

As above, so below: Flows and liquidity from the bogs to the fens

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Introduction: Flows and liquidity – the unsettling nature of water

This paper charts a course from Derbyshire and Staffordshire Moors to the Lincolnshire Fens. Along the way the folktales that flow into the Dove, Derwent, and Trent are used to explore their landscapes with special attention paid to the role of water, wild and domesticated, in the character and subjects of the tales. The main foci of the paper are the folk tales of the mermaid of Mermaid Pool in Derbyshire, the Crooker of the River Derwent, and the Tiddy Mun in the Lincolnshire Carrs. What is encountered in each tale is a transactional engagement with nature, articulated through bodies of water and bodies in water. My concern, then, is folk tales associated with water and how they communicate across narrow boundaries between the watery, liquid beings contained within our skins and the watery worlds without.

The mermaid in the Mermaid Pool bestows upon visitors eternal life or death according to her whim, the Crooker by Cromford Bridge seeks to drag unwary travellers into the river Derwent, and the Tiddy Mun controls the tidal power that could swallow the Fens or maintain the fenfolk's precarious livelihoods. Each is a dangerous presence with a watery home. These stories of death, immortality, seduction, worship, and hunting humans on dark roads make manifest the themes of transgression and boundary crossing personified by the figures of the water tales. The location of these tales further underlines the radical uncertainty that they invoke. The Peak District pools are on high, wet ground: wild lands whose economic limitations render them undesirable; similarly, the Carrs are places of danger and risk to

authority and God that needed taming. Marshlands and wet places frustrate and thwart patriarchal capitalism – from across the Atlantic we hear the Trumpian chorus sing that swamps must be drained and problematic women locked up.

The idea of a political, or politicised, landscape is self-evident in a time of climate crisis. Water is a key informant of the topography of ecological concern. We, humanity, are assailed by crises of water: in excess it floods, erodes, and drowns; its lack is experienced as drought, desertification, and death. Civilisations clustered around water sources and transitory points, fresh to salt, salt to fresh. In the Anthropocene, these are crises that reflect back to us human action and inaction. In England and Wales, rivers that were slowly cleared of the long legacy of the industrial revolution are now polluted by the sewage of industrial farming and human populations. Flowing between the Peaks and the Carrs, the River Trent was the third most polluted river in England and Wales during 2024 according to the campaign group ‘Top of the Poops’. The personification of rivers is discussed below; if the Trent were a person it would be hospitalised and in intensive care.’ Globally, the 2025 edition of the UN Frontiers report, *The Weight of Time: Facing a new age of challenges for people and ecosystems*, highlights four key areas of emerging concern; in different ways, three of these are concerned with water.

This article’s concern with politics in the broadest sense reflects the ways in which the vernacular cultures of the people allow an autonomy of expression that escapes the frameworks of polite or policed speech elsewhere. That means sometimes that speech is uncomfortable from a progressive perspective, especially when ‘outsiders’ are thought of as a threat. We encounter this idea in Tiddy Mun’s tale where Dutch engineers disappear when they upset the balance of nature. But that does not make folk culture a problem in itself but, instead, points to the need to recognise that it is a medium through which difference is

explored and tensions articulated. American folkloristics is alert to these issues and Fivecoate, Downs, & McGriff (2021) ask the question,

It is true that the public often finds the topics we study to be fascinating, even if it does not care to engage in the same way with the theoretical discourse surrounding those texts or social groups. So the discipline has a unique insight on the things that people and institutions find interesting, but how do we capitalize on this interest? (69).

This article shows that the politics of water is a key, crucial area of concern and that is being expressed through at least some vectors of the current folklore revival.

These same questions have been examined in some detail previously. Rod Giblett's (1996) *Postmodern Wetlands* is a powerful exploration of the religio-political-psychoanalytic construction of the swamp within modernity. He sees 'marsh and modern ways as inimical to each other' (72), and argues that there is a patriarchal imperative to 'tame' the wet places of the Earth and to regulate them, to make them subject to the demands of productivity and the ordering tendencies of patriarchal capitalism. Once drained, they lose the vitality they possessed; through possession they become economically viable but moribund,

As wetlands are increasingly lost from the world and are lost as an object of love which nourishes life, both mourning and melancholia are experienced and exercised in relation to them. The world should mourn its wetlands which gave it life and nourished it (177).

The freeing of the wetlands from their colonisation would render not only the marshes free but the damp, dark inner worlds of humanity that are trapped in melancholic longing.

