

Fenlore: Creative conversations between folklore and archaeology in Lincolnshire's peatlands.

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Introduction

Folklore and archaeology have a long, and complex, relationship. As formal disciplines, both have their roots in the antiquarianism of the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries and the collecting of 'popular antiquities', which were seen as representative of vernacular culture (Gazin-Schwartz and Holtorf 1999; Paphitis 2019: 143). British antiquarians often recorded folklore as a kind of domestic ethnography, complementing their archaeological investigations and artefact collections from a region, in an interdisciplinary approach characterised as 'chorography': Chorographic practices drew on 'established traditions of perambulation and situated local knowledge' often an eclectic mixture of history, folklore and local anecdote; weaving narratives of past and present alongside topographical description (Gillings 2011: 61, Pearson and Shanks 2001). Yet by the late nineteenth century, folklore and archaeology began to diverge, becoming separate fields. In the early to mid-twentieth century, archaeology embraced more scientific approaches and techniques and as a result of 'distinguishing themselves from their less scientific antiquarian ancestors, became sceptical about the value of folklore for helping them to understand the ancient past' (Gazin-Schwartz 2012: 65). This was however often predicated on a view of folklore as a static relic from the past – rather than the living and dynamic expression of human culture it is – and those scholars who did critically consider it often framed folklore as historical texts to be judged according to their authenticity and accuracy, rather than understanding them as symbolic expressions that require skilled interpretation (Paphitis 2019: Gazin-Schwartz and

Holtorf 1999). Folklore too undertook ‘boundary-work’ in the twentieth century that excluded non-academics and non-specialists from folklore studies (Paphitis 2014). Yet there have always been exceptions; in the later twentieth and twenty-first century, the study of specific sites and landscapes often used place-name stories and folk knowledge to enrich understanding of particular monuments or regions (e.g. Grinsell 1976 and more recently, Kama 2016), whilst other scholars recognised the value of folklore as an integral and compelling part of public archaeology (Paphitis 2019).

In this article we focus on the peatlands of north Lincolnshire – an area rich in both archaeology and folklore – and explore the conversations that these complementary forms of local knowledge can spark in each other. Archaeology and folklore are both fields through which traces of the past are given meaning, informing how we might articulate the value of peatlands and their heritage(s) in the future. They are both ways of knowing *and* being in place (Paphitis 2019: 152). Thus, building connections between archaeology and folklore ‘can open new ways of looking at the landscape, raise new questions about issues of time and of memory, and bring to the forefront concerns with local and archaeological meanings of the past’ (Gazin-Schwartz 2001: 267). The past speaks with many voices. Understanding landscapes by opening a dialogue between folklore and archaeology requires us to acknowledge this multivocality, and embrace plural and sometimes conflicting stories of place through a form of ‘deep mapping’ (Pearson and Shanks 1997). For us, one approach to sit with and analyse this tension, and allow these many voices space, is creative, through poetry. We have therefore worked with poetic inquiry both as a method and product of engaging with this tension (Flint 2024). In doing so we connect with another aspect of peatland heritage: how poets have engaged with peatlands and their archaeological traces

over time. From the fenland poetry of John Clare to Seamus Heaney's bog poems, and in the poetic aspects of more modern works such as Graham Swift's *Waterland* or Daisy Johnson's *Fen*, peatlands have been fertile ground for poetic conversations between place, the past, the individual, and society.

‘Ways of knowing’: the Lincolnshire Fens

Many diverse tracts of marsh, fen and bog were both drained and depopulated under the long-term landscape processes of ‘improvement’ and enclosure in the UK, which began in the early modern era and reached its zenith in the late nineteenth century. Wetland communities were increasingly made marginal through changing agricultural practices and cultural discourse which depicted these landscapes as waste: unproductive and unhealthy places inhabited by slothful, sly and suspicious individuals, living at the edge of civilised society (see Eklund 2017). These people were often the subject of pejorative accounts (e.g. Norbury 1885) rather than being seen as first-hand witnesses to unprecedented change. Folk tales give us back some of the lost voices of these dispossessed communities: stories that taught their inhabitants how to live respectfully and well in these difficult-to-navigate, peculiar, yet resource-rich environments (Meredith 2002). These stories gave names to what we might call intangible agents: supernatural entities which were believed to inhabit the mire and were responsible for strange phenomena, such as the lights known as will-o-the-wisps. Folktales did not just record recent events stretching back a few generations, they folded time, so that the distant past became unnervingly co-present for the listener. Some stories also told of encounters with ancient things: strangely preserved plants and trees, objects and even human remains – what we would today class as the cultural artefacts and ecofacts of peatland archaeology (see Gearey and Chapman 2022). Fredengren (2016) has argued that these kinds of well-preserved remains held a particular value, a ‘deep time enchantment’, arising from

