

The History and Folk Tales of  
The Fens  
WEA Day School  
Session 1&2

Dr. Maureen James – Autumn 2014

10.00-11.00

Exploring the tale of Tiddy Mun

11.00-11.20

Break

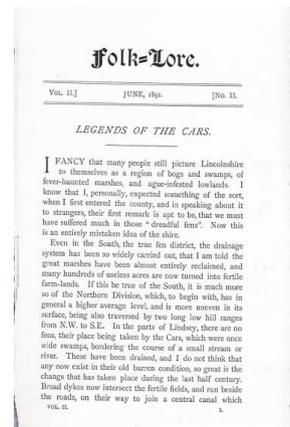
11.20-12.20

Exploring the tales of the Great  
Worm

Exploring the tale of Tiddy Mun

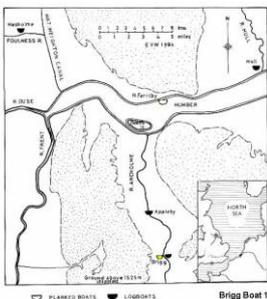


Redbourne



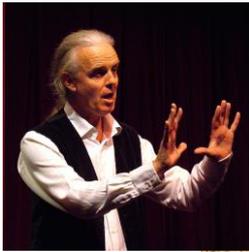
River Ancholme

40km long with 4m drop in level from end to end, similar to the Fens Ouse Washes end to end. First major drainage scheme in 1630s though Tiddy Mun probably refers to the 1767 scheme which was effective for a time. It was not until 1825 that drainage was finally reliable.



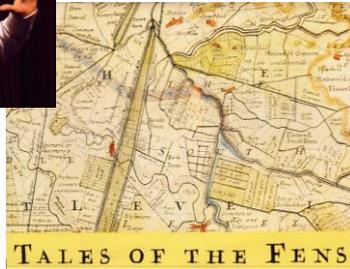
Long agone, i 'ma gran's toime, th' Carlan's down by wor a' in bogs, as thee's heerd' tell, mebbe: gra'at pools o' black watter, an' creepin' trickles o' green watter, an' squishy mools as'd soock owt in, as stept on un.

Weel, my gran' used to sa'ay, how, ong afwore her toime, tha moon's sel' wor towanst de'ad an' buried i' tha ma-ashes; an' if thee will, a'll tell thee aboot it as she used for to tell me.



**Hugh Lupton**

**Tiddy Mun**

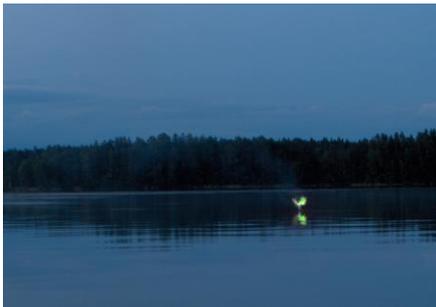


Tiddy Mun, wi-'out a name,  
White heed, walkin' lame;  
While tha watter teems tha fen  
Tiddy Mun'll harm nane.



## What was Tiddy Mun?

Was he a fairy creature... Or could he be a will o' the wisp?



## Other apparitions on the Carrs...

Out on the Carrs, there were boggarts, will o' tha wykes, todlowries dancing on tussocks, and witches riding on black snags that turned to snakes. People carried charms for protection from these evil creatures, particularly 'Bible Balls' – bits of paper with verses from the Bible crinkled up in a nutshell. Thomas found that "any prayer or piece of the Scriptures might have a mystical power waiting to be tapped" and that hundreds of charms have survived.

## Ignus Fatuus (foolish fire)

A self-igniting marsh gas which appears as small flickering flames on the surface of the water. It is also known as:

- Peggy-Lantern, Peggy-wi'-her Lantern,
- Jenny Lanterns, Jenny-Whisp,
- Jack o' Lantern,
- Will-o-the-wikes, Will-o'-the-Wisps, Willie Wisps,
- Hob o' Lantern, Hobgoblin or Hob by Lantern
- Fairy Lantern, Foxfire, Friar's Lantern,
- and in the Cambridgeshire Fens as The Lantern Man.