Borrowing from the work of Marija Gimbutas, he writes, 'The Great Goddess is fecund and

protean like the wetland itself” (198), and it is in this figure that hope can be found. The Great Goddess is adaptable: she flows, erodes, takes life but also gives it. In this complexity, the power of water as co-inhabitant of the earth, of our bodies, of our cultures reveals itself.

This paper explores the role of folklore in articulating hydrosocial dimensions of social conflict in the East Midlands of England and in doing so is inspired by the liberation of watery landscapes described by Giblett. It adopts an interdisciplinary perspective that seeks to show the importance of folklore in providing a system of signifiers through which humans link discourses of landscape, culture, politics, and environment. The paper’s sections follow the flow of water from the Kinder water table, follow the rivers of Derbyshire, Nottinghamshire, and Lincolnshire, to the Fens of Northeast Lincolnshire. Folklore tends to be treated as a local phenomenon. English folklore tends to be treated on a county by county basis. Water knows no boundaries and flows over them with impunity. A further aim of this article is to convey the commonalities shared across county lines and the manner in which water tales carry them. As the tales examined flow into the sea the article concludes with a return to its main theme, the capacity for folklore to follow social contours and provide living culture with unruly and agile streams of imagery, figures, and depths that are yet to be drained or taken into private ownership.

Above: Bogs and wet moorland

Freshwater mermaids are a rarer phenomenon than their coastal counterparts and yet the Peak District has three; two of these are in Staffordshire, in the moorland pool northwest of Leek. The third is in Derbyshire, roughly sixteen miles north-northeast of the Staffordshire pools, high up on the slopes of Kinder Scout, a plateau and the Peak’s highest point. Each pool is inhabited by a mermaid although the westernmost of the Staffordshire pools, the Doxey Pool on the Roaches, is also associated with a ghost and Jenny Greenteeth. The Kinder Mermaid

Pool and Black Mere have accounts dating to the 1890s (e.g. Hope 1893, Burne 1896) but the Doxey Pool's folklore is less clearly established with most current references drawing on Eleanor Pettit's 1949 encounter with a 30 feet tall hybrid of a mermaid and Jenny Greenteeth (Clarke 1991). The three pools share a number of features. They are believed to have chthonic underground links with other bodies of water: the Atlantic or each other. Encounters with the denizens of the pools are high stakes; they are as likely to reward visitors with riches or immortality as they are to cause their death. Each pool is said to be shunned by all living creatures with even birds and insects never flying over it. Disappointingly, at least in terms of the maintenance of legends, I can confirm that current forms of winged life are ignorant of this prohibition. I have watched birds, flies, butterflies and moths flying over the Mermaid Pool and the Doxey Pool with no ill effects befalling them. A further mystical layer is added to the tales of the pool through association with 'Celtic water worship' in the form of Well Dressing (e.g. see Johnson 2015). A connection with pre-Christian traditions was tentatively suggested by Christina Hole (1976) but has been directly challenged subsequently (Roud 2008). That has not deterred appeals to the Celtic connection in the popular imagination with folkloric websites and Peak District tourist sites drawing on the idea (e.g. Adekilekun 2025, Visit Derbyshire 2025)

The remoteness of my main focus enhances its strangeness. Nestled beneath the dramatic escarpment of Kinder Downfall—a thirty-metre cascade tumbling from the edge of the Kinder plateau—lies a pool shrouded in legend and mystery. Known as the Kinder Mermaid Pool, this secluded body of water has long been the subject of whispered tales and spectral lore among the moorland folk of Derbyshire. It is said that on the stroke of midnight, as Easter Eve yields to Easter morn, a mermaid of haunting beauty emerges from the depths. To those who behold her in that sacred hour, she may bestow the gift of immortality—or, with equal caprice, draw them into the watery abyss to their death. Robert Charles Hope, in his

1893 compendium *The Legendary Lore of the Holy Wells of England*, speaks of her as a ‘beautiful nymph’ who bathes daily in the pool’s waters. Again, my own recent observations suggest that the silty, peat-stained waters are not a welcoming sight, however the water is slightly saline and perhaps more welcoming to an errant selkie than most inland pools. According to Hope’s account, ‘the man who has the good fortune to see her whilst bathing will become immortal’ (Hope 1893: 45). He also recounts how, ‘in the previous century’, a young man was led by her to a hidden cavern beneath the hills. So ‘pleased’ was she by him that she granted him eternal life. Hope offers a similar account of a calendrical mermaid who visited Rostherne Mere in Cheshire every Easter. This was a sea-faring mermaid who visited the Mere by a passage linking the mere to the Irish Sea. Although he provides fewer details he also mentions another Easter mermaid appearing on Mill Hill in the Peak District.

