

Myths and Legends of the Test Valley

Intro: Welcome to Hampshire HistBites. Join us as we delve into the past and go on a journey to discover some of the county's best and occasionally unknown history. We'll be speaking to experts as well as enthusiasts, asking them to reveal some of our hidden heritage, as well as share with you a few fascinating untold stories.

Earl: Hello, and welcome to Hampshire HistBites. My name is Earl Panizzo, and I'll be your host for this episode where we'll explore the work of Hampshire storyteller Amanda Kane-Smith. Amanda has created a series of short stories based on the myths and folklore of towns and villages to the west of our county. Her work, *Test Valley Tales*, is available as an illustrated book and a series of podcasts.

There are details of how to access them in the show notes, which accompany this episode. As you'll discover, Amanda has a wealth of stories to share.

Amanda: Test Valley Tales is an integrated project. It's - there's a book, a podcast and, well school workshops, storytelling workshops. So back in 2019, I think it was, Test Valley Arts Foundation asked for project ideas for the Test Valley Borough of Culture 2020. And I thought, well, what better way to celebrate this beautiful part of the world than through its folk tales and legends. So I proposed to create an illustrated book of short stories, which I've done, and a storytelling podcast.

Now I've already recorded, I finished actually recording the podcast. There's 10 episodes in all, and they, follow stories, folk tales, and legends, all set in Test Valley. And they follow the Borough from the very top. The first story's set in Verham Dean, which is a ghost legend, quite a well known ghost story. And then you kind of meander your way all the way down. There's a dragon story in Wherwell and then we go across to Danebury Hill and there's a story about a travelling tree. And then we meander back down through Stockbridge and then Mottisfont. There's a magical fish story from Mottisfont. And then, it comes all the way down. The stories finish off with a story which is set in Wellow in the New Forest. The idea is the stories are all - well they're mostly local folk tales and legends. Although I have to admit, I've kind of sneaked a few folk tales, which are kind of generic folk tales and placed them in this area. Just because I actually struggled to find enough to fit all the different locations. But with them, I've got - there's lots of local folklore and interesting facts and, stuff about the environment and the ecology and, and, you know, I, well, I just discovered so much whilst I was researching it to be honest. Well, it's a really beautiful place that we live.

Earl: Absolutely. I agree. So, how did you come out with the imagination, with the mythical side of it?

Amanda: Well, I did, I did a lot of research, so yeah, I immersed myself in books and the internet. And also, I was quite keen to delve a little deeper because if you look on the internet, it's very easy to, once you start looking from place to place to place to place, you suddenly see that lots of facts are kind of regurgitated from one place to the next and people just see something and they repeat it. So it's not necessarily the origin story. So I kind of was able, to find origin stories of some of the local folk tales and the legends.

So yeah, it was really, really fascinating and my idea was I want people to go out and explore the landscape and explore it through the eyes of the story in a way. And by doing that, I dunno, just, just to feel that something magical like that could happen to them. So as you're walking around and you know that a tree could, you know, come to life and start to speak to them, or you might, there might be a, I don't know, a little goblin or a little fairy hidden behind something. But it's just, yeah just tapping into people's imaginations because, well stories aren't just for children. I think we can all do with a bit of magic in our lives, especially, you know, at the moment with the world the way it is. I think people think folklore is something of a time times gone by but actually we are still surrounded by folklore and a lot of folklore is born out of facts. They looked at the seasons, they looked at, you know, the weather and lots of little snippets of folklore is based on, on fact and the knowledge of the land, which people had at that time, which we've kind of lost. But, you know, I think today with people's interest with the environment and the importance of the environment I think people are much more, aware - of respecting it, I suppose. And that's what I hope, you know, people will, will get out of this. People enjoy exploring and, rediscovering places that they might not have, have been to for a while.

Earl: Yeah. That's amazing. You know, from what you said from your perspective and, could you suggest where you think, is the best place to explore the mythical part of the country?

Amanda: Well, the, I mean, there's so many legends, there's a really famous legend in Hampshire. So we've got one of the most famous dragon stories in, in a place called Wherwell and Wherwell is a little village, which is, you know, it's obviously really, really easy to access. I used to go there a lot with my children and feed the ducks and there's the, the Cow Meadows there, which you can get, you know, lots of people go for, for dog walks around there.

But Wherwell is the scene of a famous dragon story and it's called the, the Wherwell Cockatrice. Now a cockatrice is a type of dragon and anybody who, is a Harry Potter fan will probably know a cockatrice as something like a basilisk because it's a similar kind of creature because it has two legs and it has wings, but a cockatrice has got, the head of a cockerel and legs of a cockerel and the body and tail of a serpent. And they are really, yeah, they're vicious things you don't want to kind of, you don't wanna get near a cockatrice because they can kill people with, with a deadly look of their eye. They're really, really vicious. So basically the story goes that a cockatrice ran riot in the village of Wherwell many, many years ago.

