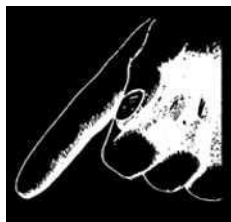




Just a short walk, but
the story lingers on

“Oswestory” is a short walking tour of the town of Oswestry telling many of the stories that make the town special along the way. There are links to recordings of live performances of some of the stories from storyteller Clive Hopwood, musician David Bannister and vocalist Annette Batty. Don’t rush your tour, enjoy the many other delights the town has to offer and make a day of it!

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“OSWESTORY”

A Mythstories story collection project

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Photographs by: Dez Quarréll

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Music by: David Bannister

Vocals by: Annette Batty

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Library.

This guide doesn't pretend to be an exhaustive record of all Oswestry's stories, but those you can read within its pages have been gleaned from a wide number of sources.

We have used Shropshire Folklore by Charlotte Sophia Burne as a major source, John Davies' History of Wales, many back-copies of Bygones from Oswestry Library as well as collecting reminiscences and stories from a good many townsfolk.

Our thanks go to all the people of Oswestry and the surrounding areas who helped us find the stories for "Oswestry".

A companion illustrative map of the walk, not to scale, is available at:-

<http://www.mythstories.com/oswestory-map.pdf>

Welcome to the “Oswestry”, a guided walk around the town of Oswestry relating some of its stories. More stories are available by clicking on SoundCloud links to ‘Oswestry’, a recording of a live performance by Storyteller Clive Hopwood, musician David Bannister with enchanting vocals from Annette Batty.

“Are all the tales true?” Well, like all works of history, we have never let the truth get in the way of a good story. Enjoy!!

We start and finish at Oswestry Visitor & Exhibition Centre at 2 Church Terrace and a beautiful historic building in its own right where Richard Holbache established Oswestry School in 1406.

Set off under the arch to your right as you leave the building and along the path which leads on to Upper Brook Street and bear right, you’ll see this on your way...



Many years ago a butcher had his shop here on Upper Brook Street and most say he must have been a rich man because of the amount of trade he did. He didn’t agree though; he said the more he sold the more the town’s dogs stole. He feared he would be ruined if the dogs of Oswestry weren’t brought under control.

But making a loud noise complaining never solved any problem and as the days wore on he became more and more agitated. Then one day, to add insult to injury, he witnessed with his own eyes the dog of the lawyer from Lower Brook Street sidle into his shop and grab a leg of mutton between its teeth and make an escape.

“Well,” he thought, “this calls for tact and diplomacy. Confront a lawyer and he’ll talk you around in circles and make you think you’re the one that’s in the wrong. This needs a gentle handling.”

After an hour or so cogitating the light came to his eyes and he pulled off his apron and called for his boy to mind the shop. Down the road he went and knocked at the lawyer’s door.

“Please, Sir, some advice” the butcher said. “A dog came to my shop this morning and carried off a leg of my finest mutton. Who is it that is responsible for this damage?”

“Why, Sir,” said the lawyer, “without a doubt it is the owner of the dog that should pay for this cut of meat.”

“Aha,” the butcher replied, “that dog, Sir, belonged to you.”

“Well, how much would you have me pay for this leg of mutton then?”

“Four and six-pence,” was the butcher’s triumphant retort.

“Very well then, butcher, I will trouble you for two and two-pence. My fee for the advice I have given is six shillings and eight-pence.”

Well, let that first story be a lesson to us all, but before we continue on our way another quick story to prove the inevitable doesn't always happen in Oswestry.

Away down the road Lower Brook Street becomes Victoria Road and it was there on the 10th September 1816 that a great poplar tree fell victim to a south west wind. A real panic arose, for the tree lay right across the road, blocking it so no horse or carriage could pass by. Men with axes and saws were sent for and soon arrived ready for long hours of toil.

Well the first thing you must do when clearing a tree is to get rid of the head, so they set to chopping and sawing away at the uppermost branches. There was a creak and a ground-shaking groan as the trunk was finally severed and to everyone's astonishment the tree began to move.

The workmen ran for a place of safety and they couldn't quite believe their eyes as the tree stood bolt upright again back in the great hole its roots had left.

The astounded onlookers timidly went to examine the righted tree and there was not so much as a mark in the sod at the base of the trunk to suggest the tree had been disturbed. People passed by that poplar tree somewhat nervously from that day on, but it went on to live a long and happy life thanks to that miraculous 'short back and sides'.

Carry along Upper Brook Street over the junction with Welsh Walls and turn next right into Oswald's Place and into Oswald's Well Lane. On your way, see if you can spot this oddity...

As you walk up Oswald's Well Lane on your left you will notice the school grounds of the Old Oswestry Grammar School.



In the first part of the 19th century the master of the school was Mr. Donne, a teacher who could engender real interest from his pupils. He kindled a love of ornithology in one young cockney pupil so strong that he went out bird watching in the town and came back with a real trophy.

He'd just been walking along by the market at the Cross when he'd seen the most ungainly of birds waddling along the cobbles. It was brightly coloured too with the strangest of beaks and its feet were webbed rather than clawed. He wasted no time in slipping off his jacket and throwing it over the strange specimen and wrapping it tight around its wings so it shouldn't fly.