## The Lantern Man

Such a creature was seen by a Norfolk man, who, crossing the 'medders' at night whistled to his dog and brought up a Lantern Man. The whistler bolted for shelter, into a friend's house, who in bravado brought out a horn lantern on a long pole. The Lantern Man hurled himself at it, and the lantern was found with all the horn burnt up as though it had been in a fire...the usual method of protection from the apparition was "to lie face downwards with the mouth buried in the mud so that the Lantern Man will pass over the prostrate body.

“at this season of the year great numbers of wild geese daily cross Marshland, flying inland at early dawn to feed, and returning at night. No one who has heard their weird cry in the dusk can feel surprised that the older labourers still speak with bated breath of the " Gabblerout " of the Wild Huntsman, and the wandering souls of children who have died without baptism, whom he chases, and whom you may see for yourselves as " willywisps " flitting across the low grounds most nights of the year.

Source: Heanley (1903) *The Vikings: Traces of their folklore in Marshland*

The call of the peewit (or pyewipe) was said to herald the coming of *Tiddy Mun*. The bird, properly called the Lapwing was universally held in bad esteem. A Russian tale relates how its call is a desperate cry for a drink. The bird was said to have failed to help God to supply the seas, lakes etc. with water, and as a punishment it was only allowed to drink from hollows and among stones after rain.



## The Ague and Opium

Sufferers of the ague, a form of malarial fever...experienced intermittent and severe shivering which shook the whole body and was accompanied by intense pain in the limbs. The best way to alleviate the painful symptoms was through the use of opium, but the withdrawal symptoms experienced when the taking of opium ceased were also shaking of the limbs, which prompted the sufferer to believe the ague had returned and to take more opium.

### Opium and the Imagination



‘... decaying things, still faintly touched with the likeness of beings once loved, stir beside them in rotting debris; their children, as they kiss them, turn to skeletons. Wandering through huge caves, they are forced to step on rotting corpses, and thousands of faces made of blood-red flame flash up and die out in the darkness. They are watching faces everywhere, grinning up...stretching and lengthening and disintegrating’.

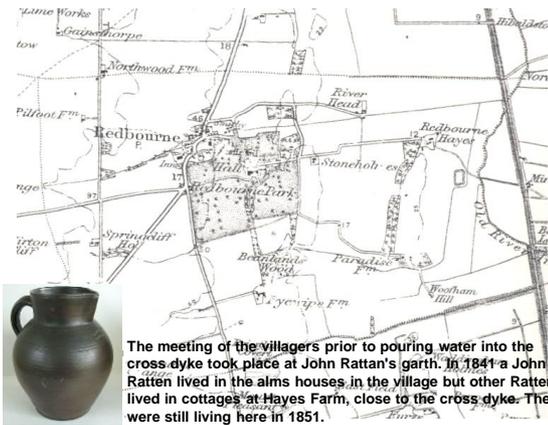
### Tiddy Mun wi’out a name, Here’s watter for thee, tak’ tha spell undone!



### Offerings to the water

Gutch and Peacock found evidence of a Lincolnshire saying that “whenever water is drawn from a well a little should be thrown back into it (1908, p. 5).





The meeting of the villagers prior to pouring water into the cross dyke took place at John Ratten's girth. In 1841 a John Ratten lived in the almshouses in the village but other Rattens lived in cottages at Hayes Farm, close to the cross dyke. They were still living here in 1851.

“I believe that...Tiddy Mun provides insight into some of the ecological consequences of land reclamation. This insight is of particular interest because it describes the events following land drainage from the perspective of the largely illiterate fen-dwelling population whose viewpoint is not often documented in standard historical sources.”

