# To Beast or not to beast, that is the question!

If the Bourne Borderers were to have a beast what could the beast be?!
I have been researching the custom of Morris teams having a beast. I wanted to know firstly why teams used beasts and secondly how those beasts came about.

**Background to Beasts used by Morris Teams**:
Boss Morris's founder member Lily Cheetham explains in a "Tradfolk" interview with John Wilks, that the creatures they use, a whole host of animals and goddess figures, were created in her kitchen organically, by members of Boss who are all crafters and artists.

"*I always feel like the beasts really add to our presence at a performance. Obviously we try and get as many people out when we are performing, but the beasts tend to be some of our partners or our plus-ones etc*"

Blackthorne Morris have a menagerie of beasts; Darkest Ooser, Apple Tree Man, Green Man, Black Vaughan, Twiggy Witch and Mari Lwyd. Their ideas for beasts are based on local myth and ancient legend.





"*We feel that the beasts bring another dimension to the storytelling that we incorporate into our gatherings…we have always aimed to spread British Folklore, particularly Local Folklore*."

In a Tradfolk article by editor Jon Wilks April 2022 entitled "Customs uncovered; Beasts, hobby horses and the suspension of the normal"
Professor Ronald Hutton (folklore specialist), surmises the three categories of British Folk culture beasts:
1. Midwinter ..Mari Lwyd of South Wales
2. Hobby Horses (obby oss) that provided entertainment in the English courts of the late Medieval Period
3. Animal heads on sticks that attended rural festivities of the 19th Century.

Hutton continues "*The historical evidence is somewhat lacking, that they have lasted so long, having been the subject of countless extinctions and revivals is perhaps down to an unabated desire for organised (or not so organised) CHAOS!…two of the simplest ways of expressing festive licence and signalling the existence of legitimate misrule have been the sexes to cross dress and for people to put on animal skins and masks*."

*Both indicate the Suspension of the Normal….*

*Ironically by dressing up as something non-human, we're engaging in a very human desire to commune, throw caution to the wind, and engage in our unending love affair with things that can't properly be explained…*"

"*The Role of the beast in the context of the Mummer's play, and those beasts which appear with Morris dancers, is an attention seeking discordant creative scattering of the masses and making space for the dance…so it was that the beast became a useful companion to Morris dancers both of heralding the prospect of a performance aggressively clearing a space and then once dancing is underway, whipping in the audience, embellishing the scene and extracting recompense*."





"*In modern times,* (Jon Wilks concludes) *after asking a number of sides about the beasts they dance with and the nature of their relationship it seems that the beasts are there to invite intrigue to draw the audience in, to facilitate an element of storytelling,to bring local Folklore to the fore and to create a connection with the lands.*"

**My conclusion based on the above dialogue is that "a beast" could be a valuable asset to the Bourne borderers;**

1) intriguing a bigger audience
2) clearing a space is most definitely required
3) collecting donations

**Background to Myths & Legions in Lincolnshire**

So as to the question, what could our beast be? I have been researching closer to home regarding legends and myths that "our" beast could align to. I was drawn to an article entitled "*Veneration of water*" from "Holy wells and springs" publication which described Lincolnshire as a "*hotbed for rag wells*."

Nellie Cole wrote in "**Folk-days**" about Rag trees 2020;

"*As a folk tradition,* ***Clootie Wells*** *or rag trees are a symbol of the way in which nature inspires people to believe, have hope and connect with nature. 'Clootie' is a Scottish for scrap of fabric*."





Furthermore since the Bronze Age Holy Wells throughout the UK have been revered in this way and are thought to be attributed to the threefold (maid, mother, crone) goddess, Great Mother Brigid (Ireland), Brittania Brigante (England), Cornwall St Ea, Wales St Bride or St Fraig. Legend speaks of her as the Goddess of Smithcraft, Childbirth and wells. She is depicted wearing a green mantle a symbol of fairie folk, she carries a white staff spiralled by a snake (that's where the symbol of medicine originates.)

Animals associated to her are boar, snake, a white skinned cow with red ears - known as a fairy cow. And a white swan, symbolising purity.

**Wikipedia;** "*Clootie wells are places of pilgrimage usually found in Celtic areas. It is believed the tradition comes from the ancient custom of leaving votive offerings in water.*"

The type of tree which are usually used according to various sources I've researched are usually either Ash or Hawthorne. I suppose if neither were in close proximity to the well the most convenient nearest branches would have been used.





Here in Lincolnshire the placing of offering cloth along with a blessing over a nearby branch was prolific but since many wells are now dry they have become a lost memory to elder locals. There are records of a considerable number of Ragwells; ragged springs near Cleethorpes, Great Cotes, Ulceby the custom of placing and blessing bits of cloth on trees near to wells continued through to the 1940's as this account describes; "*Folks used to come for miles, and the gypsies who called the place 'ragged spring or ragged well*', frequently visited … A gentleman who hunts with the 'Yarborough pack' every winter, says that he noticed the rags fluttering on the shrubs and briars each season as he rides passed says "*There is always a supply of tatters… and always has been since his father first knew the district some 70 years ago…a visitor in the 1920s noted that even the trunks were covered with longer pieces of rag.*"

On the West Common in Lincoln is the "**Lincoln Wishing Tree**." Described by the journalist Amy Cooper as "*a cross between Narnia, a children's playground and a jumble sale…It is an individual Tree which is used as an object to place wishes, hopes, offerings and sometimes even prayers on…*" she continues, "*These trees exist all around the World and some people believe they have special Spiritual or Religious Value.*" One of the founders of the tree, Mia Monroe says "*The Wish tree aims to inspire and motivate people to be creative and chose the Hawthorne tree symbolism to (Celtic Mythology) love and protect the visitor as the visitor does to the tree.*" She emphasises too the plastic free ecological aware nature of the offerings.






Interestingly, an article falakros.net describes Bourne towns Whitebread Meadow auction:

"*One of Britains ancient and curious county customs takes place each year to secure the rental of the Whitebread Meadow a field of just over one acre 1 and half miles North of the town.*" Speaking about the auction yearly timing it specifies that part of the terms of rental are for the Hawthorne in the centre of the field to be protected.

English Woodlands article; "*Revealing Folklore, Myth, magic and Legend under the canopy of UK trees*" reads "*Hawthorne - One of the greatest symbols of protection is the humble Hawthorne which has probably more myths associated with it than any other tree. It has long been connected to protection but also sacrifice. Both respected and feared because it is said to harbour fairies who would place a curse on anyone who harmed the tree… For this reason it is known as the 'Fairy Tree' known as the May Tree, named after the month during which the flowers appear. It is said to have been the tree from which May Poles were made.*"



In conclusion my research journey has taken me to the un-anticipated direction of a tree beast entitled the "**Dancing Clootie tree!**."

It's evident that legends and myths local to Bourne are thin on the ground but trees and water sources are prolific. Finally the tree beast will also encompass a desirable ethos that of a connection to the land and be a recognisable and fitting identity alongside our costume and dance.

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