the ways in which time itself seemed to have been halted or thwarted, leading to the miraculous preservation of vegetal structures, fragile textiles and shining patina on metals, or the hair, skin and nails of animals and people. What we now rationalise as the complex effect of anoxic conditions and chemical reactions in the sphagnum-rich peat was to these wetland communities a source both of wonder and fear (Giles 2020: 54).

Despite this common effect of peat preservation, each wetland landscape has its own specific environmental and cultural histories which shape the entangled relationships between archaeology, folklore, place, and people (for example, the cultural and archaeological narratives of the Cambridgeshire fenlands in Francis Pryor's work). Understanding these relationships, therefore, requires a situated and close-grained approach. The two legends that we focus on in this article are 'Tiddy Mun', and 'The Dead Hand', which are included in Marie Clothilde Balfour's (1891a; 1891b) series of three articles titled 'Legends of the Cars', and have been retold numerous times since (see James 2013). When Balfour collected these legends, she lived in the Lincolnshire village of Redbourne (from 1887-89), in the district of Lindsey (James 2013, 35 and see Figure 1). The carrs (a landscape term used to denote wet woodland) at the heart of both stories, lying along the River Ancholme, were the source of archaeological finds which stretched back to the Neolithic period, uncovered during peat-cutting (see Whitehouse and Karhapää 2022). They were regularly flooded, particularly around the March and September equinoxes, whilst the river itself was a tidal creek of the Humber to the north until the seventeenth century (Leahy 2010). After this, Lincolnshire's mosses and fenlands were progressively drained through the initiative of Dutch water engineer Vermuyden, beginning with a commission from Charles I to drain Hatfield Chase in the Isle of Axholme in 1621 (Harris 1953). Short-term, its effects were to dry out the land,

changing water flow, affecting which crops could be grown and where pasture flourished, impacting wildlife and preventing the combination of grazing, fishing and fowling, by which most of its inhabitants got by, irrevocably altering their livelihoods (Ecklund 2017: 176). Whilst some adapted, centuries-old knowledge, and the delicate and skilful navigation of hydrological ways of life, began to be lost. The long-term consequences of this process – which went hand-in-hand with enclosure and changes in land ownership – involved the severing of rural customary rites, robbing locals of their common pasture and access to turbary (peat cutting), creating violent tensions with both drainers and land-owners (see Lindley 1982, Whitehouse and Karhapää 2022).

We take each of these tales in turn, reading through an archaeological and environmental historical lens, and explore how this might contribute to a deepened and nuanced understanding of human relationships with Lincolnshire's wetlands.

Tiddy mun

The tale of the 'Tiddy mun wi'out a name' was one of 'a group of stories so unusual that some folklorists have doubted their genuineness' (Briggs 1976: 91). Yet Maureen James has convincingly argued for the veracity of their source: an 'aged woman, a lifelong dweller in these Cars [sic]' (Balfour 1891a: 149) – probably Mary Whelpton (born c.1809 and recorded as aged 72 in the 1881 census, dying in 1889) – who was a long-term resident of Redbourne (James 2013: 169). Balfour noted that Mary 'had in her young days herself observed the rite she describes, though she would not confess to it within the hearing of her grand-children, whose indifference and disbelief shocked her greatly' (1891a: 149). This traded confidence has the ring of truth about it, recalling practices that past generations undertook to cope with the endemic effects of seasonal flooding and then improvised with, in the face of changes wrought by large-scale drainage.

The story opens with an evocation of a landscape ‘teeming’ with ‘Boggarts and Will o’ th’ Wykes and sich loike; voices o’ deed folk’ known from many wetland landscapes (Giles 2020: 93–4) but all of these entities were apparently afraid of ‘Tiddy mun’: the little man, a diminutive white-haired being, bearded like a grandfather, who dwelt in the still, green water of the bog holes and rose with the mists as evening settled. Mary’s story tells of how he was ‘to be loved as well as feared’ for he was neither ‘wicked an’ tantrummy like the water-wives’ but instead acted as a kind of intercessor between humans and the land when ‘tha year wor geyan’ wet an’ tha’ watter rose i’ tha marshes’ (1891a: 151). Then, as flooding approached the door-sills of their houses, families would go out across the marsh on the following New Moon, calling for his help:

‘Tiddy Mun, wi’out a name,

Tha watters thruff!’