Source: Horn, Darwin (1987) p.11

### After the drainage, Tiddy Mun put a spell on the car-folk...

- The cows pined
- The pigs starved
- The ponies went lame
- The ‘brats’ (children) took sick
- The lambs dwined (dwindled/faded away)
- The creed meal burnt itself
- The new milk craddled (curdled)
- The thatch fell in, and the walls burst out

### After the people had poured the water into the cross-dyke...

- The sick bairns (children) got well
- The cattle throve (thrived)
- The bacon-pigs fattened
- The men-folk addled (earned) good wages
- Bread was plentiful

## The Livestock - 1

The construction of the sluice at the mouth of the Ancholme River prevented brackish water from the Humber estuary from inundating the valley during periods of high tide.

This would have initially led to the soil becoming more acid causing Johne’s disease in the cattle who would stand listlessly and refuse to eat.

The ground would also have become hard and the ponies, used to walking on soft springy ground would develop sore feet and lameness. Modified shoeing, the introduction of larger draft horses and the addition of clay to the soil would have remedied this in time.

## The Livestock - 2

The livestock subsisted on natural wetland vegetation but with drainage the former grazing lands were replaced by fields of rape, wheat and oats, some of which were used for feeding stock.

Changing to feeding on rape can cause bloating in sheep and cattle, as well as refusal to eat. The change in feed can also make the milk taste and smell differently. Sudden shifts in diet can also lead to severe diarrhoea in pigs.

The elimination of wetland vegetation would also have increased the number of mosquitoes and consequently fly-borne diseases such as the ague or swamp fever.

## Human Disease

With the changes there would have been an increase in malaria and gastro-intestinal disorders with the suffering of infants and small children being more pronounced as they dehydrate much faster. Whitley noted in 1864 that “the first effect of the improved drainage of the large Fen districts...especially those which were formerly constantly covered with water...has been to rather increase the prevalence of ague, was reasonably to be expected, in as much as a much larger surface of decaying vegetable matter has thus been exposed to the action of sun and air.

## The Houses

When the water is drained away from the boggy areas, there is a rapid compaction of the soil, and a shrinkage of the peat. This may have led to the less structurally sound houses collapsing.



## The fate of the Dutchmen...

The folk would not give the Dutchmen refreshments, or bedding, or fair words; no one let them cross their door-step; and they said to each other, they said, that it would be ill days for the carrs, and the poor Carr-folk, if the bog-holes were messed with, and “Tiddy Mun” were annoyed...

Was Tiddy Mun a scapegoat for the killing of the Dutch drainage engineers, the blame of which was put on the Fen Tigers further south?

Mabel Peacock noted that “It is still considered natural that the descendants of people who enclosed common land at the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth centuries, should suffer from ill-luck.” She gave the example of a family whose ancestors had enclosed a stretch of poor quality moorland and turned it into rich farm-land, much to the annoyance of local cottagers who had common rights on it. The descendants of the cottagers believed that the family had not “thriven.”

## Main Sources for Exploring the tale of Tiddy Mun

Balfour, Marie (1891) 'Legends of the Cars' in *Folklore*, 2(2), pp.145-170, (3), pp.257-283, (4), pp. 401-418.  
Eastern Counties Folklore Society 1936-39 item 14.1, p.19.  
Hayter, Althea (1968) *Opium and the Romantic Imagination*.  
Horn, Darwin (1987) 'Tiddy Mun's Curse and the Ecological Consequences of Land Reclamation', in *Folklore*, 98 (1), pp. 11-15.  
Lupton, Hugh (1990?) *Tales of the Fens* (tape)  
Thomas, Keith (1991) *Religion and the Decline of Magic*.

## Exploring the tales of the Great Worm



## Greater Fens Museum Partnership

In 2010-2011, the Greater Fens Museum Partnership led a project entitled *Fenland Stories* in which community groups in Cambridgeshire, Norfolk and Lincolnshire worked with their local museum and a film-maker to produce short films based on a selection of local stories. One of the stories chosen was *Sam'l's Ghost* which became the focus of a project by Kingsfield Primary School, Chatteris for a film entitled *Samuel and the Worm*. This, and the other films, were shown on a screen fixed into a model of a willow tree, that became the central feature of a travelling exhibition which visited 16 museums.