The Easter motif is an interesting one in the context of immortality. Here immortality is not a promise of life without end framed by the context of Jesus’ sacrifice but something altogether more mysterious and based on indeterminacy and water, homologous but not clearly related. Beyond its mythical guardian, the pool itself is reputed to possess healing virtues. Locals believed that its waters—whether taken in draught or through immersion—carry curative powers, soothing both body and spirit. The pool’s mystique is further deepened by ghost stories. Perhaps the most well-known is fictional but told with sufficient verisimilitude to be convincing as an accurate record of local lore. In Mary Augusta Ward’s 1892 novel *The History of David Grieve*, the spectral figure of Jenny Crum is said to haunt the area, weaving her own sorrowful thread into the tapestry of Kinder’s folklore.

The Kinder Mermaid Pool remains a place where nature and myth entwine—a liminal space inhabited by an indeterminate being, neither human nor animal with the power to bestow eternal life. The source of the power is unclear but what is evident is that the pool and its

waters are seen to have healing power of their own. The land – high, wet, uneconomical – has a power that seems distant from the churches of the towns and villages in the valley below. Here, then, it seems that Giblett's (*op cit.*) Great Goddess is in the seeping land, her power in the mermaid's pool.

In the valleys the connection to nature is less untrammelled and the wild female spirits of the hills are framed in terms of threat and repercussions. The avatar of the wild, Great Goddess is recast as an evil witch. This is the transformation of the mermaid that occurs in Mary Augusta Ward's (1892) *The History of David Grieve*. Published within twelve months of Hope's suggestions of old magic in the hills, Ward's novel names the mermaid-witch Jenny Crum and makes her an enemy of any 'Christian man' in the mind of Derbyshire farmer, Reuben Grieve,

[H]eer wor witches yance, my gell, becos it's in th' Bible, an whatever's in th' Bible's true,' and the farmer brought his hand down on the top bar of the gate. 'I'm no gien ony judgment about 'em nowadays. Theer wor aw mak o' queer things said about Jenny Crum an Needham Farm i' th' owd days. I've heerd my grandmither say it worn't worth a Christian man's while to live in Needham Farm when Jenny Crum wor about. She meddled wi everythin-wi his lambs, an his coos, an his childer. I niver seed nothin mysel, so I doan't say nowt-not o' mi awn knowledge. But I doan't soomhow bleeve as it's th' Awmighty's will to freeten a Christian coountry wi witches, i th' present dispensation. An murderin's a gräat sin, wheder it's witches or oother foak. (Ward 1892: 84).

Ward is a fascinating example of a contradictory Victorian; President of the Women's National Anti-Suffrage League and publishing in her husband's name she was, nonetheless, an outspoken advocate for higher education and greater employment opportunities for women. Joannau (2005) provides an insightful overview of Ward and notes the outrage that

Ward's novel *Robert Elsmere* (1888) caused, including provoking the ire of Gladstone, for exploring, 'the ethical dilemmas of a young Anglican clergyman who is converted to Christian Socialism,' (Joannau 2005: 563). By the 1890s Ward is already associated with a liberal, if not dangerous, approach to conventional religious belief and yet she is keen to tell the story of the Kinder Mermaid from a Christian perspective.

Joannau suggests that Ward used her novels as a means of communicating her ideas more widely and this is apparent in the social commentary and observations of *The History of David Grieve*. From the perspective of her eponymous hero she writes,

Young men and women, out on a holiday from the big towns near, and carrying little red or green 'guides,' spoke of the 'Mermaid's Pool' with the accent of romantic interest. But the boy had also discovered that no native-born farmer or shepherd about had ever heard of the name, or would have a word to say to it. And for the first time he had stumbled full into the deep deposit of witch-lore and belief still surviving in the Kinder Scout district, as in all the remoter moorland of the North (96–7).

Here, too, as in Giblett and his wild Goddess a century later, the moors are places of atavistic survivals and dangerous reminders of past times. This is not simply a cosmopolitan dismissal of 'simple countryfolk', but an effect of the land, 'the remoter moorland of the North'.

