Mythstories storywalks

Tales & Trails

your guide to picturesque storywalks in North Shropshire and South Cheshire

northern marches - england

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The Countryside Agency

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Photography: Ali & Dez Quarréll

Published by Mythstories museum of myth and fable
The Morgan Library, Aston Street, Wem, Shropshire. SY4 5AU
Tel 07969 541552 email info@mythstories.com
Website www.mythstories.com
Registered charity number 1161594

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We are truly blessed in the Northern Marches with some of the most magnificent and diverse scenery to be found in the British Isles. And, as many a delighted local will tell you, most of the landscapes are a well kept secret. While we would not wish to unveil the hidden beauty too widely, we are a generous people, and we're sure there's enough beauty for your eyes too. Share it and enjoy!

Maesbury Marsh

OS SJ313250

From Maesbury Marsh there are some glorious walks along the canal and over fields. The wise walker will always take in St Winifred's Well at Woolston as part of their route.

A 16th C courthouse guards the healing well-

"Bargaining Over Bones"

Way back around the year 1100, Shrewsbury wasn't doing too well at pulling in tourist visitors and the curator of its main attraction was worried. Yes, the Abbot of Shrewsbury knew too well that to flourish Shrewsbury Abbey didn't just need worshippers, it needed tourists – admittedly I think he used the word 'pilgrims'. They were doing a roaring trade to the South in Much Wenlock with St. Milburga's bones on display. Shrewsbury needed a holy relic, preferably another Saint's bones with a reputation for miracles too.

I don't know whether he'd been along to his local story club and he'd heard the tale there, but almost immediately one name came to mind. St. Winifred. The story of St. Winifred was definitely miraculous. She'd lived with her Uncle, Bishop Bueno, over the border in Wales, in Flintshire to be precise.

The young girl was a beauty to behold, but chaste as the virgin snow. When a young welsh prince, Caradoc, saw her he fell head over heels in love and he wasn't used to being rebuffed in his amorous advances. When Winifred said "No" and started to run for home, out came his sword and off came her head. Luckily Bishop Bueno was no pipe and slippers man. He ran out of the church, plucked Winifred's head from the ground and replaced it upon her shoulders before her body had time to fall upon the turf. Caradoc withered into the spot where he stood and from the place where Winifred's head had been plucked a healing holy well burst forth.

The Abbot thought those Welshman have got their well, they're canny businessmen, maybe we can come to some arrangement for her bones. He sent off a crack team of negotiators doubling as monks with spades right then and there. It was less than two days before the deal was done and those monks were on their way home, with those bones in a box. But it was after their overnight stop when they broke their journey at Woolston that they knew their money had been well spent. When morning dawned they raised the coffin from the ground to discover another holy well had sprung forth.

Winifred's bones were just what they needed for pulling the pilgrim punters in back home at the Abbey in Shrewsbury.

Whittington Castle

OS SJ326313

One of the most picturesque sites in Shropshire, Whittington Castle is owned by the villagers of Whittington. With Herculean energy they maintain the ancient monument for all to enjoy.

The castle of the real-life Robin Hood.

Robin Hood Another Shropshire Lad

When Fulk Fitz Warine III, son of the Baron of Whittington Castle, was a young lad he was brought up in the Court of Henry II with the King's sons, Richard, Arthur and John. Fulk was of an age with John but one could never have called them close friends. John teased and bullied Fulk unmercifully, but that stout Shropshire lad never turned a hair.

But one day Fulk caught John bending the rules of chess and that was too much for him to bear.

Fulk accused the Prince of cheating, which was not the right thing to have done. John threw the board and all the playing pieces into Fulk's face. Now that his blood had finally risen Fulk retaliated drop-kicking John across the room into the wall, no way to treat a Prince!

John wasn't dead but his pride was badly bruised. He rushed to his father, telling him he must punish Fulk by chopping off his head. Wise King Henry would have none of this. He knew Fulk had been provoked and punished John instead for coming telling tales. From this point on the die was cast.

Fulk inherited Whittington Castle in 1197, back he wasn't to keep it long. When John came to the throne in 1199 he ousted Fulk from his baronial seat and set Sir Morys of Hawkstone there in his place in return for a bribe.

What was Fulk to do; he became an outlaw and roamed the country robbing the rich to give to the poor. He only had one ambition on his mind, to get his rightful castle back.

Once Fulk and his band of outlaws managed to capture King John while he was out hunting deer 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 was a great favourite of the people and amassed a great band of followers. Eventually his band had become an army. He led them to his Castle 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 who witnessed John putting his seal to the Magna Carta.

Does the story seem familiar? - Yes, substitute the name 'Robin Hood' for Fulk and that of the 'Sheriff of Nottingham' for Sir Morys and you have it. Robin Hood was really a Shropshire Lad.

Hindford

OS SJ334331

Rural canal towpath walks can be made into circular routes using the quiet country lanes

Hugh Lupton telling "The Changelings" at Hindford-

Click Here: https://youtu.be/Xe2RMJWRqzc

"The Ungrateful Servants"

There are so many stories to tell of Mad Jack Mytton it is very difficult to choose just one. Should it be the tale of robbing his guests on their journey home; riding his pet bear on the fully laden table at a dinner party; or setting fire to his nightshirt to cure his hiccoughs?

What really made John Mytton, a.k.a. Mad Jack, so universally popular was his dislike of cant and hypocrisy and his generosity to the poor. Therefore one tale comes to the fore...

