

“Dartmoor Myths and Legends”

Talk by Emma Cunis, November 2024

Our second talk of the 2024/25 season and the first on Zoom was by Emma Cunis, talking about the myths and legends of Dartmoor. Emma is local to the area and acts as a guide and speaker on the moor and there are so many myths and legends associated with Dartmoor that she could only talk about a selection. It is a mystic landscape with granite tors, undulating hills, wooded valleys and ancient stone monuments; an environment that lends itself to myths and legends.

The legend of the Nine Maidens Stone Circle near the village of Belstone is that the stones were once young girls who didn't go to church and instead went dancing on the moor. As a punishment the maidens were turned to stone, coming to life each day at noon to dance.

We then heard about the “faithless wives of Chagford” who, as penance, had to walk from Cranmere Pool on the high moor down to the Scorhill stone circle which they run round three times. They then tracked down to the Tolmen Stone, a holed stone by the river, where they purified themselves and finally went to the Grey Wethers stone circle to pray for forgiveness. If the stones remained standing the woman would be forgiven.

Bowerman the Hunter was a big man who liked hunting with hounds. One day whilst hunting, he came across woodland, where he found a coven of witches. He ran through with his hounds, upsetting their cauldron, making the witches very angry. A witch named Levera turned into a hare and led him back to where he started out at Hound Tor and there she turned Bowerman and his hounds into stone – Bowerman's Nose. This is actually a natural stack of rocks, with a slight resemblance to a human figure.



Bowerman's Nose

Squire Richard Cabell lived in Buckfastleigh in the seventeenth century and was an evil man, said to have killed his wife and to have sold his soul to the Devil. The Devil and a phantom pack of hounds is said to have attended Squire Richard's funeral and on the anniversary of his death it is said you can

hear the hounds baying hourly. Many years later this story was the inspiration for the “Hound of the Baskervilles” by Arthur Conan Doyle. Stories of spectral hounds, usually headed by Satan or Odin, appear all over Europe and are not unique to Dartmoor.

Emma then told us about Lady Howard who lived at Fitzford House, Tavistock in the seventeenth century. Lady Howard was orphaned at nine years old and was taken in by a friend of her parents who decided to marry her off to a much older man who enjoyed hunting, but he was killed when he fell whilst chasing a stag. Lady Howard then married a man closer to her age and had children with him, before he fell ill and died.

In all Lady Howard had four husbands who all died in mysterious circumstances and her ghost is said to haunt Tavistock where a coach made out of her husbands’ skeletons, led by a dog with glowing red eyes rides every night from Fitzford House to Okehampton Castle where the dog plucks a single blade of grass. Lady Howard’s spirit will only rest free when all the grass has been plucked – an impossible task.

Jan Reynolds was a tin miner who lived in Widecombe in the Moor. He took to drinking and gambling and sold his soul to the Devil for a never ending purse of gold. He paid off his debts, but in 1638 the Devil visited the moor, stopped off at the Tavistock Inn and ordered beer, which sizzled as he drank it. He asked the way to Widecombe, where, unusually, Jan was in the church. A crack of thunder struck the church and a thunderbolt killed three people. The Devil came down the steeple, took Jan under his arm and flew away on his horse, Jan’s playing cards falling out of his hands and landing on the ground.

Kitty Jay, a young unmarried housemaid, took her own life after becoming pregnant. Her grave always has fresh flowers, said to be placed there by pixies. Pixies are thought to be helpful but if you don’t thank them they get mischievous and bring down fog. If you take your coat off and turn it inside out it will confuse the pixies and the fog may then lift.

A more macabre and more recent tale is that of the “hairy hands of Dartmoor”. In the 1920s there was a series of accidents where a pair of hairy hands was said to have grabbed steering wheels and handlebars, causing vehicles to crash. The council upgraded the road but the stories continued. As late as the 1990s a soldier claimed that a pair of disembodied hands had tried to strangle him.

This talk was just a sample of the many myths and legends associated with Dartmoor and brought back memories of early HADS study tours. Those who have experienced the atmosphere of the moor are not surprised at the many myths and legends that have grown up there.

Alan Sandford

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