

Introduction

By Dr Anna Milon

This Special Issue of *Revenant* casts new light on the folk tales of Lincolnshire, England's second largest county by area, and possibly its most overlooked – by, among others, tourists, governments, and scholars. Lincolnshire's folk tales are often ignored in favour of folklore associated with its more glamorous neighbours and near-neighbours, principally Yorkshire, Derbyshire, Nottinghamshire, Cambridgeshire, and Norfolk. This issue's impetus, ultimately, is a desire to challenge this perception of Lincolnshire as an un-storied place. More widely, the issue also recognises the importance of folklore for individual and regional identities, an importance that is increasingly explored by both practitioners of folklore and academics. The issue's contributions are developed from papers given at the Lincolnshire Folk Tales and Folklore(s) of Place symposium, which formed part of the Lincolnshire Folk Tales: Origins, Legacies, Connections, Futures project, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council and based at Nottingham Trent University. The project aimed to reconnect Lincolnshire's folk tales with the communities and landscapes about which they are told, and to bring the county's folklore to a wider audience. The symposium delegates showcased much of the enchantment and variety of Lincolnshire's many storied landscapes.

At this moment of political and social uncertainty in Britain, folklore has re-emerged as a means to reconnect with our communities, landscapes, history, and common humanity. The role of folklore in identity-building is fruitfully explored by The British Academy's 'Folklore Reimagined' event series, by the Shelter of Stories exhibition at Compton Verney (co-created with the Museum of British Folklore), and by recent projects such as the ongoing National Folklore Survey based at Sheffield Hallam University and the multi-institutional StoryMachine project, among others. Through various approaches and methods, these

projects look at why we tell stories and how those stories help us connect to each other and to the world around us. This Special Issue adds to that ongoing discussion about folklores of place and the place of folklore in our lives, and stakes a claim for the significance of folklore that originated, or has been augmented, away from the usual centres of influence.

What is folklore, and what is a folk tale?

There is something mystical in attempts to define folklore. For instance, Edward Burnett Tylor's now-outdated theory of 'survivals', where rural customs were held to be the eroded echoes of past rational practices, or Jeffrey A. Tolbert and Michael Foster's 'folkloresque' narratives that hide behind masks of themselves, seeming to be folklore but belying a literary origin. Marius Barbeau (1883-1969) offers the following:

Whenever in many callings the knowledge, experience, wisdom, skill, the habits and practices of the past are handed down by example or spoken word, by the older to the new generations, without reference to book, print, or schoolteacher;

Then we have folklore in its own perennial domain, at work as ever, alive and shifting, always apt to grasp and assimilate new elements on its way. ... it is the born opponent of the serial number, the stamped product, and the patented standard (1996: 255).

In fact, many folk tales survive solely in written form, having fallen out of oral circulation, and we have folklorists of Barbeau's and earlier generations to thank for their survival as artefacts. His second paragraph, however, stands firm: folklore is – or, in some cases, was at one time – a living thing woven out of the experiences of people.

The Lincolnshire Folk Tales: Origins, Legacies, Connections, Futures project dealt specifically with folk *tales*, elements of folklore in narrative form. This leaves ample room

for future hands to take up other aspects of Lincolnshire folklore, such as song, dance, holiday customs, artefacts, and so on. But folklore and folk tales are perennial, and it is also this issue's aim actively to pass on findings to these future hands, combatting a concern expressed by A. Irving Hallowell:

While it has been customary over a long period to collect a representative sample of the oral narratives of the people they [the folklorists] happen to be studying, it is an open secret that, once recorded, very little subsequent use may be made of such material. Indeed, these archival collections, once published, often moulder on our shelves waiting for the professional folklorist [...] to make use of them in a dim and uncertain future (1947: 544).

The Lincolnshire Folk Tales project included new renditions of folk tales in oral, performatively interpreted, and sung forms, and open invitations to reimagine folk tales in literature, as captured in our anthology *Lincolnshire Folk Tales Reimagined* (Five Leaves, 2025). It included an interactive map and a public blog, both available at www.lincolnshirefolktalesproject.com. This Special Issue, is part of its scholarly legacy, and our intention is that it might enable continued 'use', directly, indirectly, and in any scholarly context or location.

Lincolnshire?

In defiance of county borders on a map, the project attempted to capture the spirit of place and of its inhabitants. A good way to think about it is through Edward Casey's 'placiality': the specific foil to the abstraction of 'space'. For Casey, 'to be at all – to exist in any way – is to be somewhere, and to be somewhere is to be in some kind of *place*' (emphasis added). By moving through space, we occupy a series of places, and populate them with the signs of our

passage – with stories. Dramatist Mike Pearson brings this relationship between story and place to the fore in his *In Comes I* (2006):

In the form of a series of excursions in a defined geographical area – off the beaten track in eastern England – the book weaves together performance and land, biography and locality, memory and place.

