plaster had to be chipped away and replaced.

S13 - The Disappearing City

It's said that Arthur's Camelot was built at Wroxeter after the Romans left, but by the year 600 the city was empty. The city was left whole but quickly disappeared. Local people blame the sparrows. Great flocks of the birds came; clouds roosted on the roofs of the city. They pecked at the tiles and stabbed at the mortar. By morning all that was left of the city was the little you can see today.

S14 - The Treasure Hunter

Betty “Mother” Fox, the wheelwright’s wife from Wroxeter, was an ardent treasure hunter. One night she dreamt of a crock of silver by the side of the lane from Wroxeter to Uckington. It was buried in the verge by an elder bush. She woke her husband, but you can imagine what he said. Every time she tried to sleep she had the same dream. So, at 3.00 am, she got dressed and fetched her spade. She went to the spot and started digging. Soon her spade hit something, it was a Roman pot, and as it cracked open 400 coins tumbled out.

S15 - The Giant and The Cobbler

The Mayor of Shrewsbury had made a Welsh Giant so angry that he stomped across the border with a huge spade of earth to block the Severn and flood Shrewsbury. The Giant was so mad he walked straight past and ended up at Wellington, where he met a cobbler. The cobbler didn’t want to lose his Shrewsbury customers, so he said the holed shoes in his bag had been worn out walking from Shrewsbury, it was so far away. The despondent giant dumped the earth right there, and that’s the Wrekin.

S16 - The Needle’s Eye and the Raven’s Bowl

Two exiled giants decided to build a new home near Wellington. They piled up soil to make a massive hill (the Wrekin) leaving a great long trench which filled with water and formed the River Severn. When the hill was finished they argued over who should live there. One giant raised his spade to hit his brother, but up flew a raven who pecked his eyes, so he missed. The spade came down hard and left a cleft in the rock (this feature is now called the Needles Eye).

The raven’s attack had caused the giant to shed a massive tear, which burned into the hill forming a pool (nowadays this is known as ‘the Raven’s Bowl’). No matter how hot the summer, it never dries up.

The other giant knocked his brother over and piled earth over him to imprison him making another hill (the Ercall). At dead of night you can still hear the trapped giant moaning, or so local people say!

S17 - The Mermaid of Child’s Ercall

Two men spotted a mermaid in a pool at Child’s Ercall, who offered them a great lump of gold if they came into the pool to collect it. Alas, when one of them saw the size of the nugget he swore. The mermaid, in horror, took her gold back to the depths.

S18 - The Fox's Knob

Reynard was old, he knew it was only a matter of time until the hunt ran him down and stole his brush. That last day he lured the hounds on, and led them a merry dance. He was tiring when he saw Hawkstone ahead and quickly decided what his future should be. He ran straight for the hilltop. Right to the edge and over, he ran. The huntsmen would have no pleasure from this kill. Falling, he took some of the hounds with him. Reynard had the last laugh!

S19 - Killyards

Two giants, Tarquin and Tarquinius, lived in the Red Castle at Hawkstone Park (the ruined tower 'Giants Well' is named after them). Their brother, Sir Caradus, was a great fighter. He used to tour the country kidnapping knights and holding them for ransom. When King Arthur's knights, Sir Lancelot and Sir Tristram, heard he had captured their fellow round-tableer Sir Gawain, they decided to take action. When they caught up with Sir Caradus at Killyards, near Weston Church, Sir Lancelot and Sir Caradus set to in an epic battle in which, after much time and effort, Sir Lancelot came out triumphant and Sir Gawain was freed.

S20 - The Bells of Colemere

At Colemere the villagers decided to build a church in honour of their saint. However much of the church they managed to build in a day, they would return to nothing in the morning. It seemed to disappear into the lake. They tried to complete the whole building in a day, bell tower and all, thinking this would protect it. But alas no, by morning it had gone. But ever since, on the Saint's day, if you listen carefully you can hear the bells toll beneath the water.

In another version of this story a church stood by the side of Colemere and when Oliver Cromwell's army passed by they ransacked the church, pulled it to the ground and threw the bells into the water. The bells ring as a reminder of the sins of the awful Mr. Cromwell.

S21 - Not A Drop More

Where today you see the mighty lake of Ellesmere once was the cottage of a little old lady, Mrs. Ellis. She had a well of the sweetest water in her garden. She was very flattered when her neighbours came along asking for a little taste but, after a drought, when they started coming along with buckets pleading for the water she put her foot down. "Not a Drop More" she said and, although there was far too much water for her alone she kept to her word. Gradually the spring welled up and submerged the selfish old lady and her cottage, leaving the lake 'Mrs. Ellis' Mere - or Ellesmere.

S22 - Robin Hood: A Shropshire Lad?

When Fulk Fitz Warine II was a young man he was brought up in the Court of Henry II with the King's sons, Richard and John. Fulk was of an age with John but one could never have called them close friends, they were always arguing. One day after Fulk caught John cheating at chess, John threw the board and players at Fulk who retaliated by kicking John across the room and into the wall, not a way to treat a Prince! John rushed to his father, telling him he must punish Fulk. Wise King Henry would have none of this. He told John that Fulk had surely been provoked and punished John for coming telling tales. From this point the die was cast and Fulk and John were mortal enemies.

