

Folklore Sites around the Isle of Man

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Each month, James Franklin, Online & Educational Resources Officer at Culture Vannin and co-author of 'A Guide to the Folklore of the Isle of Man,' looks at a particular place in the Island and gives a guide to some of its folklore.

Port Erin

South Barrule

Maughold village

Kirk Malew

Glen Auldyn

Agneash

Glen Mona

St Luke's

Onchan Village

Niarbyl

Peel Hill

St John's

Port Erin:

A mermaid's blessing and the buggane of Spaldrick Dip

May 2023



“...there is not a creek or cranny in this Island, but what is haunted, either with fairies or ghosts.”

This is probably as true today as when it was first noted nearly 300 years ago.

It was the author of this, George Waldron, who first wrote of the mermaids then to be found on Port Erin shore.

They were a regular sight in the 1650s, playing about on the sand in the moonlight. So, some men daringly laid out nets one night and caught one. They took this mermaid home and cared for her, but she remained silent and refused all food and drink. After three days of this, the men grew scared of what might happen to them out on the sea and so they let her go. The mermaid glided on her tail over the sand and splashed back into the sea.

When her own kind came to ask her what life was like up on dry land, she reported it as ‘nothing very wonderful,’ but noted our ignorance for throwing away the water we boil eggs in!

A man named Kelly also came across a mermaid on the shore at Port Erin. Stranded, she appealed for help and he helped her back into the sea. Before diving beneath the waves, the mermaid put a blessing on Kelly's family, so that none of the women of his line would ever have long childbirths.

This still held true when it was recorded around 140 years ago, but perhaps a Port Erin Kelly can let us know if it still does today?

Just above the shore is St Catherine's Well (Chibbyr Catreeney in Manx), close to which an early Christian chapel once stood. This was once one of the Isle of Man's most revered holy wells, and its water was legendary for its cures, especially if taken on the first Sunday of August.

Don't expect much from it today though, as the tap is now piped from the mains, leaving the water to empty out into the sand below!

Before the onset of tourism, the town did not reach too far beyond the shore. Today's Promenade was then a rough and narrow track towards Bradda, and it was here that a man was walking one night. When he reached where the Belle Vue Hotel used to be, he heard the sound of a great hunt coming towards him, complete with horses' hooves, cracking whips and barking dogs. He leapt aside into the doorway of the building there and the hunt rushed past... but all was invisible to him.

Such fairy hunts are known all around the town and beyond, especially around Fairy Hill, for obvious reasons!

Further up that road towards Bradda you need to be taking care. Even today, Spaldrick Dip (just by the old telephone box) is known as a place where you might meet a buggane. This terrible monster lives up the small glen towards the golf course and it occasionally comes out to chase people along the road.

If you ever meet this buggane yourself, we recommend doing what someone in that position did in the 1890s, and call out the Lord's name. That is always a good way to scare off a buggane!

There isn't space here to speak of the rampaging pigs, eternal blood stains, ghosts and fairy-loves elsewhere in Port Erin. But maybe we'll find similar tales somewhere else in the Island next month!

South Barrule:

Manannan, King Orry and a lot of rocks

June 2023



As July approaches, many will be thinking of a trip up South Barrule on the eve of Tynwald Day. For good reason!

South Barrule is the home of Manannan, the Island's great protector and God. He once had a great castle on the top of the hill, from which he would send out his mist to protect the Island from invaders.

All he asked for in return from the Manx people for living on his land was a bundle of rushes to be taken up to him each year on the day before Tynwald Day.

Taking rushes up South Barrule today is a great way to recall this Manx tradition and to have a lovely walk!

But this is not at all the only folklore associated with South Barrule.

At one time the phynodderee lived up there, and one day he fell into a violent argument with his wife. She began to run but he threw a great rock after her. This hit her on the ankle, and the rock still stands beside the Glen Rushen river to this day oozing red from her blood.

Throwing rocks from this hilltop seems to have been a popular activity as it was from up here that a group of giants competed to see who could throw boulders the furthest. One of these is still obvious for all to see as it landed in the field at Ballacreggan Corner, on the edge of Port St Mary.