Evoking moments from different periods over the last 200 years, forming them into asynchronous juxtaposition, attempting to create a deep map (n/p).

‘Off the beaten track’ is, in this instance, Hibaldstow, a village in North Lincolnshire and the location of Pearson’s formative years. The resulting ‘deep map’ is place and story blended in a synesthetic experience. Folk tales are often deep maps themselves, and provide ways of stitching the past onto the maps we know today.

Lincolnshire defies expectations. The Scottish folklorist Marie Clothilde Balfour, who lived a few miles south of Hibaldstow in the smaller village of Redbourne for two years in the late 1880s, gave an impression of the county in the journal *Folklore* in 1891, and much of it still rings true:

I fancy that many people still picture Lincolnshire to themselves as a region of bogs and swamps, of fever-haunted marshes, and ague-infested lowlands. I know that I, personally, expected something of the sort, when I first entered the county, and in speaking about it to strangers, their first remark is apt to be, that we must have suffered much in those “dreadful fens”. Now this is an entirely mistaken idea of the shire (145).

The Fens in the south, the Carrs in the north, and the Marsh along its seaboard, are indeed flat: reclaimed agricultural land scored by canals and drainage ditches, the marks of harrow

and plough. Along the coast, the sea goes out for miles, separated from the dunes by an expanse of wrinkled mudflats in the north, and sands from Cleethorpes to Skegness. But Lincolnshire is not all flat: the Lincoln Cliff escarpment that runs the length of the county to the west, and the Wolds to the east, cup most of it like the palm of a hand. The Roman Ermine Street bisects the county north to south, still visible in field boundaries or underlapping the arrow-straight A15 north of Lincoln (with one distinct kink around the runway of former RAF Scampton).

Lincolnshire is a haunted place, alive with the raw and riverine forces just out of the corner of your eye. The Fens and Carrs may have been drained between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, but the stories they held sunk into the earth and stayed for good. In this issue, Andrew Fergus Wilson, Melanie Giles and Abbi Flint honour the watery presences in the folk tales of Lincolnshire and beyond. Wilson traces the course of the rivers Derwent and Trent, and the various aquatic entities that populate them as their mingled waters wash along the western edge of the county and towards the Humber. Highlighting interactions between supernatural water-beings and people, Wilson argues that ‘these transactions can serve to remind us of the delicate balance between the human and non-human worlds and suggested that folklore has a key role in finding a more harmonious relationship with the non-human’. Giles and Flint, in turn, focus on the fen and peatland landscapes along Lincolnshire’s borders, positing that ‘archaeological and folkloric narratives can be a source of connection with place across time’ and offering original poetic expressions of that connection.

The storied places of Lincolnshire are inhabited by a cast of characters, both real and mythological. Andrew Robinson and Katie Marland offer richly illustrated contributions of close encounters. Marland takes on folklorist Ethel Rudkin’s ‘kindly beast’, the Black Dog, better known elsewhere as a terrifying omen of misfortune. She discusses the use of

printmaking in understanding eerie physical encounters with the creature, and her artwork forms an integral part of the argument. Robinson, a photographer and scholar of that art, explores the Haxey Hood, a folk game played on the Isle of Axholme, which supposedly originated when a group of local farmhands found a hood that had been dropped by a noble lady in the Middle Ages.

Folklorists whose works are often the sole repositories of many Lincolnshire folk tales and customs are characters in their own right. Balfour, quoted in the second paragraph, is a somewhat controversial figure, the legitimacy of her records questioned by many subsequent folklorists, among them F. J. Norton, Neil Philip and Jeremy Harte. Maureen James, author of *Lincolnshire Folk Tales* (2013) and *Cambridgeshire Folk Tales* (2014), provides a convincing retort. Any collection of material on Lincolnshire folklore would feel incomplete without discussion of the Lincoln Imp, perhaps the most well-known grotesque in the country, and the *de facto* symbol of the county town. Ceri Houlbrook explores the Imp's far-reaching impact (pun accepted), locating – for example – an Imp figurine concealed in a chimney in Dorset.

As such, the present issue of *Revenant* offers a selection of Lincolnshire folk tales discussed in relation to their connections to place and emplacedness. A fuller assemblage of the county's folk tales (though by no means an exhaustive one) can be found on the Lincolnshire Folk Tales: Origins, Legacies, Connections, Futures website:

www.lincolnshirefolktaleproject.com. Lincolnshire Folk Tales: Origins, Legacies, Connections, Futures project concluded as an AHRC-funded project in July 2025, but you can still access the project's website and purchase the *Lincolnshire Folk Tales Reimagined* anthology of fiction and poetry from Five Leaves Publications. Project leader Rory Waterman's book *Devils in the Details*, exploring other tales, their histories, and their

connections to landscape and contemporary lives, will be published by the same press in 2026.

Works Cited

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