Fulk inherited Whittington Castle in 1197. When John came to the throne in 1199 he ousted Fulk from his baronial seat and set Sir Morys of Hawkstone in his place. Fulk became an outlaw and roamed the country robbing the rich to give to the poor with one aim in his mind, to get his rightful castle back.

In one notable episode Fulk and his band of outlaws managed to capture King John while he was out hunting in Windsor Forest. John promised to give Fulk Whittington Castle back if he let him go. However, after his release, John reneged on his promise and Fulk became all the more determined. Fulk became a great favourite of the people and amassed a great band of followers. Eventually he led his band back to his Castle at Whittington and laid it to siege and captured it back from Sir Morys. Fulk was so popular that John could do nothing but pardon him. Fulk remained a thorn in John's flesh and was one of the nobles in the baronial revolt that led to John signing the Magna Carta.

Does the story seem familiar? – yes indeed. Substitute the name 'Robin Hood' for Fulk and that of the Sheriff of Nottingham for Sir Morys and you have it. Robin Hood was indeed a Shropshire Lad.

S23 - Gogmagog and his Giants

The land around old Oswestry was once ruled by King Gogmagog and his fellow giants. They were not a friendly bunch and terrorised the ordinary people thereabouts. Some knights came from Troy and one of their number, Sir Corinius, managed to kill King Gogmagog and return old Oswestry to good King Bran.

No sooner had King Bran rebuilt the hillfort when an evil spirit entered Gogmagog's corpse and destroyed the fort again. At this point our hero Payn Peveril enters the story. Arming himself only with a cross, Payn attacked the evil one. The fiend pleaded for mercy and promised to help Payn steal the giants' buried treasure of golden animals.

Payn and the spirit laid in wait until the giants came to dig up their treasure. The evil spirit spoke through the lips of a golden bull from the hoard. He warned the giants that they had no future but death if they stayed in the area. Justly alarmed, the giants fled. The evil spirit vanished and Payn took the treasure and buried Gogmagog's body in the hole. King Bran rewarded Payn with the rule of the area.

S24 - St. Oswald's Well

In 682 King Oswald of Northumbria lost a battle to King Penda and his dismembered body was hung from a tree. An eagle tried to fly off with one of Oswald's arms, but dropped it. Where it fell a spring burst forth. The name 'Oswestry' is a corruption of 'Oswald's tree'.

S25 - St. Winifred's Well

St. Winifred, whose body was brought to Shrewsbury Abbey as a holy relic to encourage a steady flow of pilgrims, was in fact a Welsh saint from the little village of Gwtherin.

When a young lady, Winifred fought off the advances of a Welsh chieftain, Caradoc. Plainly out of temper, Caradoc sliced off her head with his sword. But Winifred's uncle, St. Bruno, simply picked up her head and placed it back on her body and miraculously brought her back to life. Caradoc paid for his crime as the earth opened and swallowed him up. Winifred devoted the rest of her life to the Church and at the spot where her head fell a spring arose with healing powers, now named Holywell.

However our St. Winifred's Well dates many years later when the Brothers from Shrewsbury Abbey went to disinter Winifred's bones to take them back to their monastery as a relic. Halfway home they stopped overnight here at Woolston. By morning, the power of Winifred's bones had caused another spring to rise. It is fabled to have great healing properties too.

S26 - Robin Hood's Chair

Long ago a stone circle used to stand on Crig Hill, near West Felton. Grug Hill is the best candidate to be Crig Hill, the stone circle has long since been destroyed. The monument was known as Robin Hood's Chair, although it was a Stone Age site which must have long pre-dated the outlaw. However, it is just one more clue fixing Robin Hood to Shropshire. As mentioned earlier, Fulk Fitz Warine from nearby Whittington Castle is the best historical candidate to have been the real man behind the story.

S27 - Humphrey Kynaston

Humphrey Kynaston was a young man of noble descent with a big future ahead of him until he murdered a man and was forced into the trade of a highwayman. He set up home in this cave on Nesscliffe Hill to avoid the forces of law and order. In the tradition of his predecessor, Fulk Fitz Warine or Robin Hood, he stole from the rich and gave to the poor, making himself a great favourite with the common people. Kynaston was never caught and was pardoned in 1516 and retired to Welshpool

S28 - Beelzebub's Massive Leap.

Humphrey Kynaston had a massive black horse called Beelzebub. Local people thought it to be the devil in disguise and capable of black magic. To conceal his course Kynaston had Beelzebub's horseshoes fitted backwards and still the animal was capable of marvellous feats. One day the Sheriff of Shropshire laid a trap to catch Kynaston at Montford Bridge. Then a wooden structure, the Sheriff removed the boards in the bridge and laid in wait for the outlaw. When Humphrey rode up to the bridge he didn't flinch. He simply dug his heels into Beelzebub's side and the horse leapt across the river below. Not a bad feat as the Severn, as you can see, is quite a width at that point.

Two sticks were stuck in a field next to the river the distance of that jump apart so people from miles around could come and walk up and down and marvel at Beelzebub, the flying horse's leap.



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