Later, during the Norse era, it was Godred Crovan (better known as King Orry) who was throwing boulders from South Barrule. This time it landed in St Marks, killing his own wife. However, later in Norse Rule, it was Lord Kitter who lived in a castle on the summit and its broken walls are still to be seen close 100 metres from the top.

It was also here that the witch Ada caused Eaoch of the Loud Voice to fall asleep and the castle caught alight. Awoken by the flames, Eaoch ran to the walls and shouted out to Lord Kitter down on the Calf of Man. But when rushing home, the witch raised a storm and Kitter was drowned on the rock that now bears his name, Kittlerand.

This is not the only name left in the landscape by such figures. Some say that the name 'Barrule' itself comes from the great King Barrule buried under the cairn at the summit. Judging by the size of this cairn, King Barrule must have been a giant (who undoubtedly threw rocks about!)

Of course, Themselves are never far away in the Isle of Man, but South Barrule has been described as 'probably the most fairy-haunted part of the isle.'

Not far from the summit is a large rock (thrown there by a giant, of course!) with the name, 'Creg Arran.' The food of this 'Bread Rock' is thought by some to come from its once being a place to leave offerings to the moonjerk veggey.

Finally, there is also the tale of an unfortunate woman who came across a bell close to two fairy armies preparing for battle by South Barrule. Inquisitive, she rang the bell herself, at which both armies turned and attacked her. She was held captive for three years before she managed to escape – let that be a lesson for you!

And this is just some of the folklore to be thinking of on 4 July when you're taking your rushes up to Manannan!

Maughold village: Saintly murder and whispering bones

July 2023



The last day of July is one of the Isle of Man's most important saints' days; St Maughold's Day. With it comes a focus on Maughold village and its tales of murder, whispering bones and the metamorphosis of the first ever porpoise.

Some will know that Maughold was originally an Irish bandit who St Patrick punished for his wayward life. Cast out to sea chained up in a tiny boat, Maughold finally washed up at Port Mooar. Here, he grew in devotion to his new religion until he received the miracle of the keys to his chains delivered inside a fish. The parish has forever remembered this great saint by taking on his name.

Less well known than this a lovely tale is the one about when Maughold came back from the dead to stab a sleeping Viking through the heart.

The year was 1158, some 670 years after the death of St Maughold, and a Viking chieftain named Gilcolum set himself on raiding the monastery at Kirk Maughold. Ill-pleased with this idea, St Maughold invaded the sleeping Gilcolum's dream and stabbed him through the heart three times with his pastoral staff. The Viking died not long afterwards, with a swarm of revolting flies buzzing around his face.

Don't mess with Maughold!

It was perhaps the saint's bones that were unearthed when the chancel of the church was being renovated in 1865. When digging up the steps, some bones were uncovered, and then were put to one side as the men went for lunch. Soon, strange whispering and murmuring could be heard inside the church, so the bones were quickly reburied, and the noises stopped.

The saint's bones are also associated with the large stone sarcophagus outside the back gate of the churchyard. This links to the twelfth century legend of a sarcophagus from which water continually flowed. To believers, the water would cure all ailments, but, to sinners or doubters, it brought instant death.

The cause, of course, was St Maughold's bones, which were there inside the sarcophagus, even though they were invisible.

Fortunately, St Maughold's Well, which is still accessible on the far side of Maughold Head (there behind the church), offers holy water for your ailments, without the threat of instant death.

If you do plan to visit the saint's well for a cure, the best time is before sunrise on the first Sunday of August.

Maughold Head is also the place for the curious tale of the last wild boar in the Isle of Man. This enormous beast terrorised the Manx until they all rose up and chased it over the hills, where it was cornered on Maughold Head. Here this 'Purr Mooar' saw there was no hope and so it turned and leapt off the cliff, down into the sea. There, it changed into a sea creature and swam away. This was the origin of world's first porpoise, which is remembered in its Manx name, Muc Varrey (sea pig).

Maughold Head is also where you might hear the mermen whistling from the rocks below. If you do hear them, expect a storm to be coming soon.

