

# DEVON FOLK REMEMBER MYSTERY FOOTPRINTS



The night of the 6/7th of February is the 150th anniversary of one of the most extraordinary events in Devon history. For when the people of the villages and small towns of Exmouth, Lypstone, Topsham (pictured above), Teignmouth and Dawlish awoke all those years ago, they discovered, in the heavy fall of snow, a vast number of mysterious footprints trailing over one hundred miles across, up and over houses, gardens and fields. They were seen in all kinds of totally inaccessible places, including over rooftops and haystacks, along narrow walls and within enclosed courtyards. Hardly a garden in Lypstone escaped the visitor's attention. They even crossed the two mile wide Exe Estuary! Local Resident, Jane Johnson, said recently, "The footprints haven't been forgotten in the village. People still talk about them and the Lypstone Players even used them in the scenery for this year's Halloween performance".

The prints appeared to have been left by a two-legged animal, rather than a quadruped. However, the impression left in the snow most closely resembled that of a donkey's shoe or, occasionally, a cloven hoof. The sizes varied from 1½ to 2½ inches across. There was no definite path and, at several points, the creature seemed to have approached the doors of different houses, only to change its mind and retreat. Many culprits have been suggested: rabbits, birds, otters, rats or even a badger; but none really seems satisfactory. At the time, the Rev. Musgrave preached, at Lypstone, on the following Sunday, that the creature must have been a kangaroo!

He was trying to allay the fears of local residents who quickly dubbed the tracks, the 'Devil's Footprints' – and they really believed this is what they were. Many ancient superstitions were still very widespread in Victorian Britain, especially in rural communities, and the people of Devon – and particularly of the wilds of Dartmoor – still held many beliefs which were essentially pagan in origin. Mythological characters were transformed into the Devil, who was easily blamed for any unexplained occurrences, especially when they so obviously seemed to display his attributes. Devon folk were always early to retire to bed, because it was widely believed that the Devil led the 'Wild Hunt' across the night's sky searching for the wicked and, especially, the unbaptised. This was a role anciently ascribed to the chief of the Saxon gods, Woden. Although, in Devon, the hunt emerges from the 'Dewerstone,' one of the many timeless rocky outcrops on Dartmoor, which betrays a connection with the Saxon God of War, Tiw, after whom Tuesday was named. Elsewhere in Britain, the hunt is said to have been led by Herne the Hunter, King Herla or even King Arthur: each character probably having a pagan mythological aspect to their origin. Who or what really left the footprints we shall probably never know.



## WOT NO MONUMENTS?

Sunny, but cold: crisp winter days can provide some of the best conditions for photographing historic buildings. It was on one such day that I found myself in Lichfield with just enough time for a whistle-stop tour of the medieval cathedral, the only one in England to retain its three spires known as the ‘Ladies of the Vale’.



The cathedral and see of Lichfield is a very ancient foundation, established by St. Chad in AD 669. I always think of St. Chad as a rather sympathetic and humble character. For he was a Northumbrian, originally appointed as Bishop of York in place of St. Wilfred who arrogantly disappeared off to France for several years. When Wilfred eventually returned, he threw a tantrum and poor Chad was obliged to step down. Four years later, he was sent into Mercia and settled at Lichfield. His holy well, where he used to bathe daily, still stands in the grounds of St. Chad’s Church in the city and his influence is evident throughout the cathedral.

Most notable is the, spookily named, ‘St. Chad’s Head Chapel’ where the skull of the saint was once kept and displayed to pilgrims from a stone gallery. The site of his main shrine is marked behind the high altar and there are depictions of episodes from his life in the stained glass of the chapter house and on the floor tiles in the presbytery.

The chapter house houses the famous ‘Lichfield Gospel,’ one of the Britain’s great illuminated manuscripts, full of colourful creatures and detailed patterns. It was probably made in Wales around AD 730 and belonged to the Abbey of Llandeilo Fawr before coming to Lichfield in the 10th century. In the meantime, Lichfield briefly became the centre

of an archiepiscopal see under the patronage of King Offa (of Offa’s Dyke fame).