One day Mad Jack met a beggar walking up the drive of his home, Halston Hall, and immediately decided to put his servants' generosity to the test. He bundled the old fellow into the potting shed and exchanged his fine clothes for the beggar's rags, and having filled the old man's hands with money, he sent him, happily, on his way.

Mad Jack dressed in the beggar's rags with a hood pulled down shadowing his face was almost unrecognisable. He picked up a stout branch as a walking stick and hobbled towards the front door.

When the door opened he croaked a plea for alms, but it was met with a tirade of abuse from the butler, who didn't seem any too eager to meet a ragamuffin's requests.

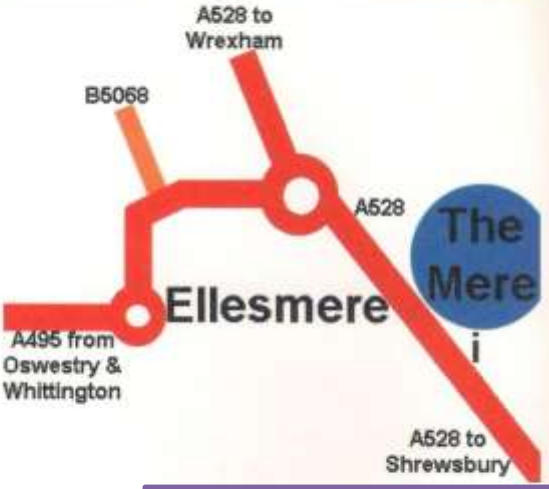
Jack's retainer pushed at him and told him to be on his way, but "on his way" was where Mad Jack didn't want to go. He upped with his stick and set about the butler playing a tattoo on his tail coat. This, understandably, was met with such screams that the whole household retinue came running to the rescue. Armed with all manner of implements they might have been, but this beggar seemed to have the strength of twenty men; Mad Jack's stick was a match for all.

Their bruised and battered eyes watched as the old man battled his way through their midst towards the door of the room where their master kept his bear. As the beggar rushed in the servants heaved a heavy sigh of relief, they'd be bothered no more, mighty he might be but he'd fall foul of Mr Mytton's Bear.

Faces were soon to fall as the door cannoned open and out cavorted the beggar on bear back, hood off now clearly visible as Mr John Mytton himself. The bear was growling and Mad Jack looked ready to continue the fight. Those servants, to a woman and a man, weren't going to wait around, they ran for the hills and never returned much to Mad Jack's delight. Alas, how he managed to replace them isn't mentioned in the history books or the story.

The Mere

OS SJ406347



In the lakeside visitor centre a videolink shows everyday life in heron's nests on the island before the trees come to full leaf.

2 extra Ellesmere audio stories:-
https://youtu.be/pQjh040PYsw
https://youtu.be/eLBwt37H5Ho

"One Mere Island Or Two"

As you can tell from the accompanying CD Ellesmere abounds with stories. The deep glacial mere seems to attract them. Not all of the mysteries are mythical, some of its stranger tales are facts drawn from real-life history.

The two islands you see today haven't always been there. They were created by two very different men. The large island with the heronry was built – if such a word can be used of an island – at the bidding of Mr. Deighton, agent of the Bridgwater Estate. He was a kind-hearted man who took pity on the unemployed workers of the district. And there were a great many of them in the winter of 1812/13.

Mr. Deighton designed a job-creation scheme all on his own, but the island wasn't meant to be the outcome of his plan. He took on the workers to do a makeover to his garden, something many of us would aspire to today if certain tv programmes are anything to be believed. Mr. Deighton wanted the end of his garden turned from a dumping-ground into a shrubbery, and the copse beyond turned into a beautiful woodland walk.

All these dreams required a great deal of effort shifting a small mountain of earth. His gang of workers filled cart upon cart and led their horses puffing and panting away. Opportunity is a great mother of invention and rather than cart that spoil for mile upon mile, someone hit upon the idea of dumping the debris on the thick ice that covered the Mere that cold winter.

All through the winter and the just-as-cold spring they took to heaping a great hill of earth from their wagons onto the ice. Until, when the work was done, a slow thaw set in. And so slow was that thaw that the earth gradually settled to the depths of the Mere and built itself into an island that still showed its none-too-small head above the waters.

That cold winter was the one when Napoleon marched upon Moscow to find it deserted when he arrived. He torched the city, but the defeat was his because of the numbers of men he lost to the Russian winter. That Island on the Mere was christened 'Moscow Island'. However later, because of its shape, it gathered an alternative name - Cow Hill. No, not because it looked like a cow, but rather like something a cow might have left behind.

The other island off the north-west shore bears the name of its creator - Neddy Jebb's Island is what its called. Neddy was a jobbing builder who always went about his work by the quickest and most direct route. The vicar wanted a new entrance to the vicarage from Church Hill. The most direct route was through the old graveyards, so that was the one Neddy took.

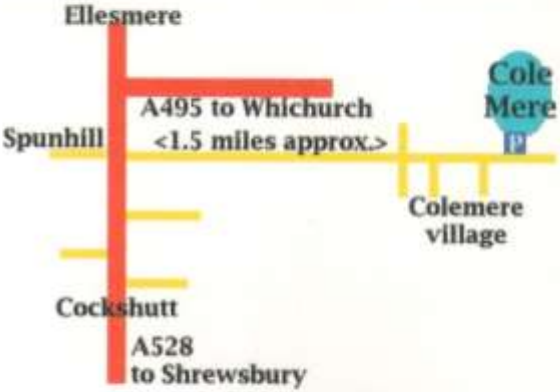
He dug up the ground, graves and skeletons too, and took them by the most direct route, to the edge of the Mere, dumping the debris once living and dead onto the shallow shelf, making an island as a testimony to himself. He even built a little bridge to make it into a favourite beauty spot. You would not believe the gruesome tales the children told of what they saw and found.