There's no space here for the tales of a sinner's petrification, Samson's rock throwing, blood-charming and more. But hopefully this is enough to persuade you that the saint's day on 31 July is a good excuse to pay a visit to Maughold and find out more!

Kirk Malew:

Digging up the dead and a Fairy Cup

August 2023



Parish churches are good places to look for tales of Manx folklore, and Malew is no exception.

As far back as the 1720s, it was known as being the home of a fairy cup. A man was led into the hills by the inescapable attraction of strange music. Eventually he came to a large open space, where Themselves were all sat at a feast. The man joined them, but was warned against taking their offer of a drink by one of the party, who looked strangely familiar to him. When the feast ended, they disappeared and he was left behind, alone on the hills.

But still in his hand was their silver cup.

This he brought to Kirk Malew, where it was used as the communion cup for a long time afterwards.

Traditionally in Manx folklore, graveyards are not really the sorts of places to be finding ghosts. You need to look over the wall at Skibrick Hill, with its white standing boulder, for that!

However, it was from Kirk Malew that a woman's ghost set off to haunt her old home after her burial in 1863.

The family were horrified to realise that they had not undone the knots in her funeral shroud, which meant she could not pass on from this world. The family were confident what they needed to do, even when the vicar would not entertain the family's 'superstitious' request to exhume the body.

In the night before Easter Sunday the woman's brothers-in-law came and got the job done, so that, by the time the vicar arrived in the morning, the grave had been re-dug, the body exhumed and the knots untied.

The men were brought to court, but were not punished severely. It was undoubtedly worth it to allow their sister-in-law release from her earthly ghost form!

The Church not aligning with the beliefs of parishioners showed itself some 250 years earlier, after the outlawing of compurgation.

This was the practice of proving your case over a dead person's estate. In compurgation, you were legally acknowledged to be expressing the truth if you lay on the deceased person's grave, with a bible on your chest, and swore to the truth of your claim before kneeling witnesses.

The legal status of this was only removed as a superstitious practice in 1609. However, in 1616, it was none other than the Deemster himself who resorted to compurgation, on the grave of the recently deceased chaplain of Castle Rushen.

Evidently Deemster Samsburie felt that this was justified when proving that he did not owe money!

Malew church was also the scene of a spectacular curse in 1659.

An MHK's wife at Ballahick was obliged to publicly renounce the devil in church here, after she had been accused of practising witchcraft, selling charms using bullock's hoof clippings and stealing the prosperity of neighbours for her own farm.

We can only imagine the outrage of the congregation, and the fear of her accusers, when the woman announced her defiance of the devil and his works, but followed it by her own addition:

"May those who brought me to this scandal never see their eldest children in the estate my youngest are in!"

It is not recorded if the curse came true or not.

There's a lot of history, and folklore, in places like Kirk Malew, without even beginning to talk about Norse crosses, Illiam Dhone or the like!

Glen Auldyn:

From the fairy king to a frying pan ghost

September 2023



Glens are great places to look for Manx folklore, and perhaps Glen Auldyn is the best of all.

To start at the very bottom, the turning from the main road out of Ramsey is Milntown Corner, a place teeming with traditional folklore.

As recently as the 1930s reports tell us of a moddey doo with eyes 'like coals of fire' forewarning of death, a terroo ushtey (a bull that comes out of the river to terrorise the nearby cattle) and a two-foot-high man in a red cap and blue coat guiding travelers through the dark with his lamp.

More serious is the cabbyl ushtey, a horse which emerges from water to loiter at the roadside. If you innocently climb onto its back, it will race off and try to drown you in the river or the curragh. Watch out!

Further up the glen, in the Brookdale plantation on the eastern spur, an ancient chapel once stood. Here people would come on St John's Eve to watch through the night for lights in the glen below. Each light spotted would foretell of a death from the community in the year ahead.

Church records discuss stamping out this 'superstition' in the 1630s, so we cannot say if it would still work if tried today.

Going back over the bridge and up Glen Auldyn proper, you pass by the tholtan of Tantaloo with a private track dropping off to ford the river. It was here that surely amongst the oddest ghosts in the Island used to be seen.