This retelling of the story takes a twist from fiction to, possibly, a semblance of truth through the investigations of an early photographer keen to photograph literary landscapes. According to Charles S. Olcott (1914) in *The Lure of the Camera*, Mary Ward based her telling of the story of Jenny Crum on a real account of supernatural disturbances in the Derbyshire hills. Olcott's account added a frisson of the unseen to the countryside he was eager to photograph whilst giving an account of the locations associated with the works of Ward, Carlyle, Wordsworth and others. Olcott visited the area and implies a familiarity with Upper and

Lower House, both owned by a Manchester merchant, James Watt. The Upper House is still present and is a commercial venture offering weddings, events, and AirBnB stays claiming that the house hosted Prince Albert and Agatha Christie as former guests.

The main characters in Ward's novel, David and his sister Louie, grow up in Needham Farm, named for a tenant farmer of Watts. Olcott notes that the farm was contemporaneously named Lower House, making its ties to the estate established by Watts more evident. Olcott's tale is based close to here and concerns a farmer, Tom Heys. It is worth repeating Olcott's telling of the ghost of the Mermaid Pool in full. It is short but full of rich detail that gives a flavour of the enchanted landscape that inspired Ward:

An old farmer named Tom Heys was much troubled by a ghost, of which he could not rid himself. He once shot at it, but without effect except that the bullet-mark is in the old house even now. An old woman once saw the ghost while shearing sheep. She threw the tongs at it. Instantly the room was filled with flying fleece, while the woman's clothes were cut to pieces and fell off her body. These were some of the troublesome pranks played by the ghost. At length the farmer discovered, somewhere on his place, an old skull, which doubtless belonged to His Ghostship, and carried it to the Mermaid's Pool, where he deposited it,

"To stay as long as holly's green,

And rocks on Kinderscout are seen." (Olcott 1914: 130).

In the most macabre terms, Olcott depicts Ward's witch spirit as a malevolent ghost who is only quelled by an offering of a human skull to the Mermaid Pool while intoning a ritual incantation to the natural world. Tom Heys Farm is still named on current maps and is a mile and a half northwest of the site of Lower Farm. Lower Farm itself has been lost beneath the

waters of Kinder Reservoir, built during the first two decades of the twentieth century; like the town of Derwent beneath the nearby Derwent Reservoir, an entire settlement drowned beneath the gathered waters of the Kinder Ashop and Derwent rivers, both also gathering in the wetlands of the Kinder massif. The sinking of Lower Farm and Derwent were planned but the Derwent floods with increasing regularity, threatening to drown more of Derbyshire. The human relationship with water is complex; it can sustain us and overwhelm us.

Between: Rivers and flow

Rising in the Dark Peak and gathering volume from successive water tables, the Derwent is the major river that runs almost the full length of Derbyshire; the shared prefix acts as a bond between county and river although derived from different roots. Ekwall (1960) suggests that Derby comes from Old Scandinavian and indicates, ‘woods where deer were seen’ (Ekwall 1960: 142), whilst Derwent is derived from Old English meaning, ‘river where oaks were common,’ (143). The source of the Derwent is the forbiddingly named Bleaklow, six miles northeast of the Mermaid Pool. Like the Mermaid Pool, in the currents of the river Derwent are flows of magic and the supernatural, stories overflowing with signifiers inviting open interpretations that enchant the domesticated lands through which it flows. The Derwent flows South until it feeds the Trent which then flows East and North through Lincolnshire until it, in turn, feeds a larger river, the Humber. Thus, the Kinder waters wash into the North Sea. Both the Derwent and the Trent are inhabited and personified through spirits that threaten humans and require appeasement. Like the offering made to the mermaid-witch, water takes as well as gives; while the rivers slake human thirst, they also have their own appetites.

Collected by Ruth Tongue (2015 [1970]), ‘The Crooker’ is a tale that wavers between states of embodiment. The Crooker is an entity that rises from the river Derwent by Cromford

Bridge and threatens travellers. In the prelude to a recent retelling (Jones 2022 [2015]), Pollyanna Jones writes a neo-pagan motif into the tale. Although there is no clear inference in Tongue, beyond the familiar tropes of three witches, kindness to animals rewarded, and plants with magical qualities, Jones alludes to one of the themes of this article, aquatic animism. She suggests that the Crooker is an embodiment of the river: ‘The hungry spirit that dwells in the River Derwent is known as a water weird, and this may be some corruption of an older belief that rivers have their own spirits, nymphs, or other deities.’ (Jones 2022: para.3)

In the tale, a traveller is warned away from travelling on the Cromford Road after dark three times. Each time, he is warned by a witch dressed in green and each time he insists he must press on to Wirksworth to visit his ill mother. Each witch acquiesces and remembers a kindness he did to an animal friend of theirs, successively in Tongue, a netted bird, a snared rabbit, and a trapped vixen and cub. In return for his kindness to the Derbyshire fauna, the witches each give him a posy of protective flowers: first St John’s wort, then primroses, and finally daisies. The traveller continues along the road with the words of the last witch ringing in his ears; a warning that he must be on Cromford Bridge before the moon rises. Inevitably, for without the appearance of the Crooker there would be no tale to tell, the moon rises and close to the river the traveller is waylaid.