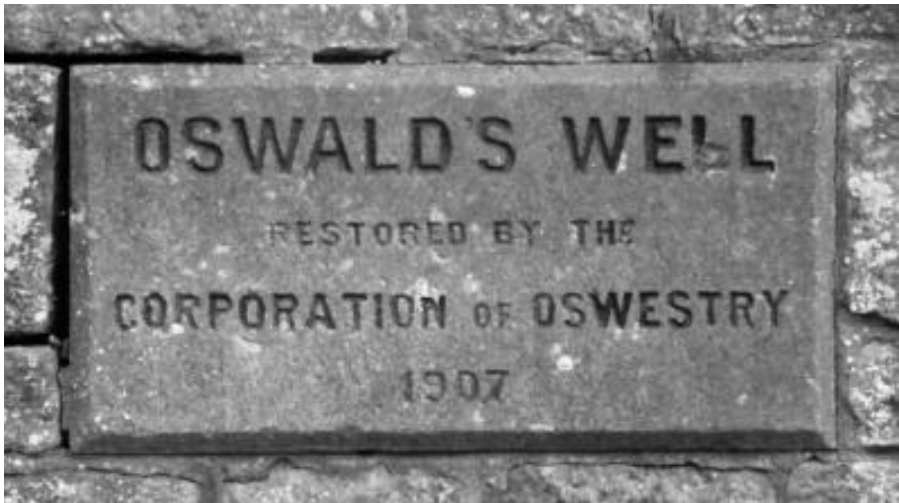
The boy rushed back to the school to show his friends and his illustrious mentor his prize. But on the great unveiling he was greeted by laughter, it was only a duck, something the city boy had never seen. And it wasn't very long before an incensed owner came after tracking down the schoolboy thief, ready to call for the law.

Well, of course, the noble Mr. Donne managed to calm all agitated feathers, including those of the duck, and put matters right. But he never did really live the incident down. From that day whenever he or his boys were out in the town they were followed, at a safe distance, by taunts from the wags of the streets.

*“Quack, quack, quack, quack,
Go to the Devil and never come back!”*

The urchins would shout at Donne’s Ducks.

You should now be approaching Oswald’s Well on your left. You’ll find this when you arrive...



It’s hard and hazardous work having a town named after you, but that pales into insignificance with the trials and tribulations you encounter when having a town, a well and a church all bearing your name. Oswald was definitely in for trouble in the year 641AD if only he knew it.

Click on this link to go a live recording of the story:-
<https://soundcloud.com/mythstories/intro-st-oswald>

or here's a short written version...

Oswald was a good upstanding Christian King with not a stain on his character and he couldn't abide his neighbours - heathen hoard of pagans that they were. so it was off to Maserfeld to fight the battle of Cogwy and cleanse the world of the infidel.

Well, Oswald of Northumbria may have been a young fit King, brave and fearless and ready for almost anything, but that day must have been an off-day because the one thing he wasn't ready for was the ageing King of the Mercians, Penda, who put paid to him with short shrift.

And like a skilled butcher after he'd despatched Oswald, Penda set about sorting him into prime cuts, and just in case any of his enemies had missed hearing the news, he impaled Oswald's body parts on a spiky hawthorn tree for all to see and marvel at. Yes, by all means raise an eyebrow, but believe me it was part of a day's work for a heathen King.

Much of the remains of Oswald were left upon the tree for a year or more, until Oswy, Oswald's brother, rescued what was left and took the pieces back to Northumbria for a decent burial. But a peckish eagle who had been roosting nearby spied a tasty arm and swooped upon it for his lunch. Obviously his beady eye misjudged just what a prize joint of meat Oswald's appendage was and, after a good few vigorous flaps and a great deal of effort expended, the great bird could hold on to his prize no longer and let it fall to the ground.

And yes, even after that foul day there was goodness and justice left in the world to reward a crusader bold; because where that over-ambitious lunch fell, up sprung a spring of miraculous healing waters.

The tree with the body parts was, of course, Oswald's Tree, to later become the site of the town of Oswestry. And the miraculous spring was named Oswald's Well to commemorate an arm well spent.

The church came a little later, because as you know we're not still heathens in this enlightened day and age but good Christian folk. Oswald's brother Oswy couldn't let such a sin go unpunished and took his revenge on Penda at the battle of Cai and after less than 15 years plans were already being made for a church in the new town of Oswestry to bear the name of that noble missionary of the faith, Oswald.

But before we leave, I'm sure everyone reading this tract has some minor ailment of which they would like to be rid. So now to effect a cure by the use of these wonderful waters. At one time there was a ladle provided, hung by a chain, now I'm afraid you'll have to bring your own, but there are a number of alternative methods of taking the waters - take your pick.

Either:

Go to the well at midnight.

Take one handful of water.

Drink part thereof while making a wish.

Toss the remainder at the stone at the back of the well.

(this is where a stone carving of Oswald's head, crown and all, was once situated - talk about throwing his blessings back into his face!)

If the water hits just the spot and no specks alight elsewhere, your wish will be granted.

Or:

Think up your wish.

Whisper the wish into a small hole by the keystone of the well arch.

(this method worked well for a young Oswestrian lady in 1880, others found themselves tumbling into the water in mid-wish)

Or:

Bathe your face underwater while making your wish.

(Care must be taken not to inhale)

Re-emerge into a better world.

Dry face.

Or:

Drop a stone on the green spot at the bottom of the well.

Wait for a jet of water to spurt up into the air.

(If your aim was true this should follow immediately, so don't wait too long)

Put your head under the water spout and make a wish.

Wait! It might take up to two days to grant your wish if you use this method.

Or:

Search the vicinity for a half-beechnut husk, the outer side of which should resemble a face.

(handy hint, start looking near a beech tree)

Throw the husk into the water face side uppermost.

Watch carefully, if it floats for the count of 20 you're in luck, now no counting too fast. Try the old 'one elephant, two elephant, three...' method to ensure successful wish attainment.

Please remember in all cases you must keep your wish secret or you will be doomed to failure.

I must add the author in no way advocates the imbibing of these untreated well-waters, they are not for human

consumption. Oswald's Well's waters are now available in bottles ready to drink, but I cannot speak for their miraculous qualities, you'll have to experiment yourself.

Retrace your steps a little way and take the first left, Jennings Road, and go along to the junction. Go right along Brynhafol Road until you meet Welsh Walls.

To help you on your way here is a little bit of old fashioned Oswestry wisdom, while the water is still fresh in your mind.

*“Never throw water out of the house on a Sunday,
lest you throw it into the face of the Saviour.”*

It proves, that after all those pagan rituals at the Well, Oswestrians are without doubt good God-fearing people.

As it's a good long walk, here's something to exercise your brains with:

“Why was 1876 such a bad year for mares giving birth in Oswestry?” In that year, mares aborted, foals were still born or died within the first few days after birth. There were so many that it belied co-incidence.

