

This is my adaptation of the tale told to W H Barrett by his great-uncle who lived close to Gold Hill, that was included in *Tales from the Fens*. Gold hill is described as being near the Suspension Bridge over the Hundred Foot River between Littleport and Welney, and close to an ancient trackway that connected Wisbech and Littleport (A1101).

As the [welney.org.uk](http://welney.org.uk) website points out, the area known as “Suspension Bridge hasn't had, or been, a suspension bridge since 1926, Gold Hill doesn't have gold or a hill; the Hundred Foot Bank is neither 100 feet high, wide or long, and is actually one bank of the New Bedford River otherwise known as the Hundred Foot River, which is tidal, but sometimes called a drain.” But enough of that...and on to the story:

#### 7.4 King John and Wisbech

You will probably have heard of King John, the king with the bad reputation. It is said that he spent too much time in this country and the Baron's didn't like it, and that he disregarded the laws of the land, and the Baron's didn't like that either.

Well, shortly after the experience of having to sign the Magna Carta at Runnymede in 1215, the King went back on his word, and started to travel round the country collecting in all the treasure that he had left in the abbeys for safekeeping. This treasure included the crown of his grandmother Empress Matilda, the Sword of Tristram and a great weight of gold, silver and precious jewels.

On the 9 October 1216 King John arrived at Lynn in Norfolk, where he intended to spend a few day, not only seizing more of his treasure, but also trying some of the fine continental wines that had come into the port. He was also making arrangements to charter a ship to carry this and some of his baggage up to Grimsby in North Lincolnshire, where he was going later.

John, however tasted far too much of the wine and when he awoke on the morning of 12 October, he could not face the long journey to his next stop at Swineshead in Lincolnshire. Instead he decided to make another stop on his journey at Wisbech Castle, particularly as he had heard that the travelling fair was in the town.

Wisbech had a reputation for its travelling fair, which it was said had the best of entertainments, the best of food and drink, and the finest of young women offering their services!

So the king travelled to Wisbech and to the Castle, where he safely looked away his belongings, including all his treasure in a big wooden chest, in his bed chamber. He then put the key around his neck, changed into the clothes of a commoner and crossed the bridge to the fair.

The fair was as busy as ever, and the king had an enjoyable day. He tasted the delicious hot chestnuts, drank some of the local cider, watched the fire eaters, jugglers, minstrels and travelling players, and admired the pretty young women.

One particular girl really caught his eye, and he invited her back to his apartment in the castle, where he offered her some of the fine wine he had purchased at Lynn.

Little did the King know, but each time he poured her some wine, the girl would pour some of it back into his goblet, and so as she pretended to become drunk, so the King actually did get this way.

As the King grew drowsy, he dismissed his attendants and asked his guards to wait outside the door. He then asked the girl to accompany him to his bedchamber. The girl agreed to this and after a short kiss and a cuddle, the king fell asleep and began snoring loudly.

The girl, wide awake and sober, got out of the bed and began to explore the room. She saw the big chest in the corner and went back to the king to look for the key, which she found on the cord around his neck.

With some effort the girl managed to get the key from around the king's neck and take it over to the chest where she lifted the heavy lid and admired the treasure. She could barely believe her luck, so much gold, silver and jewels, far too much to resist the temptation to take at least some of it.

The girl started to seriously think. If she could carry enough of the treasure out of the room, she could give up following the fair and spending nights with strangers. She could live somewhere nice and maybe get married, if she could find someone to have her, with her reputation.

Then the girl remembered the stable boy, who she knew worked at the castle, and she hatched a plan and crept to the door of the apartment, where she told the guards that the king wished to see the stable boy at once.

The guards, ever fearful of the bad tempered monarch, did as requested and sent word to the stables for the boy to attend the king. Soon the boy was in the king's bedchamber, beside the girl, silently watching King John snoring contentedly.

The stable boy then said to the guards that the King had ordered them to take the rest of the night off to visit the Fair. Once again they did not question the order, in fact they were rather pleased to be given the chance to enjoy themselves for once.

So the stable boy and the girl, alone aside from the sleeping king, lay their cloaks upon the floor, and loaded as much of the gold, silver and precious jewels as they could onto them. They then bundled up the cloaks and carried them out of the door, down the stairs and out into the night.

They were soon in the stables where they hid their bundles underneath a pile of hay, and then waited until first light when the muck cart came into the castle.

The job of the muck cart driver was to collect all the muck from the privies and the stables and load it onto his cart. He took off his cloak and hat and set to work. But when he had finished and was just wiping the sweat from his brow, the stable boy came up behind him and slit his throat from ear to ear. The boy then bundled the man into the back of the cart and hid the body under the pile of stinking dung.

The boy then hid the bundles of jewels in the back of the muck cart, picked up the driver's cloak and hat from where they had been discarded, put them on himself and finally climbed onto the cart. The girl hid at his feet as the boy reined in the horses and they set off out of the castle.

Getting out of the castle was simple, as no one EVER stops the foul smelling muck cart, and they were soon on their way out of the town and onto the fen heading east.

When they had got far enough away, they rescued the bundles, unhitched the horses and pushed the cart, which included the driver's body, into the river.

They then rode off in the direction of Littleport, along the ancient trackway, however as they approached Welney they heard the sound of bird calls from within the tall reeds to either side of the causeway. They soon realised that they were surrounded by fenmen and they could see that the men were suspicious of their being about so early.

# THE M E D I E V A L S T O R Y

The stable lad realised that the best way to survive would be to confess what they had done, to tell the whole story of how they had come by the treasure and to offer some of the jewels to the men, and hope for the best!

Their offer was gratefully accepted by the fenmen, and the lad and the girl decided to stay with their new friends. They were soon married and moved into a nice little cottage, and the treasure was safely buried in an ancient barrow that later came to be known as Gold Hill. Some say that nine months after the night that the girl spent with the king, a son was born and they named him Prince. He grew up to be the finest thief in the area!

As for King John, when he woke up and realised that much of his treasure was missing, he was furious. It didn't take long for him to work out that the girl, and the stable lad, were missing and that they must have stolen the treasure and the king sent his guards out to search for them.

It is said that the order to search for the treasure has never been retracted and people are still searching for it today, only they are looking over near the Wash, which is where King John, and his baggage train, which is estimated to have been about 2 miles long, went next on the way to Lincolnshire.

The next part of the story is history, as they say, and as the medieval chronicler Roger of Wendover, in his *Flores Historium* (1220) tells us:

*“heading for the north, he [King John] lost by an unexpected accident all the wagons, carts and packhorses with the treasures, precious vessels and all the other things that he cherished with special care: for the ground was opened up in the midst of the waves and bottomless whirlpools engulfed everything, together with men and horses, so that not a single foot soldier got away to bear tidings of the disaster to the king.”*

History also records that King John died at Newark on 19 October. It was said that his body was stripped of all but his underwear after his death, and that he was buried wrapped in just the robes of the monk who read the last rites. There is also an account by a priest who went to Newark to say a mass for the dead king's soul and subsequently told the abbot of Coggeshall that he had seen men leaving the city laden with loot!

The people of Lincolnshire also have a tale that King John was poisoned at Swineshead Abbey, and yet others have theorised that the king may have either sold or pawned many of his treasures for ready money to pay the thousands of mercenaries that accompanied and protected him.