He hears a word in the sound of the waters of the river, ‘Hungry,’ and a large, spindly tree grasps at him. While the looming shadow that terrifies the traveller is evident to him, the form that gives the shadow shape is less clear to the reader. The story is tantalisingly evasive about the nature of the Crooker. It is clear that the traveller is grasped by a motile tree, but the tree appears to act under the control of the river itself. Each time he is threatened, the traveller throws a posy of flowers at the chasing tree as it closes in on him, first the

daisies, then the primroses, and finally the St John's Wort. He throws the first two on the road and the river commands Crooker to give it the flowers. When he throws the St John's Wort he does so directly at the Crooker; it cries out and the traveller faints as he crosses the threshold of a chapel just on the Cromford side of the bridge. He is found in the morning, giving thanks at the altar of the chapel.

Two things stand out here that weave the tale deeper into the fabric of British folklore: firstly, the final flower that vanquishes the Crooker is St John's Wort. In *The Treadwell's Book of Plant Magic* (2020), Christina Oakley-Harrington indicates that the plant is associated with protection, especially from demons. She also notes its use as a cure for 'melancholy', something that seems to be borne out through more clinical approaches (Ng et al 2017, Benitez et al 2022). Baker (1996) offers a similar account, describing its goat-like smell, and writing, 'It burned in midsummer fires; its gathering, when still wet with dew, by someone still fasting, was ceremonial and it decorated houses against midsummer dangers, evil, ghosts, witches, thunder and lightning' (140). Secondly, and crucially here, is the personification of the river. Not only does it have a land presence, as all rivers do when they flood, but it is driven by desires, hunger and want.

The recognition of rivers as entities and, as such, entitled to protections and rights as living beings is pursued globally. Robert Macfarlane's book, *Is a River Alive?* (2025) has brought the idea of recognising rivers as living beings to a wider public but does so as part of a wider current. The Whanganui River in Aotearoa New Zealand was granted legal personhood in 2017. In the UK, as of February 2025, Lewes District Council gave official support towards recognising the rights of the River Ouse in Sussex after a campaign by a local group called Love Our Ouse. With similar aims, the River Rights Network (<https://www.riverrights.org/>) was established in 2024. This recognition of the rights of rivers

and the construction of a legal identity for them echoes earlier folkloric traditions in which rivers were attributed with a coherent identity. Coherency may be anathema to entities that flow in flux and are clearly continually in a process of becoming and cessation – gathering moisture in the hills, flowing into wetlands and, ultimately, the sea as the ground flattens and tapers downwards – but riverine personification is well established.

Tongue's telling of the Crooker story ends with locals referring to an occasion when the Crooker claimed a victim and the Darrent roared its approval. In Tongue, the Darrent is her transcription of the vernacular pronunciation of Derwent, remembered from hearing the tale told at a picnic a little upstream of Cromford in 1927. A similar rendering of the Derwent was published in *Folklore* nearly a quarter of a century earlier. In this M. Agatha Turner, the letter writer, recounts the 'great excitement,' in Derbyshire at the drowning of a man in the Derwent. She writes to the editor,

I was so struck with the way Mrs. Dale [a washerwoman] talked of the river, as if it was a living personage, or deity. I could almost imagine the next step would be to take it offerings! 'He didna know Darrant' (a kind of triumph in her voice). 'He said it were nought but a brook.' 'But Darrant got 'im.' 'They never saw his head, he threw his arms up, but Darrant wouldna let him go.' 'Aye, it's a sad pity, seven children! But he shouldna ha' made so light of Darrant. He knows now! Nought but a brook! he knows now!' It sounded as if Darrant had punished him for blaspheming and he had now been summoned before Darrant his judge (Turner 1904, 99).