She wore a grey cloak and a sunbonnet-like headdress, but in her hand, she remarkably carried a frying pan. It was with this that she threatened all those who had the misfortune of coming across her. Indeed, seeing her was an ill-omen of something bad to happen.

In most glens, this might be the pinnacle of the odd stories on offer, but not so in Glen Auldyn...

One night just over a hundred years ago, two young men were out hunting hares, using their acetylene bicycle lamp to dazzle them before grabbing them. However, everything changed when they came across a hare of 'gigantic' proportions, and they immediately ran for their lives back down the glen.

Further up, where the glen opens up onto the hillside, there is the Black Dub, a distinctive pool in the river with a large shingle bank on the far side. It was here that a young man once came across the remarkable Daniel Dixon.

The sober upright 19-year-old had been working in the hills but he lay down by the pool to rest. But as soon as he closed his eyes, he felt a weight on his chest. He opened his eyes and saw a very strange little old man with teeth that stuck out and arms and legs unusually long for his small body.

The young man asked who he was, and the strange sat on his chest replied,

"I am the Fairy King, my name is Daniel Dixon."

The young man then tried to grab him, but he was thrown back head over heels.

Upon looking back, the Fairy King had vanished, leaving behind a number of tiny beings in brown petticoats. But these too all soon disappeared, leaving the man with nothing to show for his very strange encounter.

Take care the next time you're in Glen Auldyn – you never quite know what you'll come across there!

Agneash:

‘As common as rabbits’ – The fairies of Agneash

October 2023



Up the hill behind the Laxey Wheel is the beautiful small community of Agneash; ‘a great place for the fairies.’

Accounts from a hundred years ago tell us that Themselfes, the moonjer Veggey, were seen as often as rabbits around Agneash. So many, in fact, that the Agneash people barely took any notice of them.

These mysterious figures were described around Agneash as being ‘like little boys, dressed in red trousers and blue coats.’

Don’t be fooled into thinking that they were cute Lil’ People though – many Agneash tales paint a very different story.

There was the time when a man was caught in the rain at Glen Drink, and so he climbed over the hedge to hide under some trees. However, finding that it was just as wet there, he tried to get back to the road, but he couldn’t find the way.

The man walked and walked, never leaving the orchard and never finding the hedge. After hours of this, just as his legs were to about give out from tiredness, he felt himself taken up

and rushed on by a great number of people. On they raced until morning when, as the sun came up, he found himself alone on the bare mountainside.

It was obviously the work of the Lil' Fellas, but it could have been a lot worse...

The Lil' Fellas have stolen not just one, but a number of children from homes in and around Agneash, sometimes leaving 'changelings' behind in their place.

This happened to a mother in Agneash when she went out to the well. Perhaps she had forgotten to leave the iron tongs from the fire open as a cross over the cot, but when she returned, she found a fairy child in the place of her own baby. Crying awfully, as it would have done forever more, the mother immediately recognised it as a changeling.

So, instead of comforting it, she ignored the child completely and did not go anywhere near the cot. The cries worsened, with no effect, until it became clear to Themselves that the changeling was being neglected. They hastily rushed in to return the true child and take away the changeling.

The mother must have been delighted, just as another set of parents were who luckily interrupted the Lil' Fellas stealing their child, when they found it unharmed half a mile from their home after leaving it alone for a moment.

The Agneash community can perhaps be glad that the mooinjer veggey are less common today, and maybe they have the church to thank.

One idea of where the name of Glen Drink comes from is that it recalls the dancing of the fairies, as one form of the word for 'dancing' in Manx is 'Rinkey.' But even this stronghold was undone with the introduction of Methodism.

In the 1820s a Methodist preacher began to hold regular services in a house in the glen, and soon the Lil' Fellas began to be seen less and less. Within 50 years, there were none to be seen there at all.

It might be a small place, but there is certainly a long and strong connection with the fairies at Agneash.

As well as Themselves, there are tales of the phynnodderee, bugganes, a tarroo ushtey, curses, giants and the most haunted place in the whole area... but those tales will have to wait for another time!

Glen Mona:

The Glen Mona moddey doo and more!