The answer was finally sought from a 90-year old man who still possessed the ancient wisdom. He told the amazed townsfolk 1876 was a ‘seven year’, when Unicorns give birth and to make sure their young survive they make sure no other mares’ offspring do.

You should now be approaching the Welsh Walls. At the junction on the left you will find the old National School. Take a good look, you should spot this...

Here we have a most tragic tale.



Long ago when the school thronged with happy children the most popular boy of all was the Head Boy. Without exception all the other boys looked on him as a model and the masters were all sure that a bright future was in store for him. But on his final day at the school, as the last bell rang, he ran out into the road and was knocked down and killed stone dead on the spot where he fell.

All were certain that he shouldn't die in vain and every year thereafter the Head Boy and the youngest pupil would chalk on the wall of the school the simple epitaph 'the last day'.

Most people tell the tale above about Oswestry School but our informant insisted that the original happened here. Now cross the street to Cae Glas Park.

Originally the grounds of a large house called Cae Glas, which was demolished in the 1830s, it not only became a place to play but also a place where sheep could safely graze. Welsh farmers used to bring their sheep here for a final nibble and refresher before completing the journey to the Market, ensuring the flocks looked their best for the occasion.

So now take a little time for a topical game from Yesteryear Oswestry - "Sheep & Shepherds". But first we need to choose a Shepherd and a Thief from amongst the party and what better way than using these old counting out rhymes collected in Oswestry about 150 years ago.

*Enniki, benniki, my black hen
She lays eggs for gentlemen,
One for you, and one for me
O, U, T spells out goes he.*

Right, you're the Shepherd, now...

*Timothy Titus took two tees
To tie two tups to two tall trees
To terrify the terrible Thomas a Tuttamus
O, U, T spells out goes he.*

And I'm afraid you're the thief. Everyone else you're the sheep. OK.

Now for the rules:

Sheep you must stand in one long row.

Shepherd you pretend to be asleep.

Now Thief take one of the sheep and hide it, quick, quick, we haven't got all day.

Now Thief say,

'Sheperdy, shepherdy, count your sheep!'

and Shepherd you reply,

'I can't come now, I'm fast asleep.'

Your turn again, Thief.

'If you don't come now, they'll all be gone,

So Shepherdy, Shepherdy come along!'

Shepherd you must now count your sheep. One's gone, so ask the Thief,

'Where, oh where has my sheep gone?'

Thief you reply,

'It has gone to get fat.'

Now Shepherd you go back to sleep and repeat the whole thing until all the sheep are hidden.

Now comes the fun. Shepherd off you go and find your sheep and each one you find will help you find the next. When they are all found its time to chase the Thief.

And now that he's caught it's time to get back to the story trail refreshed ...

Carry along Welsh Walls towards the junction with Willow Street. On your left you should find this ..



.. on one of the buildings now an Oswestry School Dormitory.

Here we are at the Old Cottage Hospital, the site of one of Oswestry's all too rare ghosts.

A ghost of a nurse in an old-fashioned uniform wanders the rooms as if in search of something or someone. Although she died many years ago she can never let herself rest. She is continually paying for a tragic mistake she made. She sent a body to the morgue, but the patient she sent on the way was not yet dead. The patient awoke to die of fright on the slab. The nurse could not forgive herself the error and couldn't live with her grief. She committed suicide and still walks on the anniversary, November 11th.

Quickly we move on to the junction of Willow Street, the site of the old Willow Gate.

Up the road to our left beyond the fire station is the new Drill Hall. The Old Drill Hall used to be the starting point of a strange ceremony when Oswestry was at the centre of flourishing coal fields, the "Colliers' Candles".

Every Christmas Eve the miners would gather together around an old hand barrow which they would spread with an inch or so of clay. They'd then press into the clay old butts of candles saved from their duties in the

mines over the previous months in the pattern of a star – the Star of Bethlehem.

Two men would carry the barrow, a third, a lantern for lighting the candles each time they stopped. They didn't want the candles to burn down because they were off door-to-door to collect their Christmas Boxes. Miners brought luck to a house so were worth a penny or two when they paid a visit.

At each house they'd knock on the door, lift the clay star and light the candles for the householders to see, collect their presents, blow out the candles and move along. Sometimes they'd try out the ceremony on All Hallows Eve and Candlemas too.

But if you wanted value for money from your miners, nearby St. Martins was the place to live. There the miners would light the star, put the barrow down, go down on their knees and sing a carol too.

Turn right down Willow Street and here's a little something for you to spot



**When you've found that look over the street for the Butcher's Arms and the passageway that leads under it. When you see this post...
....you're there. Go on through. We're now entering Arthur Street.**

This is the site of one of Oswestry's spookier tales; of ghostly servants who kept visitors, Mr & Mrs Siddons, awake all night with their spectral sweeping. Alas no more than those bald facts survives, can anyone out there enlighten us?

On we go to the Castle Mound. Climb to the top for two more written stories plus this recorded interlude from Clive Hopwood & David Bannister:-

<https://soundcloud.com/mythstories/the-civil-war>

Over the housetops to the North you can see the Iron Age Hillfort Old Oswestry, which pre-dates the town by many a year. Its said to be the birthplace of Queen Guinevere, but the story now is on a much grander scale

In the days of good King Bran when all (or nearly all) was well in merry England the only place where discord ruled was Old Oswestry where high in the hillfort King Gogmagog of the giants had made his home.

Gogmagog and his giants weren't the friendliest of chaps and they had learnt some very bad habits. When they saw the little people from those parts they thought 'ah jelly babies', and just like you'd imagine they picked them up and ate them, head first of course.

Bran couldn't let this continue so he sent out a proclamation: "Hero required".

All the brave and bold, muscle-bound knights flocked from near and far combing their quiffs as they rode in on their milk white chargers. But giants are made of tough stuff and most knights just couldn't pass the test. The giants would be out with their tin openers and it would be bye bye hero bold.

