

NEWSLETTER

Number 68

February's Folklore: Myths, Customs and Magic

It may be the shortest month but it packs in the myths n customs ...

As the shortest month of the year, February sits at a crossroads – bridging the depths of winter and the first stirrings of spring. For generations of Britons, their days were shaped by folklore that sought to tame the cold, predict the future, and honour the ancient rhythms of the land. From sacred festivals to weather wisdom, the traditions of February offer a fascinating window into how our ancestors made sense of the world around them.

February 2nd marks **Candlemas**, a day that blends Christian observance with the Celtic festival of **Imbolc** – the "in milking" time, when ewes begin to give birth and signs of new life emerge. For pagans, Imbolc was a festival of purification and renewal, with fires lit to welcome the returning sun. When Christianity arrived, this was reimagined as the Feast of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple, with churches blessing thousands of candles to be used throughout the year. Folklore around Candlemas is rich with weather prophecy. The well-known rhyme sums it up: *"If Candlemas be fair and bright, Winter has another flight; If Candlemas brings clouds and rain, Winter will not come again."*

In some parts of Scotland and northern England, people would watch for badgers emerging from their setts – a local twist on the "groundhog" tradition. A badger seen sunning itself was said to mean more snow was on the way.

While February 14th is now synonymous with romance and greeting cards, its folk roots run deeper. The name honours St Valentine, though exactly which saint remains debated – some stories link him to a 3rd-century Roman priest who secretly married couples, while others tie him to a martyred bishop. Medieval Britons transformed the day into a time for predicting love and fortune. Young women would perform rituals to glimpse their future husbands: placing rosemary and thyme under their pillows on the eve of the 14th, or reciting charms while looking into a mirror by candlelight. In villages across England, it was customary for young people to draw names from

a bowl to find their "valentine" – a companion for feasts and games throughout the year, a tradition that lingered into the 19th century.



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February's reputation for harsh weather inspired a wealth of folk sayings. One old proverb warns: *"February fill dyke, be it black or be it white"* – meaning the month would bring enough rain or snow to fill ditches and prepare the land for spring planting. Farmers would watch for signs like snowdrops pushing through frost – their appearance was said to signal that the worst of winter was over.

Rural communities also practised small acts of magic to protect their homes and livestock. In Wales, people would hang a sprig of rowan above their door to ward off evil spirits, while in Cornwall, fishermen would leave a pinch of salt on their boats to ensure safe voyages in rough February seas.

These traditions remind us that folklore was never just "old stories" – it was a way to connect with the land, mark the passage of time, and find hope in the darkest days. As we navigate modern Februarys, the echoes of these customs still linger in the way we check the sky for signs of spring, or exchange tokens of affection with those we love.

Singing Together

We asked for comments from our Facebook members of their memories of Singing Together at School. It seemed to strike the right note

I remember we used to sing traditional folk songs. Danny Boy, Hearts of Oak, Men of Harlech, D'ye Ken John Peel, Molly Malone, My Darling Clementine, Uncle Tom Cobley, and because I was in Yorkshire "Ilkey Moor 'baht' at... The latter I can still sing all the verses to much to the amusement of my family as my husband is from Kent and both children were born there.

Hazel Lawrence

We used to love Singing Together and we were a large class of over 45 children. Those of us who sat at the back of the class used to make up our own words, we had such fun ! One song in particular stands out. It was called " Argus " and it was about a dog. Argus starts off as a puppy , and the song is brisk and lively , his master sails away in a ship and everyday Argus sits and waits on the seashore for him to return. Twenty years go by and Argus is now an old ,old dog and the music becomes slow and plodding. One day , the ship returns and Argus has a joyful reunion with his master and " then he died with joy , and then he died with joy ". Such a sad song and quite a few kids cried.

Susan Turner

At primary school from age five, early 1950s heavy going stuff.

Rule Britannia, Hearts of Oak are our ships jolly tars are our men, David the Bard on his bed of death lies, and more. All most unsuitable for the ears of the same age group today.

Sue Camsell



On my first day at my new school I was given the singing books to hand out. Unfortunately at lunch time they had made me eat all my food. As they put the books in front of me I vomited over the whole pile!

James Atwell

The busy bee (Part two) ...

Anne Silins concludes her fascinating article on The Appleby Beekeeper

Beeswax has many uses. In the 1800's and early 1900's one of the uses for beeswax was to make candles. Many Appleby villagers still used candles to light their home in winter and many children carried a candle in a candle holder to bed each night. There are of course other uses for beeswax, in food preservation. A cheese cloth would be coated in beeswax and used to cover food as we today use 'cling wrap'. We find cheeses covered in wax, and when a housewife wants to seal her jars of jams she may pour liquid wax on the top of jam. This melted wax will seal the jars keeping insects out and keeping the jam safe. Who has never used a polish containing beeswax to polish a wooden floor or leather goods. Many skincare products have beeswax in them. Years ago coats used to have a beeswax coating on the fabric to stop the rain soaking through. We may think of beeswax as an early plastic covering.