The underlying theme of a transactional relationship with nature is expressed clearly here. The offerings of bog and bridge – skull and flowers – are supplemented by a third term, respect. The unnamed drowned man, fingers sinking into the flowing waters, is claimed by Darrant for not recognising the true power of the river. We might read into this the seasonal

changes that rivers undertake; the river that flows low through Summer might wash away life and property in Winter. Regardless, human life and wild water are intertwined and the folklore reminds us that it is a negotiated relationship.

As the Derwent flows into the Trent it takes on a new persona. The Trent does not reach the North Sea, joining the Humber between Goole and Kingston upon Hull. However, it is sufficiently close to the mouth of the Humber, to be affected by tides. The Trent has an equinoctial tidal bore that flows upstream and reaches several feet in height. Maureen Sutton (1997) suggests the name given to it is derived from *Ægir*, a Norse sea deity. Earlier, Ethel Rudkin (1955) noted the Trent Aegir being known as ‘Old Muck Faace’ and ‘Owd Forky’ in Lincolnshire. Sutton also records offerings to the Trent at Gainsborough, Lincolnshire: two accounts of coins being offered to the Trent to protect from drowning the person who makes the sacrifice. Moreover, she describes a custom of sacrificing animals to the river: ‘the River Trent was a greedy river and would take seven lives a year, so in March when many of the lambs were born a farmer would sacrifice to the river a cade or weak lamb. He believed that by his action a human life will be spared,’ (Sutton 1997: 35). Sutton and her sources demonstrate the continuation of the structural relationship between folklore, customs, and water: offerings and personification.

Below: Fens and marshes

The Aegir is a reminder of the indeterminacy of the coast. The sea’s tidal push and pull can have effect for miles inland along rivers like the Trent or Severn whilst intertidal marshland makes complex common phrases like, ‘on dry land’, just as the ill-defined and unruly high ground where boglands come to be associated with warnings not to go, ‘out ont’ moor’. These troubled wetlands provide fertile environments for folklore and the Lincolnshire fens are rich with diverse, idiosyncratic tales; Anna Milon and Rory Waterman’s (2025) collection

Lincolnshire Folk Tales Reimagined offers a number of contemporary versions of some of the better-known examples of Lincolnshire folklore. Among them is a retelling of the tale of Tiddy Mun that defies convention and form.

Fee Griffin's (2025) version of Tiddy Mun in the Milon and Waterman collection, '21:00 – 22:00, Tiddy Mun. New Series. (S) (HD)' is a poetic and sidereal retelling of the story as a gameshow on the British television station, Channel 4. The channel is known for sensationalist 'reality television' gameshows and Griffin's poem has naked contestants participating in midnight rituals. It is Tiddy Mun for a post-Baudrillardian age that blurs reality and representation but the centuries old environmental subtext to Tiddy Mun is evident throughout; the poem ends with an agentic shift from contestant to reader,

The production assistant hands you

an alarm clock,

a pail of water,

and stands back-

(Griffin 2025: 113).

We are all contestants in the reality of climate change and winning or losing will affect us all; the alarm clock tells us of the pressing urgency of the crisis and the pail of water indicates the centrality of water to our lives and the material effects of the crisis. Along the eastern seaboard of England houses are tumbling into the sea as rising sea levels erode the coast at ever greater speed; flowing into the sea are England's polluted rivers; reservoirs run low in Summer; flash floods close transport links and ruin homes in Winter; around the world the

pattern is repeated as islands disappear, microplastics and human effluence pollute, deserts expand and people go hungry and thirsty. For four hundred years Tiddy Mun has acted as a symbol of the need for a considered relationship with wetlands.

The tale is increasingly well known. It was first collected and published as part of Marie Clothilde Balfour's survey of the folklore of the Lincolnshire Carrs (Balfour 1891). Disputed, refuted, supported and defended, examinations of Balfour's work have revealed that the fenland of the Carrs was a place of class conflict and a place of low magic and embedded vernacular beliefs (see Borlik 2013, Borlik 2021, James 2013). Tiddy Mun, or in modern terms, 'tiny man', is understood to be a Boggart living in the Lincolnshire Carrs. The number of versions of this tale proliferates but he is generally held to be a white haired and bearded figure who is the size of a toddler but is nonetheless, variously, king of the tiddy folk or chief of the fen spirits. Tiddy Mun's ecological salience is his connection to the tidal rising and falling of water levels in the fens prior to their drainage from the seventeenth century onwards and his legendary response to the engineering of the system of drains thereafter.