"films retelling traditional tales and modern Fenland myths."



You can see Fenland Stories when it visits these museums:

**2010**

- 3 April - 2 May: 0431 817515 **Wicken Fen**
- 7 May - 6 June: 0431 933 72074 **Flag Fen, Peterborough**
- 12 June - 4 July: 0431 334 18414 **Bedford Hall, Hunting**
- 10 July - 27 Aug: 0431 726 244 **Fensland Museum & County Library**
- 14 July - 18 August: 0431 222 80388 **March & District Museum**
- 21 August - 18 September: 0431 554 85385 **Wickenham Museum**
- 18 September - 17 October: 0431 733 84898 **Chatteris Museum**
- 13 October - 8 November: 0431 534 69619 **Ely Museum**
- 10 November - 3 December: 0431 533 66635 **Wickham & Fenland Museum**
- 7 December - 3 January 2011: 0431 945 38817

**2011**

- Peterborough Museum and Art Gallery: 31 - 30 January: 0431 732 86863
- 51 Hours Museum: 1 - 27 February: 0431 480 14163
- Agonouglie Hall: 1 - 27 March: 0431 729 96305
- Cambridge & County Folk Museum: 20 March - 20 April: 0431 755 159
- Pickwell Lane Drainage: 4 May - 2 June: 0431 553 68830
- Agon Museum: 1 July - 27 August: 0431 553 75001

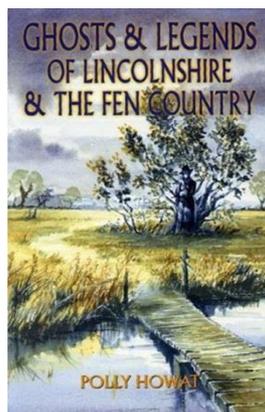
www.fenlandstories.org.uk



## Sam'l's Ghost/Fred the Fool & The Wandering Toadman



"so that he can rest in his grave."



Marie Balfour noted within the introduction to Part I, that "some of the stories were pieced together by scraps gained from several sources". This is likely to refer to *Fred th' Fool* and *Sam'l's Ghost* of which she suggested in the introduction to Part III that they were "...portions of the same tale, although told...at different times and by different people". She stated that she had "given titles to these...but otherwise... added and altered nothing."

Balfour described the informant, who also gave her the tale of *Fred th' Fool*, as "a poor story-teller, [who] did not seem to realise the incoherency of the tale" and added that "...he believed...that all dead persons are "boggles", capable of feeling, speaking, appearing to living eyes, and of working good and evil, till corruption has finally completed its work, and the bodies no longer exist"

## Sam'l's Ghost

- Location: not named
- Collected: 1887 approx by Marie Clothilde Balfour
- Informant: a young girl in Redbourne, North Lincs who heard it from her grandparents

## Fred the Fool

- Location: the eastern side of the Lincolnshire Wolds
- Collected: 1887 approx by Marie Clothilde Balfour
- Informant: a man from the Wolds that she met in an Inn

## The Wandering Toadman

- Location: Acre Fen between Chatteris and Somersham
- Collected: 1990s by Polly Howat
- Informant: a 70+ year old woman who was told the story by her Grandfather

## Wandering Toadman & Variants

Aspect of story	Chatteris version	North Lincolnshire versions
Main character	Elijah	Samuel/Fred
Start of the tale	Hiring Fair	Hiring Fair
Type of character	Skilled Horseman (Toadman)	Scrawny little agricultural labourer
Reason for part 1	Not paid - stopped horses	Hunger so decided to steal food
Punishment 1	Nail taken off whilst he slept	Nail taken off for stealing
Reason for part 2	Accused of stealing food	Needed clothes so stole the masters
Punishment 2/3	Chopped off arm whilst he slept	Hand, then arm chopped off for theft
Reason for part 3	Barn on fire – toadman blamed	Barn set alight whilst he should have been watching it
Punishment	Thrown into the flames	Thrown into the flames
After death	Has to meet the Chief Worm	Has to meet the Great Worm
Task	To gather ashes and body parts	To gather ashes and body parts
Outcome	Couldn't find nail so still wandering	Couldn't find nail so still wandering