So a cockatrice can only be born if a toad sits on a duck egg. And this is exactly what happened in Wherwell. So in the, in the cellar of Wherwell a duck laid an egg and a toad sat on top of that egg and inside a cockatrice was born and cracked out of this egg and then proceeded to fly around the village, eating nuns, eating the local Bishop, eating people. I mean, it was really, really not very good thing at all. So what they did was they, sent out, an edict to all the knights, all the local knights to say, please come and save us. And the abbess at that time, she issued a reward and the reward was four acres of land to anyone who could kill the beast.

So of course, all the local knights came along and they all tried to kill it and they all died. Until one day, a local pot washer and his name was, Samuel Green, and he went to the, abbess and he said, well, look, I can, I can kill the beast for you. Because he'd been polishing a huge serving dish and he'd seen his reflection in the serving dish and it gave him a little bit of an idea. So he went to the Abbess and the Abbess said, yep, you can give it a go. So the next day, Green, - Samuel Green - goes down into the cellar where the Cockatrice is asleep and he takes this big serving dish. And he wedges the serving dish between the floor and the ceiling. And then he gets his storm lamp. He lights the storm

lamp and he puts that next to the serving dish and then he hides behind it. So of course for the first time ever light starts to jump around that dark place. And as it does, so the cockatrice wakes up.

He opens his eyes, he sees the serving dish and he sees what he thinks is another cockatrice. And well, he starts to fight the cockatrice and all day the cockatrice fights his own reflection until finally he is exhausted. And he collapses at which point, Green just comes out and stabs the cockatrice and kills him.

And if you're not sure whether that story is true, if you look on a, a map today of Harewood Forest, you'll see that there are four acres of land and those four acres of land are called Greens Acres. And it is said that that was, the land, which was rewarded to Samuel Green for killing the cockatrice.

So, you know, that's a really cool story that we have here. And actually up until the 1930s in Wherwell they, it said that people refused to eat duck eggs because of the connection with the, the cockatrice.

And also if you go to Andover museum, there's, a weather vane, a cockatrice weather vane there, which is like this very old thing, which used to be on top of the church in Wherwell many, many years ago. And, one of the great things about this weather vane's, if you look very closely, there's a hole in it. And that hole I discovered, was made by a GI. So in the war, we had the American soldiers coming over here. And some were stationed in, in Wherwell and one of them took a pot shot at the weather vane, which was on top of the church at the time. And there's also, another story, which I was told, about some American soldiers, which tried to smuggle some of the, artifacts away and then, in their baggage. And then they couldn't. But yeah, if you go to Andover Museum, there's all sorts of little stories about that. The connection between the cockatrice and the soldiers and the history of it. But, you know, there's lots of stories around there.

There's also the dead man's plaque story, which is just up the road. And that's another really, that that's a lovely walk for families 'cause it's a very easy walk through Harewood Forest. And at the end of the walk, there's this really strange monument, which is just a cross - it's like the sort of thing you'd find in a church yard really, but it's kind of in the middle of the Forest and, it's a great walk for children 'cause it's a very easy walk along the path and then you can go there. There's a little inscription about the story and the good thing about that one it's called the, the, the dead man's plaque and it's a legend and the people in the legend are real people. So you've got King Edgar, Queen Ethelred, who was the first queen of all England, she's a Saxon queen and, Ethelwald who was the King's best friend and basically, King Edgar king kills Ethelwald, all for the love of the beautiful Elfrida. That's the, the kind of crux of the story. But, yeah, again, that's a great, a great story,

Earl: Yeah, that sounds really interesting, and I think it's important that, you know, letting the new generation to discover this thing, 'cos this so easily gets lost.

Amanda: Yeah, I think so. And I think, well, we all love that, but I think children particularly are fascinated by history and, and things. If you can, if you can bring it to life, in that way and tap into the story of a place it makes it live for children. It makes it really, really interesting. And I think also the other thing I like about the project was the environmental aspect because obviously children now are really, really aware as, you know, as they should be that we're living in, a time where, you know, climate is a really, really huge issue. And, one of the things that I learned, which I thought was amazing is that the chalk streams.