However, Tiddy Mun’s benevolent intercession was reliant on respectful care for his habitat, the bog-holes: ‘while tha watter teems tha fen, Tiddy Mun’ll harm nane’. The drainage projects threatened his wellbeing, even as it promised to improve daily life by reducing the cause of the malaria which plagued old and young. Yet, as Mary comments in the story, ‘tha wor used to un’ and folk were ‘sore miscontended’ that changes on this scale risked unsettling the delicate balance of their lives (ibid: 150). Vermuyden’s plan was not to straighten existing rivers, but to construct new drains to empty the major watercourses; deprived of the seasonal deposition of mineral-rich flood-borne silt, the moisture-content and fertility of the land suffered, reducing the head of stock which could feed on the pasture (Thirsk 1957). Horn (1987) argues that what happens next in the story (attributed to the wrath of Tiddy Mun who was ‘sore fratchet wi’ everyone’, Balfour 1891a: 153) is a plausible description of the impact of draining the wetlands:

soft bog-lands 'ud soon be turned to green closin's... [but] tha coos pined, tha pigs starved, an' tha pownies went lame; tha brats took sick, tha lambs dwined, tha creed meal brunt 'issen, an' tha new milk craddled; tha thatch fell in, an' tha walls burst out, an' all an' anders went arsy-varsy. (Balfour 1891a: 152).

Dried-out pasture lowered the yield of both grass and hay crops, and the hardened land would have led to lameness in stock (Horn 1987: 12). Changes to wildlife biodiversity, including naturally larvicidal plant-life and insect predators (such as seasonal wildfowl), ironically increased mosquito populations in the short-term. The lack of routine flooding created standing and stagnant bodies of water in which mosquitos thrived, whilst reducing the natural filtration effect of aquatic vegetation, lowering water quality and exacerbating disease in the vulnerable (ibid: 13–14). Horn also proposes that the sudden loss of brackish (salty) water created more acidic soil conditions which can allow the bacteria that causes Johne's disease in stock to thrive, leading to listlessness and wasting (ibid: 12). Changes in crops would have impacted diets and altered the taste of the milk, whilst hunting and fishing were vilified as lazy ways of life; by championing instead the industry of an agricultural workforce it also increased their dependency on paid labour by new landlords who laid claim to the commons. The loss of turbary (peat-cutting) rights and reduction of fen-edge fuel sources diminished sources of light and heat for homes and cooking, and as the peat dried out, it warped the foundations of vernacular buildings designed for a wetland landscape (Horn 1987: 14). No wonder thatched roofs collapsed and walls fell in! This desiccation of the peat also led to wind-blow, reducing the height of the land; within a few decades, flooding had returned but it was now more unpredictable. Finally, then, as drainage progressed it damaged the sanctuaries of supernatural wetland denizens: 'tha bog holes were meddled wi' and Tiddy Mun wor unhapped' (Balfour 1891a: 150).

How should the locals appease such a creature, for ‘somethin’ mun be done, or the Car-folk ‘ud be deed an’ gone’ (Balfour 1891a: 153)? This is where the tale of Tiddy Mun speaks most strongly to the archaeology of the carrs. Their rationale was to build upon their existing rite: to call out to him again at the New Moon, to show that the ‘tha Car-folk wished un well, an’ that a’d give un tha watter back if tha only could’ (ibid). Like the Full Moon, the New Moon (regardless of season) exerts a tidal pull on all estuarine waters, naturally mimicking a rising flood. Lunar calendrical events have been argued to inform and structure ritual in the Lincolnshire carrs and fens for over two thousand years. At the Iron Age site of Fiskerton, Parker Pearson and Chamberlain argue the cyclical building and renewal of a raised timber causeway on the River Witham seems to coincide with 19-year Saros cycle of midwinter lunar eclipses (in Parker Pearson and Field 2003: 145). What began as a propitiatory response to a cosmological event, they argue, began in time to be a predictable rhythm of lunar eclipses, prompting structured phases of repair and renewal, associated with the giving of offerings. Metalwork decorated with La Tène (Celtic) art including swords, shield fittings and plaques were found with tools, pots and white pebbles, cast into the waters off this raised causeway. A long-lost Iron Age sword from further down the Witham at Barlings Eau (just over 20 miles from Redbourne) was also apparently stamped with an inlaid symbol of the crescent moon (ibid: 144). Whilst we are not arguing for direct continuity in these practices, the giving of offerings to the tidal waters continued in sporadic bursts into the Medieval era (White 1979c) and in the flat fenlands, it is easy to see how the reflective power of the moon might literally have had a magnified effect, just as its cycles strongly shaped the lives of the carr folk.