However one knight was braver and bolder than the rest, and he had a blonder, quiffier quiff and a bigger milkier whiter charger, this was Corineus who had ridden in all the way from Troy.

Corineus wasn't alas too well endowed with brain-power and thought the answer to every problem was his flashing, swishing blade. He hacked and chopped, chopped and hacked and giants' heads went tumbling and rolling down the ramparts, but a good story can't end that simply, and sure enough this one doesn't.

Watching from a tree was an evil spirit, and when Corineus swished and Gogmagog's head came tumbling off, in swooped the opportunist spirit and took hold of the king giant's body. Now giants are one thing but immortal evil spirits are another, Corineus handed in the towel and rode for all his might back in the direction of Troy leaving chaos behind him.

What we need now is a true Shropshire hero and luckily enough Payn Peveril was at hand, obviously between jobs at the time. Now Payn being a Shropshire lad was brave and bold and most importantly wise too, so he didn't go rushing in with a flashing blade but sidled to the foot of the hill seemingly unarmed.

Tiny Payn shouted a challenge, which was met with thunderous laughter from the giant above him. But Payn knew how to deal with evil spirits so he stood firm, put his hand in his pocket and pulled out a cross.

It was somewhat less than a second before Gogmagog was on his knees weeping, wailing and pleading with Payn to show him mercy. Payn didn't falter until the giant evil spirit offered him all the giants' treasure if he would only let him go. Payn recognised a bargain when he heard one and said, "Lead the way".

Gogmagog and Payn hid in the bushes and watched as all the giants gathered, for it just so happened that it was

that one day of the year when giants come to dig up and count their treasure. Payn watched as they unearthed a mighty horde of golden animals and he marvelled as the evil spirit made his voice come out of the mouth of a golden bull.

"Beware giants, beware. If you stay one second more in this place you will die a horrible death. Go and never return," it said.

The giants didn't wait for a replay but were up and away and over the hills and far away. They left the pile of treasure and a large hole in the ground.

Gogmagog and Payn walked towards the hole and out came Payn's cross again. The spirit let rip a blood-curdling scream and fled away into the sky leaving Gogmagog's body tottering by the gaping hole. Payn gave the giant body a helpful push and it fell into its grave. Payn wasted no time replacing the earth and tamping it down. He was a rich man with the giants' treasure.

Payn though was a fine upstanding citizen and took the treasure to his king, Bran. But Good King Bran was so pleased to be rid of Gogmagog that he told Payn Peveril to keep his treasure and to have the rule of Old Oswestry and all the lands around.

And believe me or believe me not Payn and his family the Fitz Warine's ruled this area wisely and well for many years to come.

Before we leave, because it's been quite a climb, another story which explains how Oswestry found its way into English hands.

Far be it from me to say that arranged marriages don't work, but to be successful there needs to be a certain amount of thought into matching the partners and ensuring compatibility.

If you're new to this game I would suggest that sufficient reason to believe the match will flourish is not just the fact that the one prospective partner may be a Prince of Gwynedd, and the female in question be a daughter of a Marcher Lord. The marriage might at first seem to ensure a little peace along the borders, but when the plates start to fly you realise it to be a very short-lived peace.

Whoever decided to put Madog and Maud together obviously wasn't planning a dream-team for the tv quiz Mr. & Mrs., perfect couple they would never be. As soon as they even set eyes on each other you could see the hackles rise. Maybe the union would've worked if separate castles had been an option, but I'm afraid that just wasn't done and matters went from bad to worse.

Now in Wales in those enlightened days divorce was easy enough even, or especially, for royalty. You just agreed that was that and packed your bags. However, this was a cross-border union so English niceties had to be considered and divorce really was the last resort; one, or should I say two, had to ask permission of the King.

Henry II wasn't keen, and in the absence of Relate he decided to arbitrate himself to see if he could resolve the incompatibility problem. He was realistic enough to know it would be a tall order though, as the two by this time refused to even see each other without daggers drawn. Therefore the wise King set some ground rules.

“When you come to the meeting bring no more than a retinue of four and twenty horse,” he said to them both and then named the day.

Well come the appointed day for quiet, calm, marital discord maintenance, Henry II sat waiting for the parties in question to arrive at his gate. The weather was hot and sticky and there seemed to be a little more electricity in the air than there should when Madog arrived with his twenty-four horsemen, armed to their teeth and bristling for a fight.

“Oh dear,” thought the King, and locked the gate. “What will be will be”. And it was. He didn’t have to wait too long either, not for the battle or the resolution. Because when Maud arrived he saw she had kept strictly to the rules, but used her womanly guile to the full. Accompanying her were four and twenty horse and upon each horse sat two brave warriors with gleaming swords flashing in the sun.

A little sword flashing later, and of course, a little mopping up, and Madog found himself bundled into a dark underground cell, left to waste away until natural processes made Maud don her widow’s rags.

Some thought it slightly disrespectful, her marrying so soon after her dear husband’s death, but marry she did. Maud took the hand of the Earl of Arundel and as her dowry she brought Oswestry to seal the match. And that, dear friends, is how Oswestry found its way back across the border into England all those years ago.

History isn’t always made by Lords and Ladies. Sometimes the common folk have their trump cards to play. One such ordinary Joe was George Cranage who

saved the day and became the hero during the Civil War. If you didn't click the link before these two stories revisit in now for George's tale.

Walk down again, but before you leave see if you can find this at the foot of the mound...



Now to Bailey Head, the busy market place of a thriving market town, and yet another thing to find on the way...



While you stand in the market place, cast your mind back to less sanitary days. Think of the throng of people that must have met here and rubbed shoulders, and other appendages. You could say it was an exciting, stimulating place to be, but it was also a hotbed of

infection, where disease could pass as easily as trade goods.

In the second half of the 19th Century a virulent plague struck Oswestry. Known as 'The Wolf' it caused alarm and consternation. Even the well-to-do and educated were not immune and more than one family locked up their daughters to protect them from the infection.