Before the Carrs were drained Tiddy Mun would be beseeched with chanting whenever the waters rose too far. To signal his acquiescence to the chants of the fenfolk he would reply with a peewit's (lapwing's) cry and lower the waters once more. When the Carrs and fens were drained, a malaise spread over the region around his home in the Ancholme Valley. Crops failed, livestock and then humans sickened, homes fell, and the Dutch workers associated with the drainage of the fens disappeared. When the children of the district began to fall ill and disappear, the fenfolk acted and beseeched the Tiddy Mun at the time of the new moon, filling the drained ditches with pails of water. Their lamentations were heard and Tiddy Mun restored the relative prosperity of the area, healed the sick and for a fleeting

moment sent the spirits of children who had died during the aftermath of the draining of the Carrs to visit their grieving mothers.

Horn (1987) draws out the ecological framing as an explanatory tool. He suggested that the draining of the fens and subsequent environmental effects structure the tale – change, harm, recovery. This cycle is predictable from a more informed vantage point but less so in the seventeenth century. The fenfolk who maintained a livelihood from the aquatic and avian life found among the marshland of the fens lost their source of income and their rights to the wild lands of the marshes. The draining of the fens was a domestication, in Giblett's terms, a shift from the Great Goddess to the Earth Mother. It was also a shift in land claim from the common folk to landowners who were granted the emergent farm land by enclosure and the corruption of investors in the project such as Sir John Monson (for a detailed account see Keith Lindley's (1982) *Fenland Riots and the English Revolution*).

Lindley (1982) provides multiple instances of popular resistance against the drainage and subsequent enclosure; although it should be noted that there was opposition from across the contemporary social strata it was the common folk of the fens and carrs who maintained a campaign of disruption, direct action, and riot. The evidence of corruption was sufficient for Lindley to comment, 'Fenland enclosure had been achieved by a mixture of chicanery, coercion and persuasion, with royal and conciliar connivance or assistance, and the suppression of local resistance to it followed a similar pattern,' (Lindley 1982, 107). The violent resistance of the Lincolnshire fenfolk continued after the decapitation of King Charles I and was particularly pronounced on the Isle of Axholme in the Summer and Autumn of 1650 with riots and tenant farmers thrown off their land and the huge drainage ditches levelled. The support of former Levellers John Lilbourne and John Wildman added to the sense of radicalism associated with the uprising.

That the Tiddy Mun folk tale coincides with I has been linked with popular protest against enclosure and drainage in the seventeenth century provides it with a backdrop of environmental protest that resonates deeply today. Mary Gearey (2022) makes sense of Tiddy Munn in this context as a personification of the wetland as heterotopia, ‘spaces in which to enable reactionary or revolutionary thoughts and deeds,’ (66). She is alert to the threat implicit in the tale. When angered or denied recognition, the Tiddy Mun exerts his power over life and death,

The Tiddy Mun was a fenland spirit, who would wreak a terrible revenge on you if you did not pay him his dues and respect the wetlands. As a means to enacting social compliance, and enabling an anti-drainage vanguard, Tiddy Mun was your go-to watery demon, a not always benign spirit of place. Drowned cattle, lost children, and flooded homes would all be enchantments for a lack of accommodation with the Tiddy Mun (Gearey 2022: 67).

There is a powerful coincidence of structural and ecological concerns that come to shape the retelling of the tale today. Griffin’s (2025) version is indicative of the uptake of the environmental dimension but Lisa Schneidau (2022) recounts a fuller range of themes touched on in the Tiddy Mun tale: environment, class, poverty, illness, and substance dependency. The wet marshes of the fens were associated with malaria and opium was a common treatment for it; opiate use in Lincolnshire is still higher than regional and national (England) averages (LCC 2025). Schneidau highlights the environmental metaphor in her introduction to the tale and ends her retelling of it with a melancholy air, with Tiddy Mun gone, dry land and silent peewits. A similar melancholy characterises a shorter retelling of Tiddy Mun in poetic form by Patricia Monaghan, ‘Tiddy Mun is Gone’. Monaghan’s (2003) poem was published in the academic journal *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and*

Environment, a fitting platform for a figure that is repeatedly referred to in the context of the human relationship with the natural world. Monaghan's poem closes with sadness, Tiddy Mun as a connective spirit between human and non-human consciousness drowned out by the banality of the Anthropocene,

and Tiddy Mun vanished utterly, and now voices of dead fen men
know of a spirit with no home, no home at all in the dead fens,
and call out warnings to us in the shops and the streets
and we have nowhere safe to go, nowhere at all

(Monaghan 2003: 237).