November 2023



A buggane, moddey doo, tarroo ushtey, glashtyn, witches, miraculous bells and “The Big King of the Hill” – Glen Mona has it all!

So began the blurb for the tour we recently gave in Maughold as a part of the Heritage Open Day events.

Glen Mona, on the main road between Laxey and Ramsey, is more likely a place that people look up on a map than stop at to explore. But its folklore shows that it is somewhere rather special.

For example, on the Ramsey side of Dhoon School is the old Ballagorry Chapel (now a barn), and a glashtyn used to lurk in the field behind here. But what was this creature?

Elsewhere in Maughold, at Ballure on the edge of Ramsey, a ‘glashtyn’ is a horse-like figure who tries to drag people into the river. But over in the Corony Valley, on the side of North Barrule, it was known as a shy hairy giant of a person who would help about the farm, much like the Phynnodderree.

However, we don't know what form the glashtyn took behind the Ballagorry Chapel. It was never seen, but it was being heard here at night through into around the 1850s.

Overlooking the school is the hill, Creg ny Mult. This translates as 'rock of the wethers' (castrated rams), raising the possibility that this was once a place where shepherds would castrate their sheep. (Manx place names are always worth looking into!)

William Kennish in the 1840s claimed that witches gathered here on Oie Voaldyn, at the end of April, to commune with the devil. However, this is almost certainly his own odd fiction.

Not in doubt, however, is the significance that Berree Dhone had over in the Corony Valley. Perhaps a Celtic 'witch' who can take bovine form, lives underground beneath a rock in the hills, and who offers followers a vision of the future... but certainly the subject of a wonderful old Manx song still heard sung today!

Beyond the school, at the end of the terrace of houses, is a small drainage ditch. It was here in one night the late 19th century that two miners were walking home by moonlight when they saw something very strange.

A great splashing in the water preceded a great black dog emerging out onto the road. This moddey doo then lurked off towards the Corony, leaving the two terrified men in its wake.

It's not just in Peel Castle that you might find a moddey doo!

The present church at Glen Mona was built after the original building at the Dhoon fell into disrepair, hence the unusual name of 'Christ Church Dhoon,' but this was only possible due to something of a miracle.

Lost in the mist at sea, a ship sailed perilously close to the rocks at the bottom of Dhoon Glen. But, just at the last moment, the sound of the small bell at the old Dhoon church rang out (we think!) miraculously, and the ship averted its course towards safety.

It was in thanks for this, that two of the boat's passengers donated money to build today's church in the centre of Glen Mona. (The history books might disagree with us on this one, but whoever let that get in the way of a good story?!).

As these few tales show, there's a lot to Glen Mona, and we haven't even got to the buggane or the Ree Mooar ny Howe yet!

St Luke's:

Burying the wren near the cursed stone of destiny

December 2023



'A Guide to the Folklore of the Isle of Man' was published earlier this month, so it is now much easier to look up a good location with a bit of Christmas-related folklore.

Actually, one of the questions on the back of the book is, 'Where is the Cursed Stone of Destiny?' We can answer that here, because it is in the wall of St Luke's, up over the Baldwin Valleys.

Over the eastern window, below the bell on the outside of this small church is a small stone marked with a simple cross. This is the grandly-named stone, the Cursed Stone of Destiny, which caused a lot of trouble before it was safely lodged here.

Many years ago, the stone was foolishly taken from the old keeill site that was once visible here, and, of course, terrible things followed.

No one in the household could sleep for all the strange noises to be heard in the night. One minute there was a strange bleating, the next a sudden terrible crash as if a cartload of rocks was being tipped out.

In the morning, the marked rock was moved to a hedge outside, but the hedge fell over and refused to stand again as long as the stone was there. Indeed, some versions of the story even tell of cattle dying on the farm whilst the stone was there.

Wisely, the stone was moved to safety, onto sacred ground, into the gable wall of St Luke's, where it has remained ever since.

Woe betide anyone who might ever think of taking it, should the opportunity arise in the future!