That original bridge was washed away, but nowadays the silt is affording new opportunities for visitors to Neddy Jebb's Island. But I would not recommend a jaunt; you might find it a less than favourite haunt.

Cole Mere

OS SJ436328

Glorious lakeland vistas, dappled woods, open meadowland and canal.



"The Colemere Bell And The Cole Mere Bell"

If you stare over at Colemere church something appears to be a little odd. There is only one bell when there is space for two. Guess what? There is a story to explain the conundrum.

The church wasn't planned to be where it is today. In fact the villagers started to build it over on the banks of the mere. It wasn't a site that was favoured by all, though. Because every night as they took exhausted to their beds, something or someone would come and demolish all their hard work.

The villagers had perseverance and they decided all they needed to do was get the church completed in one day. And that would do the trick. They nearly made it, too, but they only managed to get one of the bells in the tower by midnight and the whole building, bell and all, went tumbling into the mere.

It might be easy to retrieve the stones, or get new ones in their place. But it's a completely different matter trying to retrieve a bell from an almost bottomless mere, and new ones cost a bob or two. There was only one way to get their bell back.

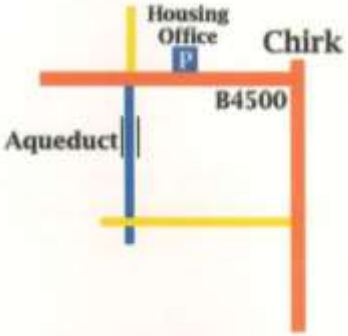
The villagers waited for a night with a full moon. And on that night they knotted together all the plough-ropes they could muster from farms far and wide and harnessed two white oxen to either end. They led the oxen, tugging the plough-ropes, into the north side of the mere, one beast swimming eastwards around the waters and the other to the west, with those heavy ropes dragging the depths.

Somehow the ropes latched on to the bell. And all that was left was a silent wait while the beasts dragged it to shore. On that night when the two oxen met at the south side of the mere and the plough-ropes started to emerge, the villagers could see their bell surfacing through the midnight-blue waters. Alas, one villager could not hide his astonishment and let out a profane gasp. That was all that was needed to send that bell rolling back to the bottom of the mere for ever more. Because fishing for a bell is the sort of trick that cannot be attempted twice.

So there you have it, the villagers moved the site of the church further from the waters and everyone seemed to be happy with that. But they kept the design the same and had only one bell instead of two. It might not be the same story the church architect would tell, that's the way the tale goes.

Chirk's Bridges

OS SJ287375



If you like stunning views and excitement on your walks Chirk is the ideal place. Walk the towpath over the aqueduct and then through the ¼mile tunnel; take care and take a torch!

A view through the viaduct from the aqueduct.

"Chirkens"

There are stories of severed hands and cursed dungeons at Chirk Castle, but those gruesome tales are easy to find elsewhere. My favourite tale is from more recent years...

Have you ever seen any chickens at Chirk Castle?

No? Well you wouldn't have, there aren't any but back in the old days you could have found the finest brood of prize fowls that ever you could hope to meet.

The Lord of the Castle loved chickens and his beautiful clutch of perfect poultry were well known all along the border lands for taking all the awards at every agricultural show. They brought an appreciative glint to every fowl judge's eye.

His secret was the way he treated his birds; firmly and with respect, he kept his hand on the tiller always their guide in whatever they did. He'd watch over them all the long day through, showing them where the choicest morsels were to be had.

"One, two, three
Peck a little here
Four, five, six
Peck a little there"

He had them as well trained as any army; they'd hang on his every word. And he was devoted to them, hen and cock alike he made sure they were put safe on their perches at night.

"One, Two, Three, Four
Go to your hutch and lay me a clutch"

He would command and they would listen, presenting him with the finest eggs all along the Welsh borders.

Some people said he loved those chickens more than he loved his wife. When she found out she thought she'd put him to the test:

"You spend all your time with those hens. It's about time you went out and earned a living, or at least did your duty up in the House of Lords. Off you go to London, you can hire a man to look after your precious hens."

Well, the Lord couldn't really argue. With head hung low he agreed to put an advert in the paper "Henman Needed". After reading through a number of letters from budding English tennis protégées he found just the man for the job, Old Tom.

Well, let's face it, Old Tom was local and came rather cheap. He was well known as the laziest man in Chirk. But when push came to shove he was the only one left on the very, very short list and he got the job.

Old Tom took to his work with his normal enthusiasm. Within ten minutes he was fast asleep. He paid little or no attention to the chickens all the long day, waking only now and again from his reverie to sample a good strong ale.

And when it came to home time he'd quite forgotten what it was he should have said to those hens to get them back to their Chirk Castle Hen House.

He tried this, and he tried that, but those hens kept a peckin' and had no time for the old timer's voice.

Aching for his bed and frustrated with the insolent birds he quite lost his temper. He shouted,

"You're a right bad brood in an ill-tempered mood
You're not fit to live in a castle
Go back instead and cluck in my shed"

I think the hens must have been impressed with his tone and knew he meant business because they did just what he said.