The Wolf was a truly horrendous disease which struck only women, and became common especially among beggar-women who were thought to contract it by drinking impure water. Having caught the malady the carrier could pass the disease by touch, bodily fluid or exhalation.

The Wolf was a little lizard-like beast which came to dwell in a woman's chest. It had a voracious appetite for roast meat, which would lead to its host having uncontrollable cravings to gorge themselves.

The sad sufferers would roam the streets, sniffing the breeze to catch the aroma of pork or mutton; beef or lamb; wafting on the town air. And when they scented it they would batter at the door in question, until the householder or servant would bring cooked meat to quench the unnatural appetite. Both woman and Wolf would fixedly devour the feast until, satisfied, they would slope off into the shadows.

But the thirst for meat would grow and grow the more it was fed until eventually, and most horrifyingly, the Wolf would devour the woman from within and wait to infect a new host.

Mediciners up on Bailey Head market would sell all manner of cures and potions to ward off the Wolf and one must have worked. By 1880 the plague had been eradicated, but should you doubt its existence, well there is proof. As late as 1890 a travelling chemist was seen at Bailey Head exhibiting a 'Wolf's Head', safe, of course, within a jar of the only efficacious cure.

Further down Bailey Street, on the right, is Woolworths. In 1812 it was the site of The Three Tuns a favourite watering hole for 300 French officers, prisoners of the Napoleonic Wars garrisoned in the town, inland and safe from escape. A famous duel took place there and left a bullet in the wall. In a town of 3,000 people, 300 sudden incomers made quite a mark and led to many a story -

Click here to hear from Clive Hopwood & David Bannister:-
<https://soundcloud.com/mythstories/the-french-connection>

After peace was made all the French went home, but as you can imagine French names and habits were left behind and can still be traced today.

Don't venture down Bailey Street, but head off to your left along Albion Hill where you might spot this...

At the junction turn right into Leg Street.

The name Leg Street is one of those mysteries that excites a good many antiquarians. No, it isn't where one of Oswald's legs was dropped by another bird of prey, maybe its named so just because its shaped like a leg. But my favourite reason leads us to the Isle of Mann.



In the reign of Richard II Oswestry was granted to Lord Scrope, King of Mann, the Manx island famous for its three-legged crest. Although Scrope didn't keep his ownership of Oswestry more than a few years, a good many souvenirs of his rule remained after he had left. An inn called the Isle of Mann opened on Leg Street and Oswestry gained three legs on its Coat of Arms. Like all holiday souvenirs though the townspeople tired of them, the Inn closed or changed its name and the town council amputated a leg from the curious coat of arms, but the name of the street stuck, Leg Street it remained.

A very convincing story, which, alas, doesn't stand up to too much close inspection. Looking back into legal records Leg Street had already acquired its name much earlier, in the reign of Edward II in 1324, so the debate continues. Have you any stories or ideas?

In 1820 a tailor of Leg Street, Thomas Roberts, had a very useful second career. He was a Wart-Charmer. Roberts was a well-respected man and numbered some of Oswestry's finest as his clients, including Bank Manager and one-time schoolmaster, John Morris.

But how did he perform these strange wart-removing ceremonies? I hear you ask; not driven by self-interest, I hope, just for purely academic reasons. Should you wish to try this skill for yourself, the first few steps are quite easy:

Firstly:-Find your wart.

Secondly:-Procure some twigs from an obliging elder tree.

Thirdly:-Choose the finest, straightest most unblemished twig and cut a cross in the end.

Fourthly:-Gently touch the wart with this crossed end and whisper the powerful charm.

Well, yes, this is where it gets a little difficult because, alas the words of the charm were lost along with Thomas Roberts, but try a few nostrums that you feel might be appropriate and then continue.

Fifthly:-Cut off about an inch (2.5cm) from the twig and repeat steps 3 to 5 a number of times.

Lastly:-Bundle up the elder chippings in a piece of paper and dispose of them in the special place.

Yes, you have guessed it, the secret of the place also died along with Thomas Roberts, but have a go, you might have a special talent and an intuition where to place your trimmings. Oswestry eagerly awaits a second successful wart-charmer to make its modern shopping facilities complete.

At the crossroads pause and look to your left down Oswald Road.

Oswald Road leads out of the old town down to the Victorian hub of the railway station and works. The coming of rail to Oswestry led to a great growth of the town and its significance. But unluckily, well according to certain farmers who will remain nameless, it also led to the Temperance movement getting a hold on at least this area of the town. From this point on leaving the town you could not get a drink for love or money. Even the Queen's Head on the corner (now the QUBE) changed from licensed premises to a temperance tearoom.

Now as most people know, the weekly trip to market goes hand in hand with the gentlemanly art of imbibing

ale and this dry quarter of town presented problems to farmers coming to Oswestry from the east. Luckily enough these sons of the soil are often inventive types and found ways around such unfriendly obstacles.

One particular yeoman was well known. He had trained his horse to take the cart home so he could drink himself into a stupor in the Old Town before leaving for home, alleviating the need for regular top-ups of ale on his homeward course. However, when his horse gave up and died he needed to think fast, because he would now need to use the train. It was a matter of moments before he solved the enigma. He hired a boy with a barrow, and when the farmer had drunk sufficient he would collapse into the barrow and the boy would trundle him down to the station and tip him onto the train. His journey was just long enough for him to become moderately sober before arriving home to face his wife.

Here's a drinking tale from Clive Hopwood & David Bannister:-
<https://soundcloud.com/mythstories/the-school-master-drink>

Go straight over the crossroads and continue a little way along Leg Street until over the road you see this...



Here we are at the Black Gate, site of a pub or two by the Shrewsbury entrance to the town. And while still on the subject of alehouses, two more short local tales of the demon drink.

In a pub nearby two men, the best of friends, used to spend their time over a pint or two. These two had been best friends since the first flush of youth; worked together; played together; were virtually inseparable, nearly joined at the hip; but Saturday nights always brought the same strange ritual. The two would drink more than normal, and would leave at the last bell still arm in arm.