Hunt the Wren, thankfully, is well-known all over the Isle of Man today, with communities coming together to dance and sing around the wren bush on the morning of 26 December. No harm has been done for over 100 years, but before 1800, of course, they had an actual bird in their bush.

It was in the graveyard of St Luke's that a part of the custom took place which few will know today.

The people of Baldwin took their wren around the houses 'with drums beaten and colours flying,' undoubtedly singing their song about 'the king of all birds.' They would sell its feathers for luck to those they met, until the procession reached St Luke's. Here, 'with much solemnity,' they would bury the bird in a corner of the graveyard.

After this, the gathered crowd would have fun playing 'all kinds of athletic games' on the open land which then adjoined the graveyard.

What a wonderful picture it presents of Christmastime here long ago, but we wonder what the vicar thought of the tradition!

If we were to continue up past the church, we would be on the slopes of Carraghan, a hill at the top of which lies a king buried under the cairn.

It was on these slopes that the infamous Ben Ven Carraghan would be seen. A ghostly figure with her spinning wheel, the sight of her was an ill-omen for the near future.

One version of her story has the 'little woman of Carraghan' on the hillside spinning the history of those being born in the Baldwin valleys. Although she sits silently, her lips move constantly and her eyes are like stars as she spins at her wheel.

But beware; the person who witnessed this died suddenly, along with all his family, very soon afterwards.

Take care when in the hills of Braddan!

Onchan Village to Molly Quirk's Glen: The ghostly sounds of murder in Onchan

January 2024



An Onchan friend was very excited to meet me recently, because of some gruesome stories of ghosts and murder they had discovered.

They had been reading 'A Guide to the Folklore of the Isle of Man' and had been amazed by the stories connected to their regular weekend walk.

So, let's take that walk today, from Onchan village out to Molly Quirk's Glen...

The 'Whipping Post' is a great place to start. This large roadside stone built into the wall of the graveyard was reputedly where punishments were once carried out. Hence its wonderful name!

Equally wonderfully named was Grissel Quayle, wife of the vicar here in 1768. When she heard that this stone was connected to 'pagan fertility rites,' Grissel immediately had the stone pulled up and removed.

Soon after, however, she suffered a freak accident when a ball of lightning shot down her chimney and killed her in her bed. The parishioners knew what had caused this, and the Whipping Post was hastily returned to where it still stands today.

Misfortune awaited the next vicar, Thomas Thwaites, too as he came under suspicion for causing the death of a farmer's sheep merely by looking at them with his apparent Evil Eye. The farmer retaliated by piling the carcasses of the sheep in the rectory porch.

The Church took a dim view of this and sentenced the unfortunate farmer to prison, followed by him having to sit on the 'stool of correction' at Douglas market.

Moving up to the main road through Onchan, a Death Coach sometimes rides through at night.

Some say it's invisible and can only be heard. For others though, the black coach drawn by headless horses is visible, but silent. If anyone can advise us definitively either way, we would like to know!

Early versions of this tale say the sound of the coach was of the fairies out hunting, but a better-known version has it as the coach belonging to a man named Spurrier, who was murdered by the infamous Victorian poisoner, Dr Palmer. Stories from Peel tell us that Spurrier's coach can also be heard there at the end of his journey, where he drank with Palmer at the Marine Hotel. It was after that that Spurrier fell ill and died, and the £1,000 he carried in his pocket was never seen again.

The house where Spurrier used to live was once a famous haunted house. But it was pulled down long ago, making way for the Co-op on the corner.

Moving out of the village now, to the White Bridge, we meet a favourite potential encounter with the supernatural.

If you are on the hill on the Laxey side of the bridge late at night, you might hear the ghostly sounds of a murder which happened long ago. Nothing is seen, but you may hear the blows of the attacker, the groans of the victim, and the murderer galloping away on a horse.

Up-stream from the White Bridge is Molly Quirk's Glen, named after the woman whose ghost still haunts the area. During her lifetime, Molly was successful in building up a store of money, until she was robbed and murdered one night in the glen. Her ghost can sometimes still be seen walking in her glen.

We are here just a stone's throw away from a tarroo ushtey, an evil place and even more ghosts... but we will have to leave them for another time.

