

Extract from James, Maureen (2013) Cambridgeshire Folktales

I don't know if there are still Toadmen in the Fens, but there certainly were at one time, and that was not so long ago. These were ordinary men who had carried out an elaborate ritual so that they could gain power over horses and other strange supernatural powers.

It is said that this ritual involved catching a male Natterjack Toad and either skinning it alive or pegging it to an ant hill so that the ants could pick the bones clean. The bones would then be carried on the person until they were fully dried. At midnight when the moon was shining, the initiate would go to a stream and throw the bones into the water. The bones would then let out a terrifying scream as they floated down stream, whilst just one of the bones would float in the opposite direction, also screaming. This bone would be removed from the water and carried by the toadman who believed that he had, by his actions, made a pact with the Devil. One account even adds that the toadman must carry the bone into the stables at midnight for three consecutive nights, and on the final night he would actually meet with, and fight the Devil.

It is not surprising that people would be wary of such Toadmen, particularly as they could stop horses from moving an inch or make them unmanageable for anyone else. An adult education tutor, named G W Pattison, researching the subject in the 1950s was told a story about a toadman who sat down at night in the loft while the chaff cutter worked itself, and also of a toadman who became so frightened as a result of his experiences that he left the land, and went to work in a factory. He was also informed of what happened when a person who worked alongside toadmen tried to find out their secret – the answer was likely to be: "I daren't tell my own son. What I know goes to the churchyard with me." Another informant explained that their own father had expressed a desire to become a toadman, but was dissuaded by his father (the informant's grandfather) that if he did "he would shoot him."

An example of the Toadman's power can be gauged from the Tale told in Ely of how a carter on a farm was told to take a wagon into Cambridge. He set out early before anyone else was up and about, but when the farmer went into the yard he found that the horses were still in the stable, yet the wagon had gone. On searching around he found that some young horses, not yet broken for cart work, were also missing. The farmer and his workers fully expected the carter to return from an unsuccessful trip, however very late that night the horses arrived back at the stables with the wagon containing the carter who was dead drunk and sound asleep. No one ever solved the mystery of how the carter managed to harness and drive such inexperienced horses and get them back safely.

The following story, about a toadman in the Chatteris area, is based on three variants of the same story, two of which were collected in North Lincolnshire in the 1880s (and were combined in the tale of Fred the Fool in my Lincolnshire Folk Tales book), and the third collected by Polly Howat in the 1990s in a Wisbech Nursing Home from a very elderly woman who had been told the story by her grandfather.

A key part of the story is the 'Chief Worm' which may be derived from the Anglo Saxon 'wyrn' which means dragon. In the Norse tradition, Nidhogg the dragon lives in Hel, the realm of the dead under the Guardian Tree, Yggdrasill where he eats the bodies of the dead.

Elijah's Ghost (A Tale of a Toadman)

Long ago, a farmer went to the Michaelmas hiring fair to find someone to help him to manage his horses. He found a young man, named Elijah who seemed competent and invited him to work at his farm which was situated on Acre Fen between Chatteris and Somersham.

Elijah became a 'live in' labourer and soon proved very skilled at handling the horses that pulled the plough. However the farmer, though he fed his workers adequately, was not good at parting with his money and was often late with the wages.

So in response to the late payment, Elijah decided to teach the farmer a lesson and he used his toadman's ability to stop the horses from working. The farmer was furious with this but he could not get the horses to move an inch until he had paid everyone what was due.

From this day on, the relationship between Elijah and the farmer changed and the latter became suspicious if anything went wrong. His fear continued to increase, and as a result of this the young man became more aloof until one night the farmer crept into the small hut where the toadman was sleeping soundly and, using a pair of pliers, pulled off one of his nails.

Elijah surprisingly did nothing, and got up the next morning and carried on with his work. However, a while later a joint of meat went missing, and though the other farm labourers said that they had seen the dog eating the meat, the farmer blamed the toadman and in his anger swung an axe which chopped off the young man's arm.

Realising what he had done, the farmer offered Elijah a small amount of compensation and a couple of days off, which seemed to settle the situation. However the farmer was still wary of the toadman's power, and when, a week or two later, he was woken by shouts from the stack yard and found his barn, full of hay, blazing furiously, his only thoughts were that Elijah had started the fire in revenge.

The farmer rushed to the hut, grabbed Elijah by the throat and dragged him to the fire, where, without a word, he flung him into the flames.

When the embers had died down the spirit of the young man found himself walking in the netherworld and he asked the creatures there what he should do next. He was told that he would need to see the Chief Worm who would eat him up so that his spirit could rest in peace.

Elijah found his way to the Chief Worm but was told that he would need to return with his ashes. He did so but was told that there was still something missing. Recalling that he had lost his arm he was told that he must retrieve that too.

Fortunately the arm had been carefully buried near the farm and the toadman was able to bring the partially decomposed arm to the worm, but this was still not sufficient. The worm could smell that the nail was missing.

Sadly Elijah could not locate the missing nail and so he was destined to wander in the twilight space for the rest of eternity, and it is here that the great-grandfather of the old lady saw him...a ghostly figure, walking out on the Acre Fen in a haze of green light...