Where should this ritual be enacted? The story states that they headed out ‘doun by tha cross dyke, ly tha au'd stope nigh on to John Ratton's garth’ (Balfour 1891a: 153), which James suggested places these events around Redbourne Hayes farm (2013: 131, table 3). Walking east from the garth (the farm’s animal paddock) to the ‘Counterdyke Drain’ would have taken villagers to where the ‘New River Ancholme’ Soak drain (running broadly north-south) cut off a loop of the old River Ancholme which still served as the parish boundary. In fens, such boundaries increasingly became the haunt of boggarts and their ilk (Young 2022) as well as sites of liminal juridical and ritual performance (Reynolds 2009): of gallows, gibbets and the ‘crossroad’ burials of those excluded from the churchyard, perhaps because of the manner of their death or potential revenancy (Thompson 1856, and see Giles 2020: 21). The old river would traditionally have been annually walked as part of the beating of this parish boundary at Rogationtide (Hutton 1996). Designed to consolidate community identity, expel evil and bring good fortune, drainage schemes (like other ‘improvements’ and enclosures, Hindle 2008) would have disrupted these ancient collective rites, yet the route was still navigable via a series of small footbridges across the intervening field drains.

The ritual describes the party of relatives and neighbours gathering ‘at tha dyke-edge, an' lookin ower to tha new River’ (Balfour 1891a: 154). An Engine House and Sluice gate (on the Six Inch First Edition Ordnance Survey map 1886, Figure 1) marks the point where the Redbourne Old River (running west-east, already heavily canalised) met with both the ancient winding Ancholme and its new course, along the major drain. It is interesting that the storyteller knew this as the ‘cross dyke’ (rather than its official ‘map’ name of the Counterdyke), evoking a psychogeography that suggests this meeting of the waters was perceived as a symbolic hydroglyph, cutting an apotropaic Christian symbol into the land (see Bowman 1960: 358). This nexus point of old and new hydrological regimes thus feels ‘right’ archaeologically for a potent place for ‘propitiation by offerings’ (Balfour 1891a: 149).