The Saxon Cathedral at Lichfield was rebuilt after the Norman Conquest and the building we see today is largely of 13th century date. Unfortunately, it was severely damaged during the English Civil War when the city was the scene of much fighting and the close was besieged three times! The cathedral’s large collection of medieval monuments to the local gentry were destroyed by Parliamentary troops but, fortunately they had been drawn by the antiquarian, William Dugdale, only a few years before. The place fared better than its sister-cathedral however. Originally a dual-bishopric, like Bath & Wells, Lichfield lost its partner at Coventry during the Dissolution of the Monasteries. It was the only cathedral to be demolished in the whole of this religious upheaval.

Subsequent restorations have done much to return Lichfield Cathedral to its former glory. The particularly impressive west front is covered in statuary reinstated in the 1880s. St. Chad, of course, sits at the centre, surrounded by Kings of England and Mercia and, surprisingly, also Kings of Wessex.

Lichfield itself is a small cathedral city, but one which is full of interest. It is particularly proud of its famous sons: Elias Ashmole, the antiquary who founded the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, and Samuel Johnson, the creator of the first dictionary, who has his own museum in Breadmarket Street.

# CIVIL WAR PROPAGANDA FOUND IN GOVERNMENT OFFICE

The British Library in London has recently made an unexpected acquisition of rare and important 17th century pamphlets which reveal the extent to which wartime propaganda was in use long before the modern era.

More than nine hundred pamphlets, bound together in seventeen huge volumes, were discovered amongst the forgotten collection of rare books at the Home Office, as they prepared to move offices. No-one seems to know how they ended up there, although other ancient Home Office papers are believed to have originated in the private papers of early secretaries of state.

The pamphlets cover a long period from 1623 to 1870, but the vast majority date from the 1640s and 50s when England was being torn apart by civil war and subsequently given a new untested form of government. King Charles I, having failed to rule without Parliament, had entered into armed combat with their supporters, with the result that he lost, not only his throne, but his head into the bargain.

The British Library is very excited at being able to make this new collection available to the studious public for the first time. Expert, Giles Mandelbrote, said, "The collection is very important for the kaleidoscopic picture it gives of a range of opinions about the burning issues of the times".

Such pamphlets were the popular newspapers of their time: four to sixteen pages covering individual subjects. There was much discussion of controversial issues such as the monarchy, parliamentary government, the law, religious divisions and toleration. Not so very different from today. However, the current events included volcanic eruptions and the sighting of sea-monsters which were reported to show the dangers of overturning what was perceived as the natural order. Many ordinary people really believed that removing the King would lead to the end of the World.

Thus clear Royalist sympathies are betrayed within this collection, which now provides a fascinating counterbalance to the British Library's existing collection of similar pamphlets gathered together by George Thomason, a London bookseller sympathetic to the Parliamentary cause. Armies on both sides of the conflict kept portable presses and printed such propaganda leaflets while on the march around the country.

There was an awareness of living in exciting times and, while most people would have thrown these pamphlets away when read, some wanted to preserve them for future generations. Others wanted to build up personal libraries from which to mount published assaults on the opposition! Who collected this newest discovery may never be clear. They were probably bound together by someone at Court, after the Restoration of the Monarchy in 1660. Inscribed names of two contemporary lawyers have been identified: Arthur Turner, father of the judge responsible for prosecuting the regicides, and Edward Northey from Oxford University. However, marginal annotations are made by at least four different hands.

## THE CONFESSION OF Richard Brandon

The Hangman (upon his Death bed) concerning His beheading his late Majesty, CHARLES the first, King of Great Britain; and his Protestation and Vow touching the same; the manner how he was terrified in Conscience; the Apparitions and Visions which appeared unto him; the great judgment that befell him three dayes before he dy'd; and the manner how he was carryed to White-Chapell Church-yard on Thursday night last, the strange Actions that happened thereupon; With the nicety conceits of the Crowne Cook and his providing mourning Cords for the Buriall.