The next morning when Old Tom arrived at work there were no hens and no job for him to do. So he was sent home. And lucky for him too, because there was plenty to do at home with all those hens in his shed.

He didn't complain though for from that day to this he has always had a good tasty egg for his breakfast.

Wem & Tilley

OS SJ514288

Explore the market town of Wem, then walk by the peaceful River Roden to discover Tilley for a taste of village life.

Mythstories Museum in Wem brimful with stories

A bonus audio story from Ali Quarréll:
https://youtu.be/-QwB_IhQE70

"The Devil In Wem"

Somewhere about the start of the 1700's there were a motley group of lads in Wem in search of fun, but definitely not innocent fun. Anything with a thrill and a few pints of beer attached. The lads had ranged Shropshire causing upsets wherever they went and found not one door was open to them. So it was Friday night and they were in their local in New Street, looking for something apart from booze to fill their time. They tried skittles, dominoes and cards, but nothing lifted their ennui. Then one bright spark came up with an idea. "Let's conjure up the devil".

Not everyone knows how to make the Old Man appear. But that lad had got a friend who'd read a witchcraft book and he'd jotted down the recipe. It all seemed quite simple too. They needed a great chalk circle on the floor leaving enough room to move around between it and the walls and to give them easy access to the bar. Then it was only a matter of saying the magic words as they walked around that circle three times. No I'm not going to tell you what words they were - you might try it too. This is definitely a 'don't try this at home' folks; you'll ruin your lovely décor.

The third time around when their feet touched the point where they had begun, there was a blinding flash. The room filled with smoke, the floor cracked open and snapped shut and there on the tiled floor was a big, black bull with an evil look in his eye and a bellow coming from deep in his throat. You've guessed it, it was old Jack Beelzebub, his snorting breath smelling of Old Man's Baccy and his horns glinting in the failing light.

It didn't take more than the blink of an eye and a screech from the barmaid before those lads regretted what they'd done. With Old Nick pawing at the chalk circle with his great big hoof, there was no time to waste, he'd escape that circle if they didn't get rid of him soon.

They tried the magic words backwards, while walking widdershins three times. It was no mean feat, especially after a drink or two, but it was all to no avail. The Devil, now he was there, albeit in the shape of a bull, was fixing to stay.

This needed the Devil's adversaries on the case, and luckily Wem is a holy place so there was no shortage of vicars, priests and preachers ready to roll up their sleeves and do battle. One after another they came with bell, book and candle but as they tried to read the words from the good book up came that devilish bull with a snort and put their candles out. Good men they might have been, but they couldn't read in the dark, so things were getting desperate. Those lads had recruited every holy man in town.

They set off to Shrewsbury. There was an Abbey there, and a Cathedral too. On their way they came upon a real fancy church, so fine it could have been a model for a wedding cake. It was called

'Battlefield' and there was a battle to fight now. So they decided to give that vicar a try.

A fine man was the Rev. Leonard Hotchkiss. He listened carefully to their pleas and a smile came to his face.

"I've just bought one of those everburn candles with a hundred-hour guarantee. A miracle of modern science, that's what they are".

It wasn't long before they reached the New Street pub and off went the Rev. Hotchkiss round that circle intoning the good book's words, as the big black bull got to work huffing and puffing to put his candle out. Third time around that bull looked pasty and pale and all blown out, which the candle flame definitely was not. Another blinding flash, again the room filled with smoke and that same floor cracked open and snapped shut. Then as the smoke cleared there it was for all to see, or not to see; because there was nothing. That big black devil bull had disappeared.

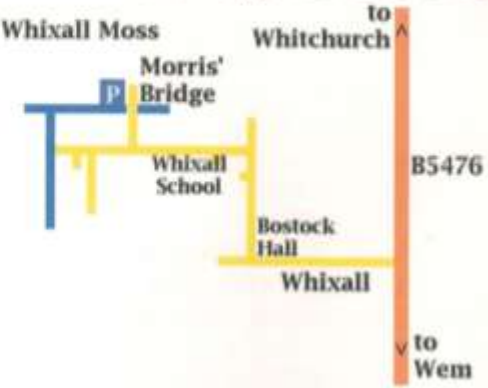
Hotchkiss was a hero, although he shunned any reward his story lingered on. He got his prize some years later when the Shrewsbury School headmaster died. The governors said,

"None of the masters are fit for the job - make Hotchkiss the new Head. If he can deal with the Devil in Wem he can cope with some of the little devils we have in here".

It was done, delivered, and if you doubt this story's true just read the role of honour at the School on the hill - Rev. Leonard Hotchkiss, Headmaster 1735.

Whixall Moss

OS SJ493354



A raised bogland environment with so many rarities to see on the way makes a walk a truly magical journey of discovery. Whixall and its neighbouring mosses are a European Special Area of Conservation and a Wetland of International Importance.

The path down from the canal into the moss.

"Whixall Rats"

The rats are big up in these parts and there is no earthly reason they should go hunting in packs. It is all that famous Wem treacle that has given them such sturdy frames. Filled to the back teeth with the nourishing liquid they are a match for any of your massive man killing rodents from elsewhere. There's even a case recorded of a man being eaten alive just down the road at Wolverley

But with rats, just the same as fish, everything was bigger and better in the old days. A lady I know and respect told me her father used to

tell her this story when she was a slip of a girl, and she'd never believed a word.

Apparently he was on his way home from the pub after a night drinking with the boys when he came to Dobson's Bridge, that little humped back one over the canal. He heard a fearful din coming from down the road like a runaway coach and four travelling at breakneck speed.