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While honey is an important staple, filled with health benefits, the golden jars point to something even more powerful: the bees that made it. These bees can travel up to 5 miles from their hives to gather nectar and pollinate our food crops. Pollinating our crops is by far the most important work they do for us. We need bees, without them the world is in serious trouble. I do not know enough about bees to save them, but we must save them. All of us must be at least aware of bees, and the good they do, they are our agricultural super-worker.

Our Appleby Beekeeper was a man who welcomed us, he taught us many lessons and much history as he allowed us to watch him work. We listened and thought of him as our special village scientist.

Emily Milbanke

Sonia Liff concludes her series ...

This series has traced the family of William Huskisson, the statesman who was killed by Stephenson's Rocket in 1830, from its humble beginnings in Appleby. Huskisson was very wealthy and influential by the end of his life. By 'following the money', this series identified a number of women whose sibling or wider kinship relationships had brought prosperity to the family. The last of these is Emily Milbanke (1777-1856) who became William's wife in 1799.

She was from a wealthy aristocratic family, and her father had a high-ranking naval career, becoming governor of Newfoundland. By his twenties William had inherited from both his father and great-uncle. Already on a political career, he was able to make a good marriage. Emily brought a further £30,000 to the marriage giving them a combined wealth of several million in today's prices. After William's death, Emily further enhanced his reputation by publishing his speeches and writing a biographical introduction which made inflated claims about his heritage.

The Huskissons lived in a period when, for those with property at least, wealth was left to the oldest son. So from a modern perspective it might seem strange that women and wider kinship relationships have played such a strong role in this account. Dorothy, first wife of William's grandfather, died before her rich brother but he left a significant legacy to her sons. He had only become wealthy because his uncle, who had made money through trade, left his fortune to his sister Ann's eldest son. William owed his introduction to the English establishment, which led to his later political career, to his great-uncle Gem who took responsibility for his education after the death of his mother and his father's subsequent remarriage. He was the brother of William's father's second wife and the uncle of William's mother.

This complex web of extended kinship relationships which led to financial and practical support differs from both our imagined single male beneficiary of inheritance and from our current more nuclear families. Bernard Capp, an academic who has researched kinship relationships and obligations in this period, situates these patterns in a time when many women died in childbirth, where men frequently re-married and had second families, and where large families could result in more children than the parents could support. Eldest sons might well inherit, and become head of households, but this role extended to responsibilities towards their younger siblings and half-siblings such as arranging their marriages, occupations, and finances. In some cases, families took in unmarried sisters or daughters to act as housekeepers or younger nieces to live alongside their children. Some of this would have been formally enshrined in wills, but social pressures and expectations were also central.

Reference Capp, B. (2018) The Ties that Bind: Siblings, Family and Society in Early Modern England.

Stories from the Museum ...

Museum Manager Sally, lets us know about the latest updates ...

The museum has recently had a bit of an extension, of sorts. As well as the old dormitory rooms above the hall, the museum can now be found in one of rooms up the stairs at the side of the hall. This room has had a varied past. Current parents and pupils might remember it as the office of past Head Mrs Carpenter. Before that it was a classroom, and even further back in time it served as a bedroom for tenants of the apartments in the building.



At one point, it was the bedroom of members of the Moore family when they visited from London. When the school was first opened in 1697, it was the parlour room of George Wayte, the first Headmaster. It was part of the living quarters of successive Headmasters until the extension was built in early Victorian times, and the Latin Headmaster moved in to quieter rooms, away from the children.

The Latin Stairs were also built at this time, so the Headmaster could not hear the dormers traipse past his rooms in the evening! Until then, the Headmaster's apartment and the school were one and the same – boys would have largely been housed in the rooms above the hall, but were also given beds in rooms throughout the building, including the room that now houses a museum display about the history of Appleby Magna.

“Spion Kop”

Local connections that struck a cord with readers

Our recent article on Boer War connections and places named ‘the Kop’ struck a chord with readers, bringing in fascinating local memories and stories.

Ashby’s Spion Kop – A Hill with History

Duncan got in touch to share his own link to the name:

“The Boer War article activated some interesting memories for me. During the 1960s my parents lived on Upper Packington Rd, Ashby, in a house called St Michael’s which belonged to Red Bank Co. It was surrounded by open land – now all built upon. If you drive down the road towards Packington, there is a steep hill on the right that was known locally as Spion Kop. Local history tells us it was from this hill that cannons made a ruin of Ashby Castle. Today, the cannons would have to fire over the railway and a narrow string of mature trees – a reminder of how much the landscape has changed.”

Spion Kop. Hopwas Staffordshire



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Hopwas – A House Named for Battle

The name also has personal significance for Andrew