Printed in the year Year, of the Hang-mans down-fall, 1649.

# BRIDGING THE GAP AT CONWY

As well as having two of the most magnificent castles in the whole of Britain, the towns of Caernarfon and Conwy, in North Wales, both have some of the most complete examples of medieval town walls to have survived the centuries. Since they were built as English strongholds in a hostile nation, the walls were constantly under the threat of attack from the locals. However, should assailants have managed to reach the wall-walks at Conwy, the occupying English forces had a cunning strategy to prevent the enemy from quickly overrunning the town. For the seemingly continuous stone walkway was, in fact, punctuated by a number of wooden footbridges which they could hastily dismantle or burn down should the need arise. In modern times, the gaps left by these bridges have been filled with concrete structures, a policy which has not been altogether successful as they are now deteriorating rapidly. So, for the Spring visitor season of 2005, Cadw - Heritage in Wales have been replacing these with fine wooden bridges, very similar to the originals. If planning a visit, be sure not to run amok – they could tear them down and leave you stranded on the walls!



## PSALTER SAVED, BUT WHAT ABOUT THE CASTLE?

Since reporting the plight of the Macclesfield Psalter in the last issue of the BHC Newsletter, the FitzWilliam Museum in Cambridge have managed to match the Getty's £1.7m with just two weeks remaining before its deadline. It will thus be staying in Britain. Unfortunately, the fate of its former home, the 14th century Shirburn Castle in Oxfordshire, is far less certain. With its owner evicted, it stands empty and fears are growing that, like so many other stately homes, it may fall into disrepair.

## CHURCH OF THE MONTH

*As well as being an active place of worship, the parish church reflects the history of every village in Britain. This month, we take a look at:*

### HAMBLEDEN CHURCH



Hambleden is a tiny little place just off the Henley to Marlow road in Buckinghamshire. Considered something of an 'idyllic English village', it has often been used as a location for British television programs such as *Just William* and *Midsomer Murders*.

Although the large parish church is much restored, it retains many interesting features, largely related to its monuments to the local gentry. Chief amongst these is the extravagant 17th century monument to the D'Oyley family showing Sir Cope D'Oyley, his wife and ten children, several of whom, having predeceased him, carry skulls. Nearby, and scattered throughout the building, are memorial brasses in various states of repair. The chancel once boasted two monuments to the husbands of Elizabeth Windsor – not the present Queen, but a 16th century Lady of the Manor. That to the cousin of Lord Scrope has been relegated to the tower, but that to Henry, son of Lord Sandys of the Vyne in Hampshire, still holds pride of place. A bedstead from this estate, featuring the arms of family friends, Cardinal Wolsey and Bishop Fox, has been turned into an altar in the north transept. Opposite the Sandys tomb, is the highly carved 'Old English' style sedilia, three seats used by the officiating clergy during the liturgy. It is one of the best examples in the area.

The key moment in the church's history was the christening, in 1218, of St. Thomas of Hereford, the Chancellor of England and the last Englishman to be canonised before the Reformation. The fine old font – possibly Norman, possibly Saxon – at which this ceremony took place can still be seen, but otherwise there is little evidence in the building of this important connection.

# BIOGRAPHIES IN VOGUE AGAIN AFTER 100 YEARS



After twelve years of research, the Oxford University Press finally published their 'Oxford Dictionary of National Biography' in September 2004 and, with libraries coming into their new budget year, the sixty volumes are now beginning to appear on bookshelves across the World.

This vitally important work contains specially written new biographies of some 50,000 men and women from across British History: 4th century bc to the year 2000. You will find details of the lives of almost everyone, well-known or otherwise, who has shaped some aspect of British life. Some of



them were good, some bad, others just plain bizarre, but they're all there. As the work also celebrates the new millennium, no person still alive on 1st January 2001 is included.