So there's two stories which are set one's called The White Trout of Stockbridge. And the other one is, The Magic Fish of Mottisfont. And they're both set in the chalk streams of Hampshire. And when I was really keen to, to find some stories which related to the chalk streams, but we haven't got any, well not that I could find. And if anybody does know one, then please let me know. But within the area that I was doing, which is the Test Valley area, I couldn't find a folk tale, which was specifically about one of our beautiful chalk streams. So I've kind of used generic folk tales and kind of linked them to the place and used and changed them, adapted them a little bit, reinvented them, for us here in Hampshire.

And, and that's because, well Test Valley's famous for its chalk streams and rivers. And there are only around 200 chalk streams and rivers in the whole world. And 85% of them are here and they are so important. They're like, rainforests really. They are so important for us to look, look after. And they're, they're just beautiful places. They're perfect habitats for wildlife. They've got lots of wildlife which needs to be protected, like the watercress flowers and the white-clawed crayfish. They really, really need to be protected, but they are beautiful, beautiful places, which we all love to visit. So, yeah. So to create some stories about those places, some magical stories I thought was really, really important. So I hope people will go and visit these places and maybe look at the water, the gin clear water as it's called and, yeah sort of tap into the magic of them.

Earl: Definitely. Yeah, definitely. I mean, it just sounds so amazing.

Amanda: Well, I interviewed for the podcast - 'cos there's interviews after them - and one of the interviews was with somebody from, Watercress and Winterbournes who are part of Hampshire Wildlife Trust - Hampshire and Isle of Wight Wildlife Trust - and she was describing how chalk streams are created. And I just thought it was really magical. So basically, you've got, under the - we're all walking on chalk. So here in Hampshire, underneath our feet is, is chalk. And chalk is like a huge aquifer, which it is basically, it's a huge giant sponge. You imagine it, you think of it as like a giant sponge 'cause it's got little holes and under these chalk aquifers are ancient springs. And what happens is the water from these ancient springs, really ancient springs, filters up through the holes in this chalk aquifers and it kind of filters up and it spills out into what are the chalk streams, which is why it's so clear. That, that gin clear thing they say. And then obviously on top of these chalk aquifers, you've got all the, the gravelly beds where all the, species, you know, animal species and plant species live. And that's why it is so magical because the water that you see there is like ancient spring water. So it's just coming up through these, and I just think it's beautiful that, you know, we have underneath our feet where it's almost like we're walking on water because, you know, we have this beautiful chalk, which is part of where we live and we don't see it because it's under the grass, but it's there.

Earl: So can you talk to me more about the books that you're launching, you know, whether it is for, you know, what age group of children and what was your aim

Amanda: Yeah. So the book itself is really aimed at children aged seven to 107 really. It's, it's got a really, really wide appeal. So the stories were written with children in mind, so that - because there's some ghost stories in there, so I've kind of made them quite, they are child friendly, put it that way. But, the story, the book's also been read by adults of all ages and actually older people as well have really, really liked it because of its links with local history and local folklore and knowledge and things that people have heard. So it's got a really, really good, range of ages that it would be liked by.

But the other thing which, was really important to me when I wanted to - with the conception of the book - was I wanted to make it a really, really beautiful thing. So as part of it, it's an illustrated book. So, I was able to commission two local artists. And, they both have created a piece of art, which is linked to each story. And, the the art brings the stories again, up to date. I wanted to make the book really engaging to people, so it's quite contemporary, the art, and it's a mixed media, little bit of photography there's yeah - they're really, really beautiful.

So what they did was they went and explored the places that the stories were set and they created it, through my words and through the location itself and yeah, so there's 10 illustrations in the book connected to each of the 10 stories and they really, really are beautiful. So yeah, that's something I'm really proud of about the book, 'cause it's just such a lovely thing. And I think that's why it's quite accessible to all ages because, just to flick through it and look at the illustrations, it's really, really lovely book.

But if you don't want to pay for the book the podcast is free and is 10 episodes and each episode features one of the stories. And after the episode, I do an interview with somebody who has a connection with the story. So one of the people I interviewed, was, Tom Morath from the Hawk Conservancy trust. I was really keen to create a story for Amport, which is by the Hawk Conservancy. And I knew this story called The Baker's Daughter, which is a bit of a generic folk tale. I - somebody, might know better than me - but for what I know, it's not particularly set anywhere. So I kind of thought I would, kind of, glean the story and put it in the woods, set it in the woods in Amport. And the reason I like this story is because it's a really, really old story and versions of it must have been round before Shakespeare was alive because in Hamlet, the character Ophelia says, "They say the owl was a baker's daughter. Lord, we know what we are but know not what we may be". And the thing is owls were thought to be bad omens in Shakespearean times. I think that's probably because they fly so silently, so people, would see like these white owls flying around churchyards and sometimes they were associated with ghosts and things.