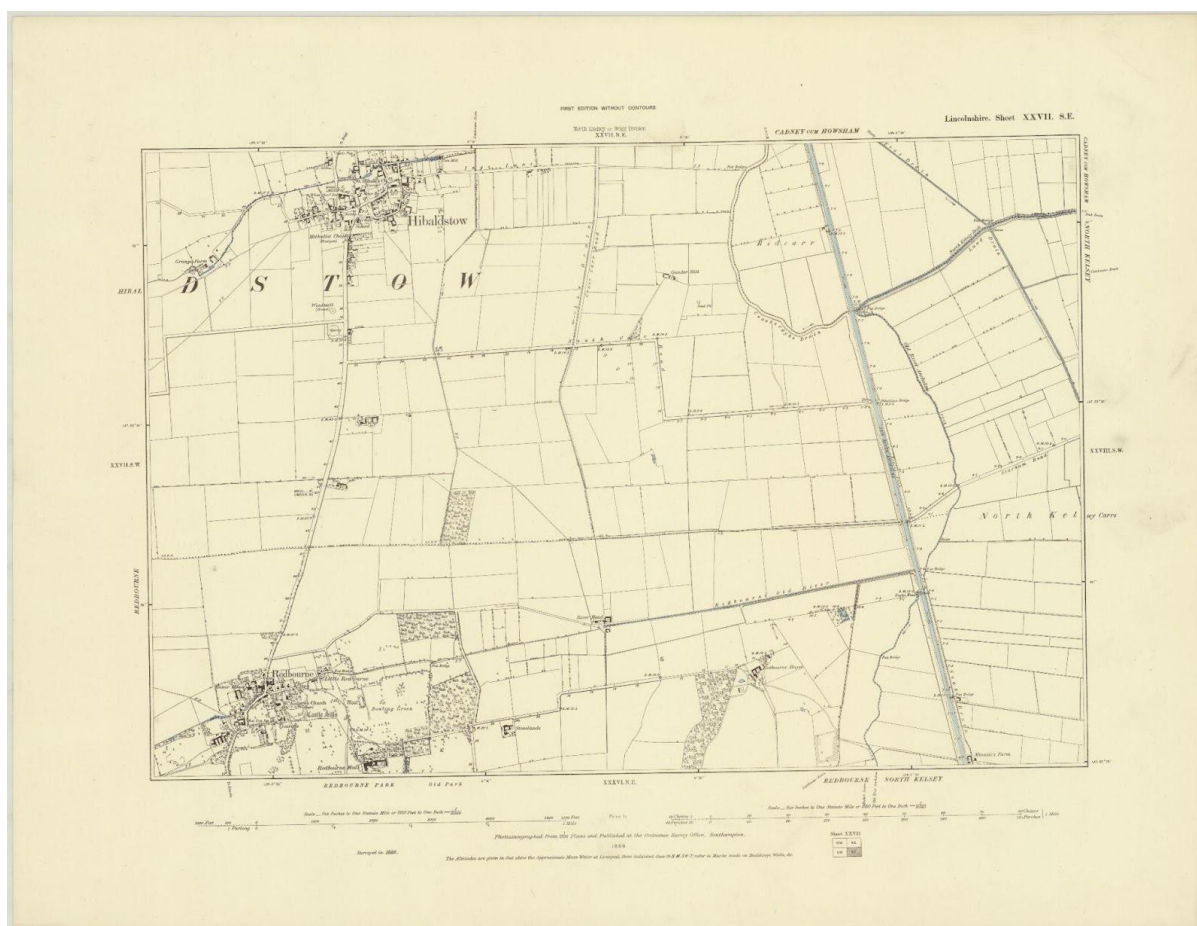


Figure 1. Redbourne Hayes and the River Ancholme, showing the new drainage system. The First edition Six-inch Ordnance Survey Map: Lincolnshire Sheet [XXVII.SE](#), surveyed 1886, published 1886. (Reproduced with the permission of the National Library of Scotland, CC-BY (NLS) <https://maps.nls.uk/>)

The ritual itself involved men and women, old and young, ‘every one wi’ a stoup o’ fresh watter in ‘s hand’, tipping their buckets, basins or flagons into the dyke whilst calling out:

‘Tiddy Mun, wi-out a name,

Here's watter for thee, tak' tha spell undone!’

The act of pouring out water to symbolically re-wet or ‘teem’ the fen, as a way of appeasing the vengeful Tiddy Mun, recalls the vats, cauldrons and containers found in many bogs and fens – Iron Age vessels containing foodstuffs such as bog butter as well as drink, which were prestigious offerings in their own right (Giles 2020: 125). Again, there is a sense here of a folkloric echo: cultural memories of offerings that Lincolnshire folk had made into the early Modern era. Yet the rite may equally have been fuelled by objects being brought to light by drainage projects in Lincolnshire, such as the Tattershall Ferry skillet (a Roman saucepan) or the Washingborough hanging bowl (White 1979a and b).

After a moment of stillness, they hear ‘tha awfulest wailin’ an’ whimperin’ all round about ‘em [...] like a lot o’ little cryin’ babbies greetin’ as if to break ther hearts, an’ none to comfort ‘em’ (Balfour 1891a: 154). Mothers in the gathering swear that they can both hear and feel ‘ther dead bairns, callin’ on Tiddy Mun to tak tha spell undone, an’ let tha childer live an’ grow strong’, suggesting the infant dead were acting as supernatural intercessors with the mercurial spirit. Like the other unquiet dead expelled to the edge of the parish, stillbirths, undisclosed miscarriages and infants that were unbaptised may well have been thought to be caught in some liminal, supernatural space, ‘driftin’ about i’ tha soughin’ o’ tha night win’ (ibid: 156), despite changes in religious practice following the Reformation. Thereafter, all is well: health is restored to sick children and animals, there is food in plenty and good wages, so long as the ritual is observed on each New Moon.

