

Superstitious nonsense

From our last office window I could see the Sinodun Hills, all two of them, overlooking the Thames in the distance and topped by the Wittenham Clumps, the oldest recorded woodland in Britain. An old folk tale says that if the cuckoo is trapped inside the clumps, summer will last for ever. We already have a big ferris wheel and a big dome tent built beside the river. Add something like a big version of London's zoo's Snowdon Aviary and we could have endless summer, global warming or climate change, whatever you want to call it. What a load of superstitious nonsense!

Witches and barons

Further downstream the river has had other such mumbo jumbo. After the Norman conquest Sheppey was ruled by four barons, one of whom had a hot temper. In a row with a priest who wanted payment upfront for a burial, he killed the fellow in front of more witnesses than could easily be silenced. Realizing this was not a good situation, he decided to get his own version of the story to the king before anyone else did. The king was, conveniently, moored in his ship in the shallows off Sheppey at the time, appreciated the gesture of one of his loyal barons riding out on horseback to greet him and duly pardoned him. Back on land the baron encountered the local witch, who demanded alms. On being told where to go, she predicted that the horse which had just saved his life would cause his death. To prove her wrong he pulled out his knife, butchered it on the spot and went home by taxi. Some time later he was walking along the beach discoursing with a friend (because that is what sages did) when they came across the skull of the horse. The baron related the tale, gave the skull a kick in passing, cut his foot, caught gangrene and died. Witches 1, Barons 0.

The sea monster

Just north of Skye there was a folk tale that a monster would come from Loch Kishorn. (Notice the word 'from', not 'to' as you would have expected.) It would rise to the surface three times then sink beneath the waves for ever. You can imagine the three great writhing coils, the fangs and the red eyes, can't you? It didn't take much for the locals to transpose Nessie. In the 1980s Howard-Doris wanted to build their Condeep oil platforms in the Inner Sound but the British Underwater Test & Evaluation Centre had already bagged the area for testing submarines and, as we have seen, they keep a close eye on anyone else doing anything. The platform engineers had to move round the corner into Loch Kishorn, out of their way. One platform launched by Prince Charles in 1989 was the largest object ever to have been moved by man on the face of this planet, a monster by anyone's standards. If you work in the oil industry and are concerned about the rest of the tale coming true, Ninian Central is the one to avoid.

Lesser creatures of the sea

Of course, some claimed sightings of fantasy creatures are much easier to dismiss, such as Selkies or seal folk, creatures which were seals at sea and could turn into men on land by taking off their tails. If their tails were hidden while they were away they were trapped on land as men. Selkies didn't go to the disco on Saturday nights. They went off round the coast seducing unsuspecting village maidens. At least, that was the excuse given by the village maidens.

Matching the Selkies were mermaids. Sightings were commonest in the north of Scotland where, obviously, the folk were much more simple and gullible. Strangely enough, a recent theory is that these creatures with removable tails were actually Finn folk in kayaks paddling across from Scandinavia, surely too far fetched, although it would explain why there were more mermaids in an area a long way from the tropical seas they are normally thought to inhabit.

The chap who came ashore in Scotland in a kayak, now in Aberdeen University's museum, was real enough but he had come from Greenland and may have hitched the last bit on a ship, not necessarily voluntarily.

Men of the English east coast

Sometimes it was not just sightings which were the problem. There were close encounters of the third kind. In the 13th century fishermen at Orford landed a naked hairy man. He was kept in the local castle for several months, would only eat fish and would not say anything intelligent even when hung up by his heels and tortured. This chap was clearly a very persistent actor. Taken down to the sea for a swim, he managed to escape past nets hung below him. Obviously he existed, whatever he was.

Likewise, fishermen at Skinningrove captured a sea man off the Yorkshire coast in 1535. He would only eat raw fish and communicated in shrieks for the months he was in captivity but was courteous to the many visitors who came to see him, especially the ladies. Eventually he escaped back to the sea. He behaved a bit like a seal but what seal could live in a house out of water for many weeks?

As recently as the 19th century the sole survivor of a shipwreck at Hartlepool was a monkey in military uniform. Such creatures dressed in this way were popular with sailors on ships at the time but the locals thought he was a French spy so they tried and hanged him. People you have known probably knew people who were alive at that time, shockingly recent for that level of ignorance.

Foreign catches

In *De Piscibus Marinis* Rondeletius reported that four years before the Skinningrove catch the Poles had caught a marine creature resembling a bishop and taken it to the king. Also, that the Norwegians had caught a creature with something like a monk's cowl on its shoulders. This was all getting a bit confusing.

Mermaids of northern Scotland

Is it any surprise, then, that simpler folk in backward places got it so wrong in the more distant past, especially when nobody knew just what mystical powers these creatures had. Certainly it was claimed they could control the winds and they could communicate by telepathy. If television killed the art of conversation, radio did much the same for telepathy. It is not totally dead, of course. Rounding northern Scotland, Sean Morley reported how often he found himself communicating by telepathy with Ian Wilson but they were only a short distance apart. In the past, those widely separated would agree to meet on a particular island at lunchtime the following day and it would happen.

Another question is whether these mermaids were maids at all. After all, anyone able to paddle across the North Sea would have a fairly well developed chest. Whereupon you will accuse me of being sexist and claim that maids would have been equally capable of paddling across the North Sea and it seems you would be right. While nobody wanted to get too close to creatures with magic powers, various sightings suggested that the tails did not have scales as expected but were smooth, as if of skin. Anyone that close should have been able to tell the difference between a mermaid and a merman. Did we have a history of topless blondes from Scandinavia paddling around the Scottish coast?

One good sighting was made by the schoolmaster in Reay in 1797 but the report did not appear in the *Times* for another dozen years. These days the *Sun* would have a photographer there before she could put away her comb. Way back then, if you were a respectable member of society like a schoolmaster you didn't come out with such nonsense or it would not have been a reporter who arrived but a couple of men in white coats with a wagon to cart you off to the funny farm.

If a mermaid parks the stern of her kayak between the rocks and the upturned bow is reflected in still water then you would see the characteristic mermaid tail. However, sooner or later someone would see one with her stern showing and that would require two tails. Most mermaids don't have two tails except the little one in Copenhagen harbour. Also Mélusine, who married Raymond of Poitou in mediaeval times, had children with him, some of whom had odd things like large