## Hiring Fairs



It was the normal custom for hiring to be done once a year, at the Statute (status) fair which was also often known as 'the hiring fair'. Commonly held at Michaelmas (29 September) these fairs were found throughout the county. The labourers would stand either in an enclosure or on a platform, where they were 'looked over' by their prospective employers for features such as strength, general appearance and character. They would then be questioned about their skills and abilities, previous employment and their liabilities (which might well include wives and children).

Enid Porter noted that, at the fair in Girton, "horsekeepers seeking new masters would stand holding whips or lashes of whipcord; cowmen fastened a cow's horn to the front of their smocks."



## Toadmen and Horses



## The power of the Horse-Whisperer

Secret societies such as the Horseman's Word and the Toadmen sprang up throughout Britain and were in existence for many generations. Initiates would, as is common in Masonic ritual, first be bound to secrecy, be made to undergo an 'ordeal', and then be given the secret of 'the word'... There were ... some strange rituals associated with some of these societies. One such was called the 'Water of the Moon'...commonly practised in Cambridgeshire....The ritual required that the horseman kill a frog or toad and hang the body on a thorn tree until only the skeleton remained. At full moon the man then had to take the skeleton to a running stream and throw it into the water. One small forked bone would detach itself from rest and float upstream, and it was this bone from which the horseman would then derive devil-given power over horses. Such were the Toadmen; whisperers with a demonic covenant!

Source: [http://www.equine-behavior.com/Origins\\_of\\_horse\\_whispering1.htm](http://www.equine-behavior.com/Origins_of_horse_whispering1.htm)

"To become a toadman, catch a " walking toad "You may then skin it alive...or you may peg it to an ant-heap and let the ants eat the bones clean. Toads may be plank-hanged. That's to say that they are stretched out on the end of a plank which is balanced on a crosspiece. The hangman then bangs the other end with a mallet. The toad is thrown up into the air, and lands on the plank with a sufficient force to kill it. The bones are then dried while being carried on the person. On a moonlight night at midnight, and all alone, the would-be toadman goes to a stream where he throws in the bones, which let out such screams that only a brave man can stand for it. One bone, still screaming, points or even moves upstream. This bone must be taken out of the water, and carried about by the toadman who is now in league with the Devil. According to one account the toadman must take the bone to the stables at midnight for three nights running, when on the third night he meets the devil, fights him, and draws blood. He is then, and not before, a fully-fledged toadman. He will be marked out as an aloof, silent fellow with strange supernatural powers. "

PATTISON, GW (1953) Adult Education and Folklore p.426

...the toadmen of Wisbech in Cambridgeshire observed an elaborate initiation ritual. A live toad was captured and skinned alive, or pegged to an ant-heap until the flesh was eaten. The toad's bones were then carried in the initiate's pocket until dry (the eighteenth century wise woman Tilly Baldry preferred to deposit the live toad in her bosom until it was thoroughly decomposed), whereupon they would be cast into a stream. One bone would detach itself from the others, sometimes, like the uprooted mandrake, emitting a fearful scream; this bone would be retrieved, and would be the new toadman's source of magical power. For three nights in a row, the toadman would carry his toad bone amulet into a stable, and on the last night, the Devil would appear, and initiate him by drawing his blood. In some variants, the Devil would fight the initiate for the bones, or even try to snatch the bones away at the stream.

Source: Giles Watson (2013) A Witch's Natural History Chapter 6

"Many fen people still speak of the manifest powers of the Toadmen but are more reticent when it comes to describing how these powers were acquired. I have wrung from old men in Burwell and Soham Fens some account of the ceremonial killing of a mole (elsewhere the more usual use of a toad is recorded) and the floating of its bones downstream at midnight, but they all warn that such things are better not known as the Devil is involved. Of the complete mastery, for good or ill, over a horse's movements which the performers of such ceremonies obtained, they are more willing to speak..."