In the tale of Tiddy Mun, then, the micropolitics of fenland drainage, landscape improvement and enclosure are embodied in a supernatural battle with an uncanny dweller, who must be ritually appeased. An archaeological engagement with the folklore – the who, when, where and what – helps us to understand its logic and its purpose, capturing an improvised tradition which shows deep and sensitive knowledge of the landscape past and present, and the canny

design of rituals that effectively dealt with supernatural ire. Yet there is a deeper motif hidden in the story, which we might now cast as a hydrogeography of loss, where personal mourning is entangled with ecological grief around disappearing wetlands. As the tale promises, we need not be paralysed by environmental loss: the decomposing fecundity of the fen creates a rich metaphorical world where new life is always springing from death (Berke 2024). This sentiment, and the way that this old story speaks poignantly to the present concerns of bogland restoration (see Giles 2025), inspired the following poem:

Undone

We have hauled the forest out of the bog,
raw roots scratching the sky;
pines piled like weeds.

Here an ancient forest thrived
before the waters lagged the land
and peat grew.

Black butter, pared back
to the bone: cut and stacked
to feed the home-fires at its brim,

ancient branches cut
for tapers, bog oaks
shaped for beams,

and when all was gone, white marl
was mined to feed the barley
that hung its head, and wept.

We drained it dry:
dug dykes, tamed
the teeming fen. Birds fled.

And all the while its dark, dank body
Cooled our earth: its flesh
was holding in our breath.

*

O, new moon: draw up the waters,
let them rise. Stop-up the ditches,
soften the hags.

Staunch the wounds,
stitches of bog cotton, dancing dabs of light,
bandages of blanketing moss.

And I will rise, like the carr-folk,
with bucket, stoop and kilderkin,
to pour the water out again.

*Tiddy Mun, without a name,
harm none: here's water for thee,
for tha' fen: take tha' spell undone.*

Melanie Giles

The Dead Hand

Presented as a 'true' tale about a 'wild slip of a lad' called Long Tom Pattison (Balfour 1891b: 271), 'The Dead Hand' takes place at an unspecified time in the past, before drainage. People were fearful of going onto the boggy carrs at night. If they had to do so, they never went alone, and always carried some kind of charm to keep them safe – some bible verses or the words of a wise woman written on paper and folded into a nutshell. Long Tom paid no heed to such things and declared that he would cross the carrs at night, alone, and with nothing but a lantern. He set out, with a small group of lads from the village following at a distance, but as he reached a willow snag a wailing wind blew his lantern out and he was surrounded by 'th' horrors o' th' air, an' th' horrors o' th' watters, an' tha slimy, creepin' things, an' th' cryin' wa'ailin' things' (274). Suddenly, these horrors fell away and the terrified village lads saw:

Long To'am sta'anin' by tha sna'ag, 's fa'ace 's whoite's de-ath an* starin' eyne, holdin'
on wi wan ha'an to tha willa an' wi th' other stretch'd oot an' cla'asp'd in a ha'an wi' oot
a body (275).

This dead hand had 'th' rottin' flesh droppin' off tha mouldy bo'ans', yet it 'pulled un an' pulled un wi' a dreadful strongness fords tha bla'ack bog heyont' and Tom was dragged, shrieking, into darkness (Ibid.). Thanks to their safe-keeps, the terrified lads lived to return to the village and tell their tale. The villagers searched for Tom in the daylight and every night

his poor mother waited and called for him at the edges of the bog. After a week, Tom was found leaning against the same willow snag where he had disappeared, but he was much changed. His hair and his face were white, and he was aged and bent double like an old man. Unable to speak sense, he pawed at unseen horrors with one hand. His other hand, the one that had been gripped by the dead hand, ‘wor nobbut a ragged bleedin’ stump—th’ han’ ’d bin pulled clean off!’ (Ibid: 277). Within just over a year, young Tom had died.

‘The Dead Hand’ can be read as a cautionary tale not just of the dangers of going onto bogs in darkness but, like ‘Tiddy Mun’, of the danger of not believing and of not respecting the other worldly inhabitants of the bog and the ritual protections of the ‘safe-keeps’. James (2013) described ‘The Dead Hand’ as collected near to Balfour’s home in Redbourne, in the Ancholme Valley. Ordnance Survey maps from 1886 show the Old and New Ancholme rivers stretching from the outskirts of South Ferriby at the Humber, down through Glanford Brigg, to Bishopbridge. They run close to many named carrs, with the closest stretch of the Ancholme to Redbourne two miles east of the village, where it passes between Redbourne Carr and Kelsey Carrs on the other side.

