

The Greylag Goose – Protector of the peoples of the East Anglian Fens

By Maureen James

Whilst it is a well known fact that the Greylag Goose is the only species indigenous to the British Isles and that in former times it bred abundantly in the East Anglian Fens, it is much less known that there was once a ‘Brotherhood of the Greygoose feather’ – a secret society of fenland people who each carried a split Greygoose feather and protected all others who did the same. In this article I would like to say more about this goose and recount the evidence for the Brotherhood.

In the centuries before the massive drainage of the Fens by the Dutch Engineer Vermuyden and others in the 1600s, the inhabitants of the wetlands lived by fishing and fowling. There was an abundance of food for consumption or sale to be found in the wetlands and the young Greylag geese were caught in large numbers and kept with the vast flocks of tame-bred geese.

The Greylag goose at one time was found in the East Anglian Fens throughout the winter and it is believed that the name "lag" derived from the fact that the goose lagged behind the other wild species at the season when they took themselves to their northern breeding quarters. However in Lincolnshire it was noticed that the flocks of tame geese were urged on by their drivers with the cry of "Lag'em, lag'em."

Whatever the origin of the name, in the days before drainage, when the geese were plentiful, it is believed that all ‘true Fenmen’ carried a split feather from the Grey Goose. In addition to carrying this feather, they also knew a secret password, which guaranteed help to those in need. The major piece of evidence for this custom is in the Fenland story of King Charles and Mucky Porter, which I would like to relate to you now –

At the time of the English Civil War as things were turning against the Royalists, King Charles escaped from Oxford to Norfolk. Whilst staying at Snore Hall, near Downham Market he decided that he needed to get to the Great North Road and up to the North. The King and his advisors were wary of being captured by the Parliamentarians in the region of Cromwell’s home and decided to go across the undrained Fens, through Huntingdon and up the Great North Road.

To get across the Fens the King needed to enlist the help of a local man who knew the area for, at that time, it was undrained and very dangerous. He heard that the best man for the task was Mucky Porter, the landlord of the Fleece Inn at Southery. Mucky agreed to help the King and when he was asked for proof of his honesty and reliability, he drew from his pocket a Grey Goose feather, took out his knife and split it down the middle.

Mucky told the King that he was a true Fenman and that all the true folk of the area carry the split Grey Goose Feather. If any other who carries the feather is in need, they are sworn to help them, even at the risk of their own life. He then gave the feather to the king, told him the secret password and said that he too was now a member of the Brotherhood.

The following morning Mucky Porter and King Charles set out across the Fen. Mucky was an expert guide and they soon reached the river crossing just outside Huntingdon, the final leg of the journey. But the crossing was strongly manned by Parliamentarian troops.

Mucky Porter, when stopped by the guards, put his hand into his pocket, took out the split Grey Goose feather and held it for all to see. The King did the same and the guards, who were also

Fenmen allowed the travellers to cross. Then Mucky Porter, taking a bag of gold in payment, left the King to travel on his way.

The King failed to negotiate help and was eventually captured by Cromwell and his men and finally executed on January 30 1649.

It is said that when Cromwell found out that his troops had allowed the King to cross the river at Huntingdon, he summoned them to him, but on hearing their story, he being a Fenman too, had to let them go. It is also said, in the Fens, that on the night before the execution of the King, Cromwell was sitting with the rest of his generals when a messenger arrived. The messenger produced a split Grey Goose feather and placed it on the table before Cromwell saying that the King, as a member of the Brotherhood, asks for mercy. Cromwell's face went white and he dismissed all those around him.

Cromwell sat long into the night, staring at the feather. He was a Fenman and he knew what he should do, but when morning came he allowed the beheading. It is said that Cromwell was never the same after this. He brooded and brooded and it was made worse by the fact that when the Fenland members of his army heard about his actions they refused to follow him, threw their Grey Goose feathers at his feet and returned to their homes.

This story was collected by the folklorist W H Barrett and printed in his collection of 'Tales from the Fens' in 1963. The story fits well with the historical record as the King did stay at Snore Hall in Norfolk before going north to meet with the French and Scots. Barrett also found that the protection of the split Grey Goose feather was still being used by French Prisoners in the early 1800s and that the tradition was believed by the local people to have survived for hundreds of years, though without written record. The man, who told the Mucky Porter story to Barrett, explained that whilst his own father was a member of the Brotherhood and knew the secret password, he never passed it onto his son.

And so the Brotherhood is believed to have died out, and for a time, with the increased drainage, so too did the presence of the Greylag Goose in the East Anglian Fens. But whilst the Greylag Goose has been reintroduced in many areas of the UK and numbers have increased significantly, the Brotherhood, to my knowledge, has not survived or been revived.

That saying, Gordon Phillips, who runs workshops to teach traditional Fen dancing, has been informed by two different children, one in Littleport and the other in Benwick, that they had found a grey goose feather amongst the possessions of their great grandfathers after their death, but had, until then, no idea of the significance!

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