Niarbyl:

Mermaids, music and the fairies' cave

February 2024



The surface of the Isle of Man is beautiful, but it is in the stories that we get the depth.

This is true especially of outstandingly beautiful places like Niarbyl.

For instance, this stretch of the west coast is one of the Island's mermen hotspots.

Once a common sight here, their relationship with the fishermen very relaxed. One once admired a fisherman's catch and so asked for some crabs, offering to tell the man's future in return. When the crabs were in his hand, however, the merman offered only the empty wisdom; 'As long as you're on land, you'll never drown at sea!'

Rather more helpful was the merman who warned of an oncoming storm. The men fishing from Niarbyl were always good for throwing some of their catch back for the people of the sea. So a merman returned the favour and warned them of dangerous weather, meaning that they alone survived the storm that gave rise to a part of the sea becoming known as 'the Sea of Blood.'

The word, Niarbyl, comes from the Manx for The Tail; Yn Arbyl. This name originally applied to the tail of rock going out into the sea, leaving the shore itself to be known by various names, including, simply, Dalby shore.

This is why the beautiful tune collected here is known as ‘Arrane Ghelbee’; Dalby Song.

A mysterious boatman would row in to near the rocks each evening and sing a song, just too distant for anyone to make out the words. No one ever knew who the man was, where he came from or where he went, but the beautiful wordless song remains today, well-known to Manx musicians yet.

Many have been out in their own boats from Niarbyl in the hope of finding the giant pearl that lies out in the bay. It was pulled up in a net one night shining so brightly that it lit up all the hills along the coast. But the fishermen took fright at the marvel and dropped the net. Many have been out to look for the giant pearl since, but none successfully.

Of course, Niarbyl is also a great place for the fairies.

In the nighttime you might hear the ‘tap-tapping’ of the Lil’ Fellas playing a game, throwing rocks. In the morning you will find a ring of white pebbles around one particular rock there on the shore.

A darker story tells of the Lil’ Fellas stealing a child from the family of a house now long gone. The Lil’ Fellas replaced the child with one of their own as a ‘changeling.’ Realising the switch, the parents set to preparing a bonfire on which to burn the changeling, hoping to force Themselves to swap the children again. However, rightly or wrongly, the neighbours swept in and stopped them in the final moment.

Just around the first headland beyond the fisherman’s hut is a beautiful cave with three entrances. Ooig ny Meill (Cave of the Mouths) is its name, and it was from within here that the sound of fairy music was once heard. But, upon going inside, nothing was found but for the footprints of Themselves, no bigger than your thumb.

We check for footprints whenever we visit, as Niarbyl is exactly the sort of place you expect to find them yet.

Peel Hill:

St Patrick, giants & Manannan

March 2024



Laa Pherick (St Patrick's Day) is on the 17th of March. This would once have been an extremely important day in the Isle of Man, as is recalled in folklore all over the Island, including at Peel Hill.

Of course, the top of the hill lies in the parish of Patrick, and at its foot is St Patrick's Isle, both of which are named after the saint. For good reason...

St Patrick arrived from Ireland, riding on his snow-white horse over the waves. Seeing his approach, Manannan threw down his cloak of mist and the saint became so disorientated that he lost his way as a sea-beast closed in trying to devour him.

Just in time, Patrick heard a curlew calling, a goat bleating and a cock crowing, all revealing to him where the Island was.

Leaping through the mist, his horse sprung up the side of Peel Hill. At the top, he cursed the sea-beast, which turned to stone below him in the sea, where it is still to be seen, with its ridged back obvious in the waves.

Patrick watched the mist lift to reveal a great army in Peel castle, with their spears glinting in the sun. But Patrick recognised them as phantoms of Manannan's conjuring. He cast out Manannan and his followers, who rushed off in the form of three legs, to an island off the Manx coast which then plunged beneath the waves.

Thus St Patrick won the Isle of Man to Christianity.

Where the hoof of his horse first struck land, a well formed, with holy water springing forth with the power to cure the faithful. This well was visited from far and wide, with offerings being left here by those hoping for a cure.