An archaeological reading of ‘The Dead Hand’ prompted us to reflect on the well-preserved human remains which have been discovered in bogs from across the UK and northern Europe (Giles 2020; von Beek et al 2023). The fenlands of Lincolnshire have a long history of peat extraction – initially by hand for personal use, such as for burning as fuel, and later for commercial sale until well into the 20th century. It is during the process of cutting for peat that many of the complete and partial human remains known as bog-bodies have been discovered. One of the earliest known accounts of these discoveries from Northern England is from wetlands near the village of Amcotts (Giles 2020): less than fifteen miles from

Redbourne, as the crow flies, and around ten miles from the nearest stretch of the River Ancholme.

Amcotts Woman

The story of Amcotts Woman begins in the middle. In 1747, a peat digger was working near Amcotts village when he put his spade through the foot of a body deep in the peat. Shocked by the discovery, he fled the scene, but word reached a local antiquarian, Dr George Stovin. Stovin located the site and, with a team of workers, excavated the body of a woman (Giles 2020). Whilst he described the body itself as like a bag of bones, the hand was well-preserved ‘with the nails as fresh as any living persons’ (Stovin 1747: 572). The hand and the shoes from the body were sent to the Royal Society for examination, and Stovin’s letter about the find was published in the Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society. The Romano-British style of the shoes suggested that this woman lived in the third or fourth century AD (Turner and Rhodes 1992), but how she ended up in the peat remains a mystery: ‘Was her death an accidental drowning, a body hidden after violence, or a formal burial in a powerful locale? We still do not know’ (Giles 2022: 75).

James (2013) speculates that the visions of the dead, and dead hands, in the Lincolnshire folk tales could be the result of opium consumption to treat ‘ague’, but they could also be associated with the archaeological finds of bog bodies. Stovin’s letter and the accounts of other finds from Lincolnshire, for instance detailed by de la Pryme (Giles 2020), provide information about bodies that were reported and recorded, but it is possible that there were also unrecorded discoveries of such bodies. It was an unusual enough event to strike a body when digging peat that it frightened the labourer who discovered Amcotts Woman, and was likely notable enough to be recounted to family and friends, even if it wasn’t formally recorded. Perhaps these stories were shared in warmth and safety at firesides in homes, or

told by the comforting hearth-light of a local inn. Could stories of such finds of partial bodies within peatlands have inspired elements of legends like ‘The Dead Hand’? Disembodied hands also feature in another of Balfour’s Lincolnshire folk tales, ‘The Dead Moon’: ‘tha slimy drippin’ De’ad Han’s slithered aboot, beckonin’ an’ p’intin’, and makin’ yer skin crawl wi’ ther cowl’d wet feel’ (Balfour 1891a: 158). In support of this possibility, Turner makes a close link between tales of Cheshire boggarts and the bog body, Lindow Man (1986). Folklore may have been both a way of making sense of these discoveries, and of incorporating them within a wider discourse around bogs as unknowable and dangerous landscapes.

Wider folklore relating to bogs often leans toward the liminal and the supernatural: beings that don’t play by human rules, such as fairies and giants, boggarts and black-dogs; the misleading lights of the will-o-the-wisps; and bottomless depths beneath a false surface (Meredith, 2002; Flint and Jennings, 2020). Folklore from other watery places across the UK also tells of supernatural beings, which like ‘Dead Hands’, may drag people who tread too close (often children) into their depths (e.g. Peg Powler, Jenny Greenteeth, or the Grindylow). These motifs aren’t restricted to the past. Modern folklore associated with peatlands includes stories of alien abductions, and sightings of UFOs and ‘alien big cats’ (colloquially known as ABCs). Bogs are powerful places where people have felt, and sought to connect with, a world beyond the human for a very long time.