When they emerged into the night air they would move a pace or two apart and one would get a piece of chalk from his pocket and draw a sketchy line between them on the pavement. Then he would issue a challenge,

“Cross that line and you’ll get a lathering, boy.”

The other would place his heavy boot firmly over the line and the punches would fly until they’d fought each other to a standstill.

Battered and bruised they’d help each other up and go on their way home. See them on a Sunday morning, well maybe they’d have a scar or scratch or two, but they’d be the best of friends again until closing time on the next Saturday.

In the same hostelry there was a regular who no-one could decide about. Was he rude and bad tempered, was he mute, or was he both. I can’t say he had cloven hooves or pointy horns, but he certainly liked the heat. He’d push his way into the pub, nod at the pump of his choice, get his pint and head straight for the fire. If anyone was there, they’d best beware because he didn’t wait to ask, he just threw them out of the way and sat down in the chair next to the blaze until he’d finished his

drink and was away and all without uttering a word or making a sound.

Night after night this went on until one time when he pushed his way through he got a mite too close to the glow in the grate and his coat started to smoulder and burn.

The rest of the inn watched with many an astonished eye, but no-one uttered a word. The coat, began to smoke. Then smoke turned to a blaze and still the man sat there unawares. Then when the flames started to lick the ceiling he jumped up to his feet, uttered a banshee wail and ran for the door.

“Well, he’s got a voice after all,” exclaimed one wag as the man went into the horse trough with a hisssss to extinguish the flames.

“Yes, and he gets a bit hot under the collar”, added another local wit.

Look to your back and you should see this...

Just a small architectural feature from the Regal Cinema, home to another Oswestry character who bears remembering, Mr. Harris.

Cinema was a popular pursuit for the children in every town before the coming of the television and Oswestry was no exception, but the people who remember Mr. Harris’ ‘reign of terror’ at the Regal frankly wonder why.



He ran a tight ship with a good many rules:-

“Don’t be late, or you won’t get in.”

“Don’t bring drinks or sweets. You can only eat the expensive ones I sell.”

“No noise, or I’ll rap you across the wrist.”

When recounting their trips to the Regal Cinema you can still see the fear in elderly Oswestrians’ eyes. That was entertainment!

Just off the mini-roundabout is Sainsbury’s superstore. Not all stories are old, some are still arriving in Oswestry today and about modern buildings too. I heard an Oswestry version of this urban myth featuring Sainsbury’s only a month or two ago from local storyteller, Amy Douglas, and it has now transplanted quite happily and become a story of the town known for far around. Without more ado, here’s my version.

Old Mrs. Evans had lived in Maesbury all her life and in fact hadn’t even left Maesbury for the last 35 years after her accident. The accident hadn’t only left her a widow, it had also left her in a wheelchair. And in those days a wheelchair wasn’t the best aid to mobility for village people.

She could get around her home and, after some careful adaptations, at least part of her garden too. But going out to places like Oswestry was quite out of the question. It was so much a fait accompli that she didn’t even think about it anymore, her shopping was done for her, she kept up with the news by her neighbours, life wasn’t that bad.

And then along came a new home help, a fresh-faced young girl, she was full of life and full of ideas too.

“Well, Mrs Evans, what about a journey into town to get your shopping then?”

“I can’t do that, my dear, not with my wheelchair.”

But that wasn’t an end to it. She told Mrs. Evans all about the new bus with the step that lowered; about the specially adapted dial-a-ride van too. Mrs. Evans was quite fascinated, she always had been one to wonder about the miracles of technology and frankly she could see she was well out of date.

When she heard about Sainsbury’s with its ramp to the door, its wide aisles and its clever shopping trolleys that fixed to the front of your wheelchair, it was all the home help could do to hold her back.

The next Tuesday they were off, dialled-a-ride and in through the automatic doors of Sainsbury’s. Mrs. Evans had never seen anything like it. She’d seen supermarkets on the tv, yes, but its not the same as actually visiting and seeing for yourself.

She was looking everywhere; when you shop at home you buy what you know you need, not what’s in the store and available.

“What’s that dear, up there, milk powder?”

“Yes, you just add water and you’ve got milk for your tea or cooking or whatever,” said her home help.

“Wonderful, wonderful, I’ll have some of that, put it in the basket dear.”

Next aisle and here it went again.

“What’s that dear, up there, soup powder?”

“Yes, you just add hot water and you’ve got instant soup for dinner.”

“Wonderful, wonderful, I’ll have some of that, put it in the basket dear.”

Next aisle and same again.

“What’s that dear, up there, potato powder?”

“Yes, add water from the kettle and stir and you’ve got mashed potato.”

“Wonderful, wonderful, I’ll have some of that, put it in the basket dear.”

Mrs. Evans didn’t want to miss a single aisle, not even the baby products. Then she stopped and her face turned hard with shock and surprise.

“Do my eyes tell me right, what’s that I see up there, girl?”

“That’s Baby powder, Mrs. Evans.”

She looked for a moment as if lost back in an earlier, happier time of her life.

“Well, I won’t have any of that and I wouldn’t suggest you did either my girl – the old way of making babies is by far the best!”

And to the home help's blushes we turn and go back to the crossroads and turn left into Cross Street.

In 1820 Cross Street was the site of Croxon & Lucas, Drapers, where a very strange crime took place, for the purpose of this volume we shall call the case, "The Present That Cost A Life"

Old Mr. Morgan was making his way to bed when he noticed a flickering light coming from the Draper's shop across the road. Passing strange, he thought, for Croxon to be working at this time of night. There must be some important funeral tomorrow that he'd heard nothing of.

When, the next morning, he was woken by a banging at the door, the mystery began to deepen. It was the young female servant from Croxon & Lucas. The shop had been robbed, had he heard or seen anything?

Mr. Morgan rushed across the road with the servant expecting to see the place ransacked and everyone in a furore, but the place was as neat and tidy as ever. Mr. Croxon looked just as puzzled.