So, this, it is a really, really lovely story, The Baker's Daughter, and it's all full of magic and it's a great one to perform because it's, it's really, really interactive. And it's all about a naughty baker's daughter who, who basically gets turned into an owl. I don't think I'm gonna ruin the story by putting a spoiler out there, I think people kind of guess, guess what's gonna happen. But because of that I was able to interview Tom from the Hawk Conservancy as part of this story and that, you know, and that was just amazing. And he's - as with everybody there - just a fountain of knowledge about owls - which are just beautiful creatures. And he bought along Troy, the barn owl, and Troy, is very chatty during this interview. And we have like, yeah, a really good chat with Tom. So yes, it's just been amazing to meet all of these fascinating people and being able to work with some, you know, brilliant local organizations.

Earl: Yeah, I can imagine, you know, the children be put into their head and maybe, you know, they could like develop even more, you know, further, but furthering the story, isn't it?

Amanda: Well, I hope that people will listen to the stories and then tell the stories to other people, because that's what oral storytelling is all about.

You know, I don't, I don't claim ownership of these stories. I've just retold them in the way that I want to tell them. But I hope that then if somebody else listens to, to the story, whether that's a child of seven or an adult of 70, if they like the story, they then will tell that story to somebody else and that somebody else will tell the story to somebody else. And over time, the story might change a

little bit, but that's great, that's the way stories evolve. And you know, when you tell a story it's really important that you put something of yourself into it. So the way I tell the story might be different to the way you tell the story or somebody else tells the story, but that's, that's what's really fun and interesting about oral storytelling, because the way stories evolve all the time. To keep this alive and, and keep these stories going for the future and, you know, things will change over time and that's good.

Earl: Yes. Yes, absolutely. Absolutely. So, yeah. do you have any more, more work coming up, within - so a next episode or activities?

Amanda: Well, the idea is next year to take the stories into schools and do some storytelling workshops. So children are aware of the stories of this place where they live. Mottisfont are hopefully doing a feature of Test Valley Tales in the autumn. That's the autumn of 2022. So you should be able to find some information - me, possibly telling stories there. But yeah. Yeah. You know, I'm constantly telling stories at various events all over the place. So, I could just pop up a fete or a festival near you.

You know, the weekend just gone, I was actually down in Portsmouth at this place called Wymering Manor, which is actually an old haunted house. And there's a - the Wymering Manor Trust are currently doing this house up and kind of reinventing it in a way of saying, well, yes, that is part of it, but it's also got loads of brilliant history. So they did a Family Fun Day and I told some stories there as part of their family fun days. So I, yeah, I, I'm always popping up here, there and everywhere and happy to tell stories to anybody who's interested really.

Earl: Yeah, that's amazing. And also, I, after the episode of your storytelling, you tend to have someone to talk through about the history with the professional, you know, such as like owl conservative and you know, some other people that related to your story. And I think that's amazing, you know, you actually got the backup, not just, you know, what you just been doing the research, but you also have got someone to actually explain things, you know, about the nature of it and how they've been lived in that location.

Amanda: Yeah. That's been one of the, the most fun things of the project is meeting people and learning from people. I've learned some amazing things, because I, you know, I've gone into this project as somebody who's really interested in learning about all of this stuff. And I've just met some amazing people who've just taught me all sorts of fabulous things. So, yeah, there's some brilliant people out there really interesting people.

And I I'm hoping to do more of this. It's getting the funding for it, to be honest but there's talk of exploring the project further and with people and also maybe linking it with, maybe people who - so say people who maybe, have, now live in Hampshire or Test Valley who may have come from another part of the world and maybe learning about their stories and how their stories relate to stories, which we have here. And yeah exploring, different sort of world folk tales through people who are now part of Hampshire and how we can learn from them and how they feed into our folk tales and that, yeah. So there's talk about exploring the stories in that way as well. So, yeah, that could be something exciting to look out for.

Earl: Yeah, definitely. Definitely. I mean, I'm truly inspired by your work, it just so rare to find someone, you know, to actually going, going to the storytelling with a magical side of the story.

Amanda: Thank you.

Earl: It's just lovely to, you know, listen to your story. It's just been amazing meeting you and just discover all the, all the things around us.

Amanda: It's, it's just been really, really lovely talking to you and, and thank you for allowing me to ramble on about my, my, my interests and my, you know, my fascination in all of this stuff. It's been a real pleasure.

Earl: It's been pleasure to talk to you.

Outro: We hope you enjoyed listening to today's episode. If you would like to find out a little bit more about what we've been talking about, then please visit the website, www.winchesterheritageopendays.org, or click on Hampshire HistBites, and there you'll find today's show notes as well as some links to more information.