Ignoring the well's alternative connections to the fairies, and the sheep-donkey buggane seen near here in 1874, we find more connections for St Patrick on the island named for him!

Our last tale saw Patrick win the castle from Manannan, but another has him take it from a giant who terrorised the Isle of Man, carelessly throwing rocks around, some of which are still visible on the hillside over Lhergydhoo bearing his finger marks – hence their name, 'Meir ny Foawr' (Giant's Fingers).

Either way, the tales show that the saint helped the Manx; ridding us of terrorising giants, heathen magicians (as the tale speaks of Manannan), and, of course, snakes. One tale even claims that he will return again in the future, to rid us of mud.

He'll have a mighty task on his hands with that one!

St Patrick folklore exists all over the Island, with versions of these stories to be found everywhere between Kirk Patrick (Jurby) and Ballakilpherick (Rushen). However, unique to the parish of Patrick is a tale of the saint quelling a storm from Horse Rock (at the Breakwater edge of St Patrick's Isle). It was in thanks and recognition of this that Peel fishermen would put up a prayer to the saint when setting out to sea in their boats.

However, Manx hearts are hard to turn and here we catch a glimpse of a much older faith. Because it was this same prayer, apparently to a Christian saint, that was still remembered into the 20th century as being dedicated to Manannan!

The landscape of faith and folklore is wonderfully complex in the Isle of Man, and places like Peel Hill are a very good place to explore it!

St John's:**Unspeakable curses and a giant's grave***April 2024*

For my twelfth and final article exploring folklore in locations all over the Isle of Man, I come to St John's, the historical home of Manx government and so much more.

The rulers and law-makers of the Island have gathered at Tynwald Hill since at least Viking times, and so it is no surprise that the animals would do the same when important questions arise.

So it was that the birds gathered here and agreed to decide who should be king by who could fly the highest. Up they went, straight up from the hill, flying into the sky until only the eagle was left. When it could fly no more it cried out triumphantly that it was the king. But from its hiding place beneath the eagle's wing, the tiny wren emerged and fly up just a short distance higher.

So it was that the wren became king, as anyone who has been out on 26 December to Hunt the Wren will know, as we sing; 'The wren, the wren, the king of all birds!'

As an important political site, it is no surprise that Tynwald Hill is also an important folklore place.

For instance, it is a good place to gain good luck, if you walk clockwise around the base of the hill three times.

Or, alternatively, you could carry out the ‘shiaght mynney mollaht;’ an evil curse sure to cause terrible things, perhaps even death. People would come here at night and turn a small ‘Swearing Stone’ seven times inside the hollow of another stone. This was done secretly, as the punishment for such ‘witchcraft’ would be very serious.

Just behind the hill, on the road northwards towards Tynwald Mills, is the Giant’s Grave.

Sadly, there are no stories noted of this particular giant, but, if the creature was anything like the one whose four-foot-long shin bone was dug up from Braddan in the 1720s, they must have been enormous!

Locally, the site is also known as ‘King Orry’s Grave,’ which perhaps gives us a clue as to who the giant be.

Of course, there is folklore connected to the walkway between the Hill and church.

Rushes are lain here on Tynwald Day, in thanks to Manannan, the pre-Christian god. He ruled the Island with great peace and prosperity, keeping it safe with his cloak of mist. All he asked for as rent from Manx people was a bundle of rushes.

It sounds like a great deal, and so it’s good that the Isle of Man government pay it still in their own way!

The Viking-era carved cross usually housed in the church is undergoing restoration with Manx National Heritage, but there was once another cross here.

When this other cross was dug up and put on display in the church porch, the cattle of neighbouring farms began to fall ill.

The vicar of St John’s refused to consider any connection between the two as anything but superstition, forcing the farmers took it into their own hands. They came at night, took the cross, and buried it in a secret location undiscovered to this day.

So, if you find a carved cross close to St John’s, watch out!

We occasionally lead an hour-long tour of St John’s folklore, such is the wealth of folklore here. But, since this is the last in this series of articles, we will have to leave you to ‘A Guide to the Folklore Sites of the Isle of Man’ if you want to explore more for yourself!