"If I didn't do my stock-keeping regularly I would never have known that a length of printed material is missing over here. Everything's been neatly folded and stacked as if nothing was amiss and in a very professional way too. I think there is more to this than meets the eye."

He scratched his head and said "I suggest the police be informed, but that we keep this matter very quiet and see what transpires. It must surely have been someone we both know."

The very next week a lady from Bailey Head came into the shop holding her daughter's hand.

"Have you anything which might make an apron to match my daughter's dress?" she said. Mr. Croxon looked at the pattern and his mouth fell open. It was made from the same print that had gone missing in the robbery.

The police were called and the lady, in tears, told how she'd been given the bolt of cloth for her daughter's dress by the girl's godfather, Mr. Lewis, one of Mr. Croxon's own tenants from a house in Beatrice Street.

The law wasted no time arresting Lewis and taking him to Shrewsbury for a quick and decisive trial where his guilt was proved and he was condemned to face execution.

While Mr. Lewis was waiting to be hanged, Mr. Croxon visited him in Shrewsbury Jail and asked him why he had committed such a costly crime.

"I needed a present for my god daughter," said Lewis, "but it was lucky the crime was not worse, your female servant nearly disturbed me, and if she had entered the room I would have shot her dead."

After that chilling end two quick Oswestry sayings that seem to fit the part.

When things seem to be at an all time low, and still getting worse, an Oswestrian may be heard to say,

"Worse and worse, like Povey's foot."

Mr. Peter Povey, a draper, died when Mayor of Oswestry in 1724 of a very pernicious form of gout.

Dressmakers in Oswestry had their very own saying:

*“If a pair of scissors falls so the points stick into the floor,
it is a sign of more work coming in.”*

**Now make your way to
The Cross, the junction
of Cross Street and
Church Street and on the
way look out for this ...**

That was the crest of the Lloyd family of Llanforda up on Llwyd Mansion. It was awarded to Meurig Lloyd for bravery in battle by the emperor of Austria.



You are now half-way between heaven and hell on the very site of that tree where Oswald's remains were impaled for a whole year before decent burial came to what was left of his body.

This used to be the starting point for races during the famous Oswestry Wakes (very rumbustious fairs). There would be pony and donkey races down to the church and the highlight would be the maidens' race when young women would run the course competing for "the smock". The celebrations became so unruly as to cause 'great disorder and riotous conduct'. It is said that the wakes became such a 'bear-garden' that the powers of law and order brought them to an end about 1825.



Now as we carry along into Church Street you should see this strange three-legged animal on your left...

The White Horse was once a pub sign for, you've guessed it, the White Horse Inn. During the general election campaign of 1832, after the Reform Act, tempers ran high in Oswestry's streets. The electoral battle was a close run affair between the Liberal, Mr. Coles, and a very popular local character, Major Gore. After the polls closed the votes were collected and counted in Shrewsbury.

It was in the days before the train ran to Oswestry so the result wouldn't be heard of the Liberal victory with a majority of 72 until the following day. But a horseman arrived in Oswestry while the campaigners were still making merry in the pubs saying Major Gore had taken the seat by 3 votes.

A riot ensued, revellers took to the streets and broke the windows of all the local liberals' houses, but in the morning everything had changed.

One local liberal, sweeping the glass from his drawing room floor, found an oddly-shaped white stone obviously the missile which had broken his window. On further examination it was found to be the knee joint of a white stone horse.

This isn't the only story of a broken leg about the White Horse Inn either. The other one is of a much more painful nature.

The upper rooms of the Inn were at one time used by local surgeons to perform operations - with the anaesthetic being so close at hand inns were ideal places. The White Horse even had bars at the windows lest any patient should try to escape. A neighbour remembers one particular night only too well, the sound of the screams kept him awake so he could tell the tale.

The surgeon had done a remarkably bad job setting a broken leg and the poor patient had to have his limb broken and re-set. The job was performed with practical simplicity. A large log was attached by means of a rope to the fellow's ankle and thrown through the bars of the window. This performed admirably two tasks. The initial jerk broke the leg again and the weight of the log dangling put the leg in traction so to set it right the second time.

There was also an added benefit, when the poor patient tried to pull the log that was causing so much pain back through the window by tugging on the rope from his bed, he could not heave it through the bars at the window. And we complain about the NHS!

After that painful note, see if you can find this Cycling Tourist Club emblem on your way to Cae Glas Park - through the gates on your right. And now for another of Oswestry's traditional games.



This time we only need one counting out rhyme to choose the Jolly Miller from among the boys:

*Eeny, weeny, winey, wo
Where do all the Frenchmen go?
To the east and to the west
and into the Old Crow's nest.*

(note: it has been suggested that the Old Crow's Nest was the slang name for The Three Tuns where Woolworths now stands on Bailey Street).

Now we've chosen our Jolly Miller lets get on with the game. The Jolly Miller stands in the middle while all the other players form pairs (boy and girl) and parade around him singing this song:-

*There was a jolly miller and he lived by himself,
As the wheel went round he made his wealth;
One hand in the hopper and one in the bag,
As the wheel went round he made his grab.*

At this point the miller seizes a girl from one of the couples and everyone must change partners until just one boy is left to be the next Jolly Miller.

If you don't like large group games you could always collect up a few horse chestnuts for a good old game of conkers and try your hand at that. To choose who goes first, see who can say the old Oswestry rhyme first:-

*Cobbly co!
My first blow!
Put down your black hat,
And let me have first smack!*

During our researches we did find other games, but frankly any attempt to play them in this enlightened day and age would have led to much disapproval. For instance the game of Mothers and Daughters, which ends with the Mother chasing her Daughters around smacking them with a stout stick Need we go on!

Back to Church Street and carry along until you see this sign...

