

Mr Colin Crosby on Leicestershire legends and traditions.

Colin is a Blue Badge guide who conducts walks in the County, Rutland, Essex and London. He defined legends as stories with a basis of truth, traditions being actions done regularly. He included a surprisingly high number of locally-connected kings in his tale.

John of Gaunt [d. 1399] was son and father of kings. Leicester Castle was one of his chief residences, others including Tutbury and Kenilworth. One of his three marriages was to the daughter of Don Pedro, King of Spain, on whose death John claimed the Kingdom of Castile. On returning from Spain, legend says he introduced a dance form which originated with the Moors; but Morris dancing was known in England before his time.

Of the five medieval town churches left in Leicester, St Mary de Castro dates from 1107, although there may have been an earlier church on the site. The title of course means (the church of the) Blessed Virgin Mary by the Castle. De Castro distinguishes it from the Church of St Mary in the Meadows, the formal title of Leicester Abbey. The timber-framed John of Gaunt's Gateway (built a century after his time!) guarded the entrance to the castle grounds. The Lord of the castle was met annually at the Gateway by the Mayor, who would surrender his sword to the servant of the Crown, who would then ceremonially return it. This tradition remained until broken by a bolshie 19th century Mayor. The nearby 14th century Turret Gate, now known as Rupert's Gateway, was partly demolished in the nineteenth century. It led from the castle to the Newarke.

The legendary Black Annis is reputed to have worn a long black hat. She had a long nose and chin and a blueish face, and loved children. She lived outside the town, near Western Park in Dane Hills, then a blasted heath, in a cave clawed out with her finger-nails. There she sat waiting for a child of either sex. With a shriek she would grab her victim, suck its blood and eat the vital organs. She then hung the bones, still connected by the skin, on the surrounding bushes, where they made music in the wind. When the supply of local children eventually failed, she dug a tunnel to the Turret Gate, where she resumed her activities. In living memory, children would run through the Gateway to avoid her clutches. Black Annis features in ghost stories, and Colin noted on a recent guided tour how the Gateway worried a dog!

Although there are similar stories elsewhere, Black Annis seems peculiar to Leicester. She appears to be based on the Celtic goddess Danu, wife of the god of the sky, to whom children were sacrificed. A lot of British features are called St Anne's hill, well, etc. Although not mentioned in the Bible, by tradition St Anne was the mother of the Blessed Virgin Mary. So sites sacred to Danu were anglicised to St Anne.

Shrove Tuesday football games were held in two Midlands villages near the County; Ashbourne and Atherstone. Hallaton has its Easter bottle-kicking and hare pie scramble against Medbourne. There are obvious religious overtones; the pies are made by the vicar or on his behalf. When one late Victorian cleric refused, the ceremony being clearly pagan, the cry 'No pie, no vicar' made him relent. The hare is an ancient fertility symbol for springtime. The Easter bunny is really a hare, its rebirth being adapted to symbolise the Resurrection.

St Morrell was an eighth or ninth century northern French bishop. Officiating at Mass, a woman asked him to baptise her dying child, but the Bishop was tardy and the baby expired unbaptised during the service. Morrell therefore resigned. He later became a gardener on the royal estate at Hallaton. He was eventually recognised and persuaded to return to France. Opening the baby's grave to baptise it, a thirty year old man arose, was duly baptised, and thereupon died. The cult of St Morrell grew up in Hallaton but nowhere else.

St Wistan was the home grown prince of the royal house of Mercia, but declined the kingship. Having denounced a courtier's designs on his mother as immoral, the courtier killed him at the place now called Wistow. 'Stow' usually means 'the holy place of'; for example Felixstowe is of St Felix of the East Angles. Wistan, although murdered, was not regarded as having been martyred; in old England murder of a king was an act of blasphemy on the Lord's Anointed. One of the places where Wistan's body lay on its way to the Mercian capital Repton was Wistow, another was Wigston Magna, formerly St Wolfstan's. At Repton a cult grew up. To enhance his abbey's reputation, the Abbot of Evesham asked for the saint's bones. There they stayed until the Reformation.

The church at Scaford near Melton is dedicated to St Egelwyn, a King of Sussex buried there. The last night the thirty-two year old King Richard III slept in a bed was in the White Boar Inn, later renamed the Blue Boar, from where he set out at the head of his army via Bow Bridge, near West Bridge. His horse kicked up a stone which hit the parapet. An old woman cried 'Sire, the next time you cross, it is your head

will strike this bridge'. After his death at Bosworth Field, his local popularity was so great that the victor, Henry Tudor, brought his body back to Leicester to show he really was dead. He was buried in Grey Friars. A century later, a local legend sprang up that his body had been dug up and cast into the River Soar, but Colin thinks it more likely he rests in Grey Friars still; the burial spot was pointed out to the father of Sir Christopher Wren [b. 1632]. John Wyclif of Lutterworth, formerly Master of Baliol College Oxford [d. 1384], had been less lucky. Disinterred by order of the Pope, his bones were thrown into the River Swift.

The chronicler Geoffrey of Monmouth [1100-1154] compiled a genealogy which starts with Brutus, who left Troy after the siege and founded a British dynasty. Geoffrey's Lud is another semi-mythical king, commemorated by Ludgate in London. His son Bladud caught leprosy, was exiled, and became a swineherd. He discovered hot springs which removed the pigs' blemishes and cured his leprosy. King Lud then founded a city at the springs; Bath. He also founded the first university; at Stamford. There certainly was a secession from Oxford to Stamford in the 14th century, until the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge drove the scholars back to Oxford. Another of Lud's sons was Lear. This king was either real or believed to be real by Geoffrey, who says he founded Leicester and lies buried in a chamber below Bow Bridge. Holy Bones nearby had nothing to do with those legends. Bones were found near a church – so they must have been holy! – but they were in fact animal bones from the butchers' shambles.

J N Briggs, 23 November 2007