There is also a more direct connection between ‘The Dead Hand’ and the discovery of Amcotts Woman: both the antiquarian illustration and the folklore focus on a hand. All that remains of Amcotts Woman today is a shoe, looked after by the Spalding Gentleman’s Society. She is one of what archaeologists call ‘paper’ bog bodies: those known only through documentary material (van Beek et al 2023: 122). However, in 2019, Melanie Giles tracked down beautiful watercolour paintings of the shoes and the hand in the

collections of the Society of Antiquaries, made by George Vertue when the remains were inspected in the eighteenth century. There are two paintings of the hand, one palm down, and the other palm up, and both shadowed, ‘suggesting they were drawn by oil-lamp or candlelight’ (Giles 2020: 78).

1
2
3
4
5
Inches



1
2
3
Inches

18 Inches the Right Bone

The Right hand of a woman
as she was found dead in a morass, digging for Peet in amicos more
limestone

see the Letter & Minutes of it
in the Society's books

brought to the Society 1 Oct 1797

Figure 2. *The hand of Amcotts Woman from the 'Prints and Drawings Collected Before 1750' of the Society of Antiquaries, linked to Minute Book entry October 1747: 33– 4* (© The Society of Antiquaries of London)

Hands can be the way we engage in tactile and intimate ways with the world and one another. There is something very personal about reaching out a hand to another person – a sense of touch that is both physical and emotional. The human hand is also ‘the part of the human body appearing most frequently in symbol’ (Biedermann 1992: 162). This symbolism has a very long history: some of the earliest known examples of prehistoric European cave art are hand stencils (Standish et al. 2025). A hand can symbolise violence, as in a fist, or be held open in a gesture of welcome and connection, such as a handshake. Hands are potent symbols of royalty and the divine, of loyalty, solidarity, comfort and healing (Biedermann 1992), or can be imbued with supernatural power (such as the ‘hand of glory’). When we first saw these images of Amcotts Woman’s hand, we did not find them macabre, but profoundly moving. Here was a hand laid open, as though reaching across time, in an invitation. Seeing this image prompted engagement with the story of Amcotts Woman in a way which evoked empathy as well as wonder and curiosity, and added an emotional depth to our understanding of the Lincolnshire carrs and fens. In a similar way, historical folklore invites us to connect emotionally and imaginatively with the ways that people in the past connected with their local peatlands. This engagement with the deep-mapping of place, through both the folklore and archaeology that are entangled with the location in which the body of Amcotts Woman was found, informed the following poem:

The Paper Hand

For Amcotts Woman

A woman becomes water
folded, peat-swaddled
becomes nameless, becomes place

before the lamp of history
she swallows the darklins
becomes the mosses keep-safe

centuries pass, alone
with bogles and todlowries
with shapeless things

alone without time

she asks to be found
invites a man bent by labour
to know others who suffer by the spade

A woman becomes a hand
drifts between flesh
and leather, peat and paper

asks to be known
for another's hand to sketch by candlelight

the proud belly of her palm

the gentle crook of thumb

the sheen of fingertips

turned inwards, cradling

the shape of longing

resting open

as on a hospital coverlet

her hand asks for my hand

for me to say, *I am with you.*

Abbi Flint

Conclusion

In their exploration of the relationship between archaeology and folklore, Gazin-Schwartz and Holtorf (1999: 16) remind us that there is ‘more than one way to think about time’, particularly in relation to specific landscapes. This idea is particularly fruitful for thinking about peatlands, where their specific chemistry can evoke collapsed senses of time, and where the past erupts unnervingly from what were boggy waters. This ‘deep time enchantment’ (Fredengren 2016) compels us to tell stories. Through our archaeological engagement with folklore, we have argued it preserves within it the wisdom with which Lincolnshire carr folk made sense of such discoveries that appeared to confound time and

confront the living with evidence of the supernatural. The telling of these tales passed on intimate, multi-sensory and embodied relationships with the fens, and served the purpose of deep mapping: a storying and re-storying of place whose connections extended beyond the human.

Yet we have also argued that the tales were constructed in the midst of the transformation of the fens, and we have pulled at some of their threads to show how themes of death, fear and grief were woven together to make sense of both the mortal risks they faced daily in this wetland landscape but also the anxiety surrounding its drainage and loss. Folklore, we argue, deploys its own deep time narrative to deal with risk and radical change, providing storied structures that allow people to act effectively and ethically in relation to the land. Our own creative methods, mimicking the poetic idioms of the tales of the carrs, bring this practice into the present, and we hope that in these new retellings, we find novel ways of dealing with both ancient pasts and uncertain futures, in an engaging and fluid landscape.

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