Production of these weighty tomes has been a monumental task. The editorial teams had to be divided into twelve subject areas – like science or literature – which were themselves subdivided into blocks based around common themes – such as criminals or reformers. Some 372 associate editors recommended authors and oversaw the writing of biographies in these blocks. The total number of expert contributors, living in forty-nine different countries, reached into the tens of thousands! The project was run by twenty-eight academic research staff, supported by twenty-two members of the OUP and ninety freelancers undertaking a seemingly endless supply of copy-editing, proofing and keyboarding. It has taken so long to complete, that, sadly, the original editor died in office.

The previous edition of the dictionary appeared over a hundred years ago, with new volumes being added every decade. Modern technology means that the new version can offer, not only the option of purchasing the hardcopies for £6,500, but online access with continuous updating at an annual subscription of £195 (+tax).

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## YORKSHIRE MANSION DEVASTATED BY FIRE

Allerton Castle, near Knaresborough, has been seriously damaged by fire after a two day battle by local fire-fighters. At its height, over one hundred firemen were tackling the flames which started in the small hours of 22nd January and caused the roof and first floor to collapse. Despite losing the Dining Room and State Bedroom, a massive clean up operation has enabled the American owners, with the approval of the local fire officer, to reopen the property for weddings and receptions. The house is one of the most important Gothic revival buildings in Britain but, being once owned by George IV's brother, is most famous for its 'Temple of Victory' in the grounds which is supposed to stand on the hill mentioned in the nursery rhyme, 'The Grand Old Duke of York'.

## BODY-SNATCHER-PROOF COFFINS ALL THE RAGE IN 19th C. CEMETERIES



Throughout the 18th and well into the 19th century, the scientific revolution meant there was a great demand in Britain for corpses which could be used for medical research. The only official source were the meager pickings of the public hangman. So, with good money to be made (£8-14 per body!) resurrectionism or body-snatching became widespread. The public was outraged and became desperate to secure 'Safety for the Dead' as contemporary adverts put it. Inventors quickly got to work and one of the most successful results seems to have been the 'iron coffin' patented by Edward Bridgeman in 1818. It incorporated an ingenious flange which engaged with spring clips in the lid and prevented the coffin from being opened after burial. Many were covered with silver foil to appear more attractive. The example in the photograph can be seen in the crypt of St. Bride's Church in Fleet Street (London). However, not all churches would accept this new invention and eventually a court ruling introduced higher burial fees because they took so long to disintegrate!

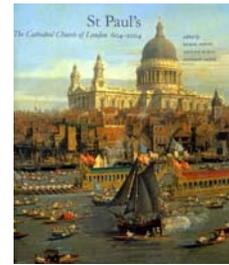


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Newsletter designed & produced by [Nash Ford Publishing](#)  
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## BEST BOOKS



**Keene, Burns & Saint's**  
**'St. Paul's: The Cathedral Church of  
London 604-2004'**  
**Yale University Press \$125.00**

Last year was the 1400th anniversary of the founding of St. Paul's Cathedral by St. Mellitus and, to celebrate, the ultimate history of the church has been published. This very large and lavishly illustrated work tells you everything you could ever wish to know about London's Mother Church, drawing on the most recent research and thinking from forty-two contributors. I found Hollar's engravings of the old cathedral, burnt down in 1666, and Wren's early designs for the new, particularly fascinating.

[Buy St. Paul's on Amazon.com](#)



**Andrew Bridgeford's**  
**'1066: The Hidden History of the  
Bayeux Tapestry'**  
**Walker & Company \$26.00**

There are many books on the Bayeux Tapestry currently available. However, they mostly concentrate on artistry and accepted historical facts. What caught my eye with '1066' is that it looks into some of the tapestry's many features which have never been fully explained. Find out all about the bizarre characters who crop up throughout its length, like Turolf the Dwarf, and the sexually mysterious Aelfgyva, as the author puts forward his theories about its Anglo-Saxon viewpoint and an enigmatic French Count.

[Buy 1066 on Amazon.com](#)