Well, he didn't it to be his neck it broke so he scrambled up onto the parapet to let it go by. Can you imagine his eyes as large as Shropshire Blue Cheeses with the veins bulging fit to pop when he saw those rats. Yes, it was no runaway coach it was a swarm of two hundred or more brown rats with pink tails swishing all lead on by the biggest rat he'd ever seen. He swore that king rat was bigger than a boxer dog, and he swore the story was absolutely true too!

She never believed him, not a word, but then a year or two ago she was visiting an old and very respectable lady of 103. When they were talking the subject turned to rats and she told her father's little story which was met with an astonished gasp.

The old lady said she knew it was a true story, she'd seen it with her own eyes. Her razor sharp memory even traced it back to the very day, so it could be no mere coincidence.

Don't you worry your heads about coming eye to beady, black eye with those rats. We value our visitors to Whixall and the Shropshire Rat Catcher is a mighty efficient man. There's no chance of you running into a pack of those rodents today.

Steel Heath

OS SJ544365

Heathland is increasingly a rarity. Steel Heath is common land, one factor that helps to guarantee its survival, the other being its lack of promise as farming land. Since grazing ceased the area is gradually being reclaimed by nature. To the west of the B4576 scrubby woodland has taken its hold on the heath. To the east mossy pools make it a true fairytale landscape fit to spark any imagination.

Daniel Morden telling "The Bwca" at Steel Heath

https://youtu.be/e0pudDATuOw

"Games To Play"

If you are out on Steel Heath collecting firewood you don't expect to be greatly disturbed; a quiet occupation with time to think your own thoughts, or so you would believe. One moment alone, Tom saw in front of him a little old man with a long white beard.

"Have you anything for a starving old man, Sir."

Tom had a generous spirit, although he was by no means a rich man or why would he have to collect firewood in this dank wood? Being about time for his lunch Tom split his food and ale with the dwarf as they sat together on a gnarled fallen trunk. As Tom wiped his mouth and listened to the dwarf's thanks he blinked an eye and *"pop,"* the dwarf was gone.

"Well, that will be the last person I meet today," but little did he know. Bent almost double from the weight of sticks on his back, Tom didn't see the giantess who blocked his way. But make no mistake he heard her voice and it chilled him right to the bone.

"Who is stealing sticks from my wood?" she bellowed.

This was no time for negotiating; the giantess was not ready to listen to apology or argue over ownership of the Heath. A twinkle came to her eye, feeling playful this day, she realised here was a chance for some sport.

"Little man, I will make you a promise for your freedom. Play "Go and Hide" with me. If you win I let you go, if I find you three times, I chew you up."

This was a challenge Tom would not be given a chance to refuse. Tom panicked. He ran back and forth looking for a place to secrete himself. He was at his wits' end when, *"pop,"* the dwarf re-appeared.

"Come and be hidden, Sir, come and be hidden" was all that he said.

The dwarf took his axe and split a tree and, with deft cuts, chopped a hollow where he hid trembling Tom, and sealed the bark into place. All went very still, until the silence was broken by the giantess's heavy footfall.

"I, with my axe, have come to gather some wood for my fire," she roared, with a taunt in her voice. A chop, a groan, a creak and Tom spilled onto the ground to stare into the giantess's huge red eyes.

"Number one, little man," said she, and off he ran. Running, running and there was the dwarf again with a sickle in his hand.

"Come and be hidden, Sir, come and be hidden," was all that he said.

He swept the metal blade through a reed and with intricate cuts hollowed out the pithy centre. He shrank Tom until he was so very small and placed him inside the reed, which he sealed, complete again.

All was quiet, until thunderous feet made the ground cry for mercy and here was the giantess again.

"I, with my scythe, have come to gather some reeds for my roof" she boomed with a laugh in her voice. A swish, a rush, a great keening on the wind and Tom spilled onto the marshy ground with that great body looming above.

"Number Two, little man" she said "Now, no more chances for you."

Off ran Tom gasping, desperate and pale, and the dwarf was there to meet him with line, hook and pocket knife.

"Come and be hidden, Sir, come and be hidden," was all that he said.

Off to the marshy pool, the dwarf casting his line, the hook biting into the fish's lip it thrashing as the dwarf pulled it to hand. With the knife he split it in two, gutted it with such quick skill and placed little Tom in the cavity, resealed the fish good as new and sent it swimming away in the green waters.

All was still except for the ripples lapping at the bank until rumbling feet shook the earth about.

"I, with my rod, have come to catch a fish for my supper," jeered the giantess with a smile curling her lip. Into a tub she climbed and pushed off out into the pool, swinging her rod and casting her line for that very fish. But then the dwarf, his hands at his hips, was blowing a mighty gust, swelling the waters with waves so high. No mercy for the lady on the waters, tossed, she fell from the boat and disappeared below the water never to rise again.

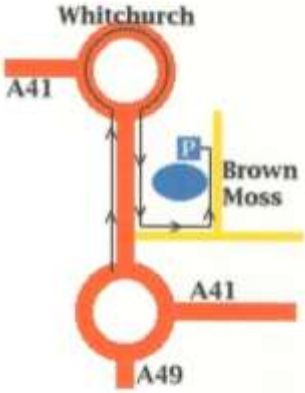
All was quiet save for the whoosh of the line as the dwarf cast a hook for that sore-lipped fish. Broken, the fish gave up Tom who the dwarf restored to size.