Source: Porter 1961

"I have had it from informants at March, and Thornhaugh (near Stamford). The informants...not only spoke of their own knowledge but also of having heard about toadmen from acquaintances, or older relatives at Thorney, Eye, Stamford and Wansworth [Wansford?]....one of the informants at March is secretary of the local N.U.A.W. Branch, and the other is the chairman..."

"The informant who had worked with a toadman often asked him how he did it. The answer was always the same. " I daren't tell my own son. What I know goes to the churchyard with me." Another man said that his father had announced his intention of becoming a toadman, whereupon his father (my informant's grandfather) threatened that if he did he would shoot him. The idea was abandoned."

PATTISON, GW (1953) Adult Education and Folklore

"I have recorded or spoken to probably more than a hundred East Anglian horsemen...and have found that they all, without exception, knew from their own inherited spoken tradition of the power of the 'frog's bone'...Having approached more than one horseman who either refused to be recorded once the frog's bone was mentioned, or declined to talk of it, I believe that they did this only because they believed in it's power and that the use and talk of it after one had 'sold one's soul to the devil' would bring damnation."

Source: Neil Lanham



Kevin Crossley-Holland noted that the word 'worm' is derived from the Anglo Saxon 'wyrn' which means dragon and that in the Norse tradition, Nidhogg the dragon lives in Hel, the realm of the dead under the Guardian Tree, Yggdrasil, where he eats the bodies of the dead. His name literally translates as 'the tearer of corpses'.



"Nidhogg lies upon Nastrond, the corpse shore. Nastrond is one section of Niflheim where those that did not die heroic deaths go. On Nastrond is a great hall of evil whose doors face north. The hall is made of serpents whose heads blow venom, forming rivers that run the length of the hall. Murderers, adulterers, and oath breakers are forced to wade through those rivers."

Source: <http://www.draconika.com/legends/nidhogg.php>

The *Völuspá* in the Poetic Edda includes the following:

"A hall I saw, far from the sun, On Nastrond it stands, and the doors face north, Venom drops through the smoke-vent down, For around the walls do serpents wind. I there saw wading through rivers wild treacherous men and murderers too, And workers of ill with the wives of men; There Nithhogg sucked the blood of the slain..."

In a Marshland parish in Lincolnshire in the 1870s when a young man lost some of his fingers in an accident, his mother wanted them to have a "proper funeral" so that the "Lord" wouldn't have to go looking for them to put him back together (Heanley, 1891, p. 214).

Lady Anne Coke of Holkham, Norfolk, after breaking her leg, found that small pieces of bone would work their way out of the injured limb. She would send these to her brother with instructions that they be buried with her. The small glass box containing such pieces was placed in her coffin after her death in 1844 (Burne, 1910, p. 105).

#### **Main Sources for exploring the tales of Sam'l's Ghost/Fred the Fool & The Wandering Toadman**

- Balfour, Marie (1891) 'Legends of the Cars' in *Folklore*, 2(2), pp.145-170, (3), pp.257-283, (4), pp. 401-418.
- Howat, Polly (1992) *Ghosts and Legends of Cambridgeshire*
- Lanham, Neil (2011?) George Ewart Evans and the Laboratory of Awareness of Marcel Jousse
- Porter, Enid (1961) Folk Life and Traditions of the Fens in *Folklore*, Vol. 72, No. 4 pp594-8
- Pattison, GW (1953) Adult Education and Folklore in *Folklore*, Vol. 64, No. 3 pp. 424-6
- Watson, Giles (2013) A Witch's Natural History Chapter 6 [www.equine-behavior.com/Origins\\_of\\_horse\\_whispering1.htm](http://www.equine-behavior.com/Origins_of_horse_whispering1.htm)
- [www.draconika.com/legends/nidhogg.php](http://www.draconika.com/legends/nidhogg.php)