Nonetheless, Tiddy Mun is far from absent and his tale is retold in multiple ways. Among many worthy examples available online, I urge the reader to first visit the Tiddy Mun page on the companion website to *Lincolnshire Folk Tales Reimagined* (Milon & Waterman 2025) – <https://lincolnshirefolktalesproject.com/2023/09/05/hello-world/>. Also worth noting for an apposite approach to reframing Tiddy Mun is Michael Hutchinson's (2018) self-published novel, *Tiddy Mun*, in which an academic ecologist becomes obsessed with the folk tale and the discovery of a bog body in the Lincolnshire fens. The academic is drawn into the marshland; Tiddy Mun has risen from the marshes just as Hutchinson's character sinks into them.

In Ethel Rudkin's description of him, Tiddy Mun lives in 'the water holes, down deep in the still green water,' (Rudkin 1955: 395). There is something Arthurian about this version of Tiddy Mun; waiting in the dark, fetid water to come again in gushing flood. And there is something timely about the recent interest in retelling his story. There are civil programmes to rewild parts of the fens and organisations such as Fens for the Future (<https://www.fensforthefuture.org.uk/>) seek to expand the remaining wetlands and waterways

of the fens from Suffolk to Lincolnshire. Just as the fenfolk of the Lindsey district of Lincolnshire filled the ditches to appease Tiddy Mun there is now a wider effort to call back the spirit king of the marshlands.

Conclusion: Water, land, spirit, and the future

Where Giblett (1996) writes about the melancholic loss of a relationship with the great Goddess, he also writes about the opportunity for resistance to be mounted from the unknowable wetlands. As such, he sees in them a lack of fixity that is freeing but frustrating, ‘the wetland is literally ambi-valent, a place of moving values, its meanings circulating and swirling around, like its waters sometimes do, never settling on one definition, never flowing to an end point’ (226), and thus refusing his readers any clear conclusion. Veronica Strang’s exploration of the form and function of tales of water serpents (Strang 2023) is more direct and speaks to a hope that emerges from a living culture of engagement with water that recognises its agency and mutual co-dependency with humans. Following the work of Benedict Anderson, she proposes

a concept of ‘re-imagined communities’, in which the notion of community is extended to include all the living kinds that a river catchment contains. In this way, as well as thinking about the familial, professional and recreational human communities to which we belong, we would also consider the non-human communities co-inhabiting the catchment area (Strang 2023: 238).

The UN recognition of the crisis mentioned in the introduction to this piece and the river rights movements are tangible steps towards this idea. It is hoped that the examples drawn on in this piece demonstrate how folktales that span the gathering waters on Kinder Scout to the tidal flushing of the Lincolnshire help build resources that reflect this re-imagined community. In this context it is worth quoting at length from Gearey (2022),

[C]ontemporary cultural representations of English wetlands in television, film, music, and literature still reinforce the sensibility of these spaces as ominous, other, unruly, or simply dull and unworthy. Encouraging a different narrative or narratives about these essential ecosystems needs to stem from more inclusive cultural practitioners than environmentalists. English wetlands, and wetlands globally, would benefit from shucking off an outdated set of norms to celebrate a way of engaging with them which requires patience, care, immersion, curiosity (72).

Strang and Gearey build on Giblett and offer a vision of a new cultural space, patiently engaged with, carefully and respectfully explored, that centres the natural world *as it is*. This is something that currents in folk tales have always sought to do, to give a voice to the little people, to the formless being, to the trees, to the things that live beneath bridges, and in caves, to the world unseen and mysterious.

In each of the tales that are considered here there is an exchange brokered between the human and non-human world through which a more harmonious balance is achieved. At the Mermaid Pool, human remains are given to the pool and life grows easier for the farmer; the Crooker is given offerings and its threat is abated; the Tiddy Mun is recognised and fed clean water and the trials and tribulations of the fenfolk are ended. In each instance the threat of a human falling away from the needs of the non-human world is made in stark terms and their solutions are fraught with fear and revulsion. Undoing the fear of the wetlands and finding a new balance with them, a new community with the non-human world means reimagining these stories in ways that ensure that the mermaid, the Crooker, and the Tiddy Mun are neither objects of fear nor anthropomorphised in ways that domesticate their radical differences. Instead, perhaps, Giblett's swirling and circulating meanings might offer a complex yet pleasurable wet path from the moors to the fens and towards a new community.

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