"Come and be given, Sir, come and be given," was all that he said.

The dwarf led Tom to the giantess's moss covered cave and her pot of gold. Then, *"clap"*, the dwarf was gone, and Tom's life was changed. All thanks to sharing that meagre lunch.

Brown Moss

OS SJ563395



A green wilderness of shallow pools, marshlands and shady woodland paths allowing the chance to discover rare plants and waterbirds

"Men Have Such Revolting Habits"

Taking a rather energetic stones throw to the South of Whitchurch you would probably hit the site of an old cottage where lived a truly matched, or ideally mis-matched, pair.

The woman would work as hard as there were hours for toil, and the man would not. All he'd do is sit in his chair, picking his nose. He'd roll his bogies so green and sticky and flick them from his nose to the fire as he watched his wife working her fingers to the bone.

Women, as they are fond of telling us, have the patience of Saints. But they cannot endure bad treatment for ever. So the woman came down with her foot and sent that man out to catch the dinner. He was a waster, she knew, but armed with the right weapon even he could deliver. She put the old blunderbuss into his hands.

"Face the trumpet barrel up and pour in the powder.
Up with the ramrod and poke it right down.

Out with the ramrod, in goes the shot.
Up with the ramrod and poke it right down.
Out with the ramrod and in with the wadding.
Up with the ramrod and poke it right down.
Out with the ramrod, pull the trigger and let it go"

Off went the man out into winter, ready to shoot anything that stirred. All away in nests, dreys, burrows and sets. So he went down to the moss to bag himself a bird. He wandered around looking this way and that, but the lake was iced over and there was nothing to shoot. There is a time to give in and with men that time doesn't take a lot of waiting. He decided if he was to return home empty-handed the quick route was the best, so he set off across the icy lake.

Half way across he slipped and he fell, blunderbuss and ramrod rattling this way and that. The noise sent up three ducks from the reeds, their quacking alarmed him but showed him his chance.

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Out with the ramrod and in with the wadding.
Up with the ramrod and poke it right down.
Fix your eye on the target, pull the trigger and let it go.

A bang to wake the dead rent the air, followed by an eerie whistling. He was left flat on his back on the ice, looking up into the air at those three ducks flying there. Well, of course, he had forgotten to take the ramrod out. And that was a blunderbuss, not a harpoon gun. He'd made a right mess. He watched that ramrod fly up into the sky, just like a javelin and imagine his surprise when it went straight through the first duck. This must have been his lucky day. Sure enough and yes it was because that ramrod arched through the sky and straight through duck number two. He couldn't believe his luck nor his eyes. But then he could as the falling ramrod went straight through the third duck.

Now his ramrod kebab was falling towards the edge of the lake and he didn't feel quite so sure of his luck at all. Until it hit a rock, and shot into the air again, but not before it had gone straight through an

alarmed rabbit, and then through a sparrow. Next it went through two pigeons. For those who like to keep tally, that's one, two, three ducks, a rabbit, a sparrow and two pigeons on that ramrod kebab.

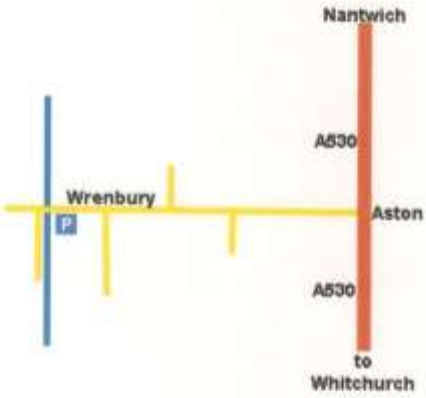
This time, 'though, it was coming down for the middle of the lake and the thinnest ice. With luck, he could just get to it in time. And today that man had plenty of luck. He threw himself at the end of the ramrod as it went down into the icy depths, not even noticing those dagger-shaped shards of ice flying up into the air. He grabbed at the end of his kebab and gently pulled it up. There they were, one, two, three ducks, a rabbit, a sparrow and two pigeons. And right on the end, a beautiful salmon. He looked up to the skies to thank the Lord above. But he didn't, because he saw those dagger-shaped shards of ice cascading down straight around his neck.

Just like ice sticks to skin so those shards made him an icy collar of the tightest fit. This really was the luckiest of lucky days. He was still alive to tell his tale. Back he went to his woman with his kebab - one, two, three ducks, a rabbit, a sparrow, two pigeons and a salmon. She just had to be impressed. Her jaw was agape. She told him he'd earned some leisure, anything he wanted to do.

We know just what he liked too. He sat down by that fire and that ice started to melt. He rolled a bogie so big and sticky and green. When it was just right, he nestled his finger at the front of his nose and flicked. Off came his head, straight into the flames. And was that a satisfying sizzle that his wife heard? Yes, but there's also a lesson for us in this moral tale.

Don't pick your nose or your head will end up roasting in the grate.

Wrenbury Bridge
OS SJ59048



Along the canal, over the fields to the church and back, or make a longer route to discover the beauty of this world apart.

"Three Wrenbury Wishes"

Three Wrenbury lads were kicking at the towpath dirt along the cut of the canal. The school day had been a trial and they had come to let off steam.

One picked up a stone and threw it into the water and the others fell to doing the same. Then, they saw a bottle floating by and used it for target practise. They were better at shying stones than they were at learning at school and all three hit the bottle in unison with their first stones. There was no crack, but there was a cry as an imp shot out of the neck of the bottle, his face ablaze.

"Will you stop disturbing my sleep, you evil lads, what's a poor imp to do?"

"Grant us wishes", they cried. They knew, wake an imp and get a wish.

"Well, who's to go first, Tom, Dick or Harry? You have only one wish each" said the testy imp.

"Me", said Tom, and he looked back at his trying day. "I want to be clever"

"Oh, be bothered and let it be done." And he was. Tom tried his fourteen times table and his friends were aghast.

"OK" said Dick, "I want to be the cleverest boy in Wrenbury".

"Oh, be bothered and let it be done." And he was. Dick tried a spot of calculus and it all added up

A glint came into Harry's eye.

"I want to be cleverer than him" he said, pointing to Dick.

"Oh, be bothered and let it be done." And she was, for Harry had turned into Harriet, a very pleasant, if surprised, looking girl.

Maiden Castle

OS SJ503530

Park in the National Trust car park at Bickerton for wonderful woodland walks to discover the Iron Age Hillfort

"All For A Maiden"

Maiden Castle was an Iron Age Hillfort, home to the largely peaceful Cornovii tribe until the Romans arrived in Britain.

The origin of its name seems to come from the old English word maegden meaning virgin or untaken. Remember those tribesmen didn't like entering into fights, if it was threatened it's more likely that the fort would have been given rather than taken.

While no stories seem to have lingered from hillfort days its name fits quite neatly with a more recent true life tale that has endured less than a mile to the north.

They say every Englishman's home is his castle, not many though would chose a cave to be his. But Mad Allen did. Just below the path in the undergrowth scrub is 'Mad Allen's Hole'. Inhabited at the end of the eighteenth century by an eccentric, or, some would say, a lunatic. One way or the other, Mad Allen was a man who didn't appreciate company.

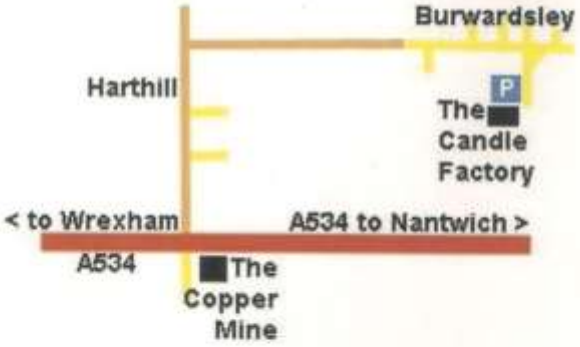
While still in his youth he had fallen madly in love with a beautiful chaste maiden who he longed to make his wife. Alas, although the lady in question would have loved to make the match, Allen's parents were all against it and forbad the loving union. The girl was simply just not of the right class.

Allen, kept apart from his sweetheart, became a recluse. He sold all his property and went to live in a cave by Raw Head in the Peckforton hills. So much did he hate any form of human company that he very soon moved south. The hustle, bustle of sight-seeing visitors disturbed his peace.

The cave on Bickerton Hill near Maiden Castle much more suited his needs and became his home for the rest of what turned out to be a long life. It is said he died in his dark, dank, home at about the age of seventy.

Peckforton Hills

OS SJ522564



"Burwardsley, that's where the crows fly backwards!" Well, there **are** views to take your breath away.

"Paying A Fair Rent"

Jack he was a chancer and he and his missis felt the need to move around. But he always had the tricks to meet the occasion should it arise. When he was among these hills he found them a nice cosy place to stay. But as for rent, well the Landlord's wishes outstripped his means by more than a little way.

Jack, he wasn't worried when it was the Landlord's day to call. He had made his missis change all the cash they had for little brass and copper coins and he fed them to his old donkey with the hay.

The Landlord arrived at the door with an open hand and Jack told him he'd have a short wait.

Jack took up his stick and with a 'crack' and a 'thwack' brought it down on the donkey's rear end. Well up went the donkey's head

and ears, and up went his tail. A bray came from the one end and I'm sure you can guess what came from the other. There on the ground plopped a dollop of muck with glistening brass and copper shining through the brown.

Jack was on his knees gathering and counting the coins and then he was up on his feet and shouting, "no, that's not quite enough" he lifted his stick and was at it all over again.

Now you don't get to be a Landlord without having an eye for an opportunity should it arise. And when Jack was after shouting, "no, that's not quite enough" again, the Landlord held up his hand.

"Jack," he said with a glint in his eye, "Just let me take the donkey and let that serve as your rent for a year". After the halter was passed the Landlord was off before Jack could change his mind.

It's not that easy to turn muck to brass, as any businessman could tell you. The Landlord, he and his new donkey, rushed into the parlour to show his wife how clever he'd been. Down came his stick and the donkey redecorated the prize Axminster carpet with nothing but muck. You can guess whose hand the stick was in next, and the donkey watched as the Landlord got his.

But no tears are shed when a deal is a deal and, as Jack said, "if you'd fed it right, it would have delivered as promised." So Jack and his missis spent a fine year in the warm with a thatch over their heads.

Beeston Castle

OS SJ540591

The aptly named Castle of the Rock commands the landscape, the ruin still standing proudly.

"Treasures Hidden, Treasures Found"

King Richard II knew he was in trouble in May of 1399. He was faced with a rebellion in Ireland and home seemed little safer. Exiled Henry Bolingbroke had an axe to grind and he was setting his sights high, gathering wealth and some very influential friends.

Richard II still had supporters of his own who would serve him well in his hour of need so before setting sail to Ireland with his army he was about stowing away his money and treasures at his allies' castles, Beeston was one of them. Where would be safer than the Castle of the Rock?