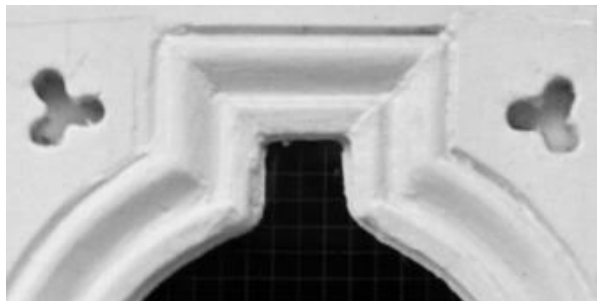
Well as the sign says the Bell now sells Bass Ales, but in the olden days pubs used to brew their own beer and the Widow Howel, who used to run the Bell Inn way back then, brewed the finest ale in all Oswestry. What was her secret? Why, she collected the water for her brewing in a water-tub that caught all the rain from the church roof.



One old Oswestry character who could certainly tell you where to buy the best ale was Mad Jack Mytton. He had probably tasted every type of ale brewed in the town. For some choice stories of this Shropshire eccentric from Clive Hopwood, David Bannister & Annette Batty go to:-

<https://soundcloud.com/mythstories/mad-jack-myton>

On to the corner of the street by the traffic lights; on the opposite side of the street to the Bell see if you can find this...



That is a detail from the Coach & Dogs, a building which has undergone a number of uses since it was built in 1660 by Edward Lloyd, the last of the Lloyds of Llanforda, for stabling his dog cart when he rode into church, and yes it quite literally was a dog-cart, a four-wheeled contraption pulled by dogs.

At one time the Coach & Dogs played host to visiting Scotland Yard Detectives; you wish to know more?

To market, to market ... no, not to buy a fat pig but to sell a rather lean one. Because times had been lean and Old Mother Trefonen had not much left nor for that matter had any of the poor working folk around Oswestry.

In a last toss for luck Old Mother Trefonen had gone to seek her fortune by selling her pig at Oswestry market. And just like in all the stories she had wrapped up her lunch, a little bread and cheese, in a red and white spotted handkerchief.

She made her way over the fields to Oswestry market with hope in her heart, pausing by the Coach and Dogs to eat her little lunch. It's hard work for an old lady to drive a pig to market, even if it's only a lean one.

Her prayers must have been answered that day, for pigs were reaching a right good price and she wrapped her little fortune in her spotted handkerchief and homeward she did go.

Crossing the fields to Trefonen her luck ran out when a heavy object came down with a thwack across the back of her neck. She was beaten cold and dead by a heavy

hand that stole her money. The thief was away across the fields undiscovered.

To the local Oswestry police it seemed like the perfect crime and they were frankly at a loss to know which way to turn. After two weeks a public murmuring began, everyone was worried lest they be clubbed to death in their beds. Our local lads were forced to admit defeat and call in the sleuths from Scotland Yard in London, down South.

England's finest arrived early the next week and were billeted together with their bloodhounds in the Coach & Dogs and set about the ways of city detectives. To be truthful the case nearly had them beat, until a house to house search found the villain still with the coins wrapped in the red-and-white spotted handkerchief.

No matter how they questioned him he refused to confess. But they were sure they had evidence enough. They sent him off to Shrewsbury to face trial and all Oswestry was jubilant to see him go.

Can you imagine the noise and the clamour when the noble Oswestrians heard that the Shrewsbury court had set him free saying that 'red and white hankies were two-a-penny and no evidence at all'? They were ready to take the law into their own hands.

A mob took to the streets. Along Oswald Road they went to meet his train on his return, but sensing the nature of his homecoming party he jumped the train and was never seen, nor heard of, again.

We are now at the Burnt End (or in Welsh - Pentrepoeth) of Oswestry, no doubt commemorating the work of

Llewellyn and Glyndwr who were among those to set torches to the town. So it's time for another quick Oswestry proverb:

*“If a knife falls from the table,
strangers will come from Wales”*

Turn back on yourself and head through the gates into the churchyard wherein you might find this...

It's said that near to the gates is the grave of a very famous Oswestrian, Dick Spot.



Dick Spot was born Richard Morris in 1710 at Bakewell, Derbyshire, but he was soon to move to Oswestry when his father, a soldier, was killed in battle. He came to live with his Aunt Deborah Heathcote, a fortune teller of some renown.

Dick was obviously a quick learner, not only at school but at home, as he became a better ‘conjurer’ even than his Aunt. People paid well to have Dick tell their future as his fame spread far and wide. His name hit its height when he foretold the death of the King of Sweden in the Conjurors’ Magazine.

Some would say his finest trick was predicting the day and hour of his own death. In fact he was more precise even than that. He told his servants that when a candle went out so would he, and that was the end of Dick Spot, but not quite the end of his story.

Much later one of the church wardens, Richard Minshall paid Dick’s granddaughter to “borrow” the late lamented Mr. Spot’s grave to bury his own mother-in-law. Then he

put his own name on the stone and claimed the grave for his own plot too and was later buried there.

In answer to the outcry from Dick Spot's family he said he had bought, not borrowed, the grave.

For all that St. Oswald's church has many healing claims. Grease from the church bells (known as bletch) was an approved cure for ringworm in August 1883. As its fame spread people tried, to the consternation of church officials, to use grease from cartwheels instead, which led to the following proclamation:

“The church officials disapprove of this innovation and aver that whereas grease which has been in contact with bell-metal is efficacious, that which has touched iron is useless for healing.”

“Pillory of the Wall” growing against the church walls is good for pains in the back - both used as a formentation and taken inwardly.

While you're by the church, if you're lucky enough to hear those bells tolling, see if you agree with the old bell rhyme:-

*“Three crows on a tree
Say the bells of Oswestry”*

And now back to the Visitor & Exhibition Centre.

If your mind is beginning to wander and you're imagining all sorts of perils at each turn you don't need to worry about witches.

In Oswestry there was a custom of hiding shoes in the walls of buildings and behind panelling to protect against witches. Some tiny shoes were found during renovations of the Heritage Centre, so you'll be alright in there.

Or hang on, I suppose you will, but I don't actually know whether the shoes are still there...

So one last Oswestry adage to make sure you keep your luck:-

*'Never sweep dust out of the door.
Always put it into the fire.
And you will keep the blessings in your house.'*

Please tell some or all these stories to keep them alive,

happy storytelling!