

The Peddler of Swaffham

Maureen James explores the roots of a Medieval Tale

This summer as you travel to the various shows, I would like you to remember what it was like in the old days before cars, trains or buses and even before carriages and metalled roads. I would like to take you back over 500 years to the small town of Swaffham in Norfolk, where there lived a peddler named John Chapman.

John had seen the best years of his life pass him by and he lived, with his old wife and his dog, in a rickety old cottage with a hole in the roof through which the rain fell, and the wind blew. John only had one good thing in his life, aside from his wife and dog, and that was his little garden, where he grew a few vegetables. This garden was dominated by an apple tree on which a fine crop of apples grew every year. He always managed to gather enough apples to see him through the winter and enough to give to others in return for a crust of bread or a piece of occasional meat.

One night as John slept next to his wife on the old straw mattress, under a mound of rough blankets, a beautiful woman appeared in his dream telling him he must go to London Bridge, for then he would hear good news. On waking the next morning the dream was still clear in his mind and he pondered on it all day. London, he reasoned was about a hundred miles away and it would take him at least a week to walk there, and it was winter, and he did not have enough warm clothes, or things to sell to buy food or a bed for each night along the way.

But the next night the beautiful woman reappeared in his dreams saying, as before, that he should go to London Bridge where he would hear good news. John once again recalled the dream clearly in his waking hours and he argued with himself that if he had to sleep in ditches on the way he would surely catch his death of cold. It was a ludicrous idea.

The dream persisted, and on the following night, the woman once again told him that he would hear good news if he were to go to London Bridge. And John, living in superstitious times, realised that to be told something three times and to ignore it would be foolish. And so the next morning he resolved to raise sufficient funds to pay for the journey. Two days later the old man kissed his wife goodbye and set off with his old dog on the road south to London. He had repaired his old hand cart, on which he could sleep, and he carried with him a bundle of items to exchange for food and drink.

The journey down to London was better than expected and the weather was kind. Within the week John arrived at the bustling bridge that crossed the River Thames. In those days the bridge, which had been built on 19 arches, was crowded with at least 129 narrow buildings many of which were not only built close together but also jutted out over the roadway. John spent the rest of the day walking up and down this narrow almost tunnel like road, looking this way and that and being asked on many occasions by the traders if there was anything he wanted to buy. He had sold all the goods he had brought with him, even his cart, and there was nothing he could afford to buy, not even food. He slept, with his dog, in the doorway of one of the shops.

The next morning he carried on walking up and down again though he spent less time looking at people. Once again the day ended in disappointment. John once again had to sleep outside with his old dog, until the dawn of the third day. He resolved on waking that if nothing had happened by noon he would set off for home and never again take notice of dreams even if they occur three

times and include a beautiful woman. John resumed his pacing of the bridge as the winter sun rose a little higher in the sky and the street became busier.

At last an innkeeper, having noted the old man pacing up and down and seeing that he neither sold any wares nor was he a beggar asking for alms, went over to him. He asked John what he was doing there and John told him that he had been having dreams in which a woman said that if he came to London Bridge he should hear good news. At this the innkeeper laughed and said he was a fool to go on journey because of a dream and added "I'll tell you, old fellow, last night I dreamed that I was at a place called Swaffham, a place that I have never been too and which must be at least 100 miles away, and I was in the garden of a rickety old house with a hole in the roof, and there was an apple tree in the garden, and I thought that if I dug under the tree I should find a pot of gold! Now do you think," said the innkeeper, "that I would be so foolish as to go on such a journey because of a dream? No, no. I'm wiser than that. You should just go home and forget your dream."

Before the innkeeper had finished speaking, the peddler had dashed off for home, arriving in four days instead of a week. And he borrowed a spade and dug beneath his apple tree, and found a pot full of gold coins, with which he could repair his house, buy new clothes for himself and his wife, and live comfortable for at least the rest of the winter. And it is said that he found within the pot, a disk on which was inscribed, in Latin, the words 'beneath this is one much bigger'.

John went digging again and found, even deeper beneath the tree, a pot in which there was so much treasure that not only did he become exceedingly rich, but he also helped to rebuild the tower and north aisle of the parish Church of St Peter and Paul in Swaffham, which was as much in need of repair as his old cottage had been.

The parish records of the Church show that a John Chapman was the churchwarden in 1462. To this day there is within the church, carvings on the bench ends of John with his wife and his dog at his heels, and his memory is also preserved in the sign of that town and its coat of arms.

This is a wonderful story but how true it is we have no idea. A similar story of '*The man who became rich through a dream*' is found in the *1001 Nights*, and versions are found relating to places in Germany (collected by Grimm); Dundonald Castle in Scotland and Upsall in Yorkshire.

Had John, who was a peddler after all, picked up the story whilst in London from traders who had been to Arabia? Possibly, as the Arabic stories had been collected together by at least year 950. But they were not translated into a European language until the seventeenth century. Could it be, as a television programme of a few years ago alleged, that John Chapman had made a lot of money doing something he could not declare and he made up a story to cover up his actions? Or could he have stumbled across one of the Romano/Celtic coin hoards that are on occasions found in East Anglia. I believe in the latter. Whatever the truth it is still a good story!