When he was in Ireland things had turned from bad to worse for Richard. John of Gaunt had died and Bolingbroke his son had returned to England to claim his inheritance as Duke of Lancaster.

But, that wasn't an end to it. Next thing Henry had enlisted the aid of the Earl of Northumberland and the pair were busy raising the country to claim Henry the crown.

When Richard II returned he never had time to retrieve his hoards of treasure. Bolingbroke was waiting for him. He had him trapped inside Flint Castle and eventually starved him out.

Richard gave up his crown and Henry rose from a Duke to a King, Henry IV. He and his allies searched out Richard's treasure. But they never found it all.

None was found at Beeston and they no longer had Richard to question. He had been murdered as a prisoner in Pontefract Castle. There was much talk that the treasure lay at the foot of the shaft of the 124m deep well in the Inner Bailey. But nothing was ever found.

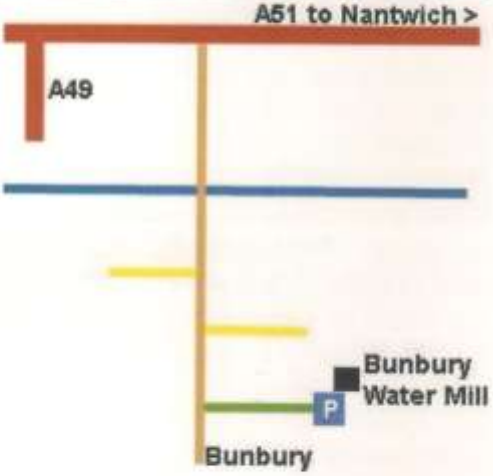
The Castle of the Rock has held its secret. Don't get any ideas of scouring the site with a metal detector. The curator has a steely glint in his eye behind that cheerful smile. He won't stand for any nonsense digging holes at this wonderful historic site.

Some treasures are better hidden. But the real treasure at Beeston is available for you to discover. It's the castle's history and, oh, those beautiful views.

Bunbury Water Mill

OS SJ573580

A setting to bring stories racing into the mind.



The mill is open Sundays & Bank Holiday Mondays April to end September 1.30pm - 4.30pm
Or by arrangement for schools and party visits throughout the year. Ring:-01829 261422

"Born For The Best"

"If you're born a peasant, you'll die a peasant", don't believe it's a hard and fast rule. Some of us are born to transcend the accident of a lowly birth. You just need to read the signs.

A poor old couple round these parts surprised everyone by being blessed with a child, so late in life. And the midwife in attendance noticed a ruddy red mark on the child's cheek. "The boy is born for more than you can give, he's set to marry a Princess", and sure enough the die was cast and the news was on the wind.

The tale spread to every ear and a smile came to almost every face, because everyone likes to see the poor brought up high. But one full ear brought a frown and a grimace, because a King doesn't like to see his daughter sold short. That King donned a disguise and was off on his horse to the poor couples' cottage, and then knocking at their splintered old door.

"That's a fine boy in that cradle. He was born for more than you can give. I've got no kith nor kin, and money aplenty. Let me take him and groom him and get him set in life". The old couple needed no second offer, no arm-twisting. They were sad, but they knew the child was born for more than they could give.

Tears were shed as they waved their baby goodbye, seeing his wicker cradle born away upon that noble steed. Ah yes, but what tears might have been shed if those old eyes had seen that King throw that cradle into the deep, dark, swirling waters of the river. That bitter King watched the currents take his problem away.

Years passed and the King thought no more of it. He had the beauty of his daughter to concentrate on and, of course, the finding of a Prince to take her hand.

One day, as he travelled the kingdom in search of a bridegroom he found himself in need of bed and board as he came to a watermill. The old miller and his wife were ready to oblige. They sat him down and called to their boy to bring forth food.

Some faces etch deep into a mind and when the King saw that handsome young man with a ruddy red mark on his cheek his breath was taken away.

"No he's not our son, Sire, we found him when he was just a baby, bobbing on the waters in his cradle and screaming himself blue. He was washed against the sluice on the millrace. It was a

miracle he was alive. The gods had sent him and we took him in"

Then the King knew. He scribbled a note to his Queen 'kill the bearer of this letter', sealed it with wax and told the boy to take the note to the castle. Off there and then went the miller's adopted son, on the old pack mule, pleased that he was working for his King.

Pack mules cannot race like thoroughbred fillies and the miller's boy stopped to rest overnight and fell into a deep, deep, sleep. And to his good fortune or bad a footpad came by and picked the boy's pocket for what he could find. A letter from the King is quite a prize, but after tenderly easing the seal and reading the note, a little mischief came to the footpad's mind. A new note was written in an expertly forged hand, bearing the same seal and slipped back into the pocket from which it had come.

The King heard the peeling bells and the wedding party before he reached his castle and raced to his Queen.

"Ah, darling" she said "what a shame you're so late. But we did just as you said in your note. The miller's boy is married to your daughter. Now come along and enjoy the feast".

The finest food can taste like ashes to a king. But even he couldn't change a thing. He should have just read the signs.

+ links to three bonus audio stories…

"Blind Ned Pugh" told by Helen East & Rick Wilson
https://youtu.be/KE243F2Ccv4

"The Childs Ercall Mermaid" told by Sal Tonge
https://youtu.be/wfRMIavwndU

"The Loppington Bear" recited by Jim Hatfield
https://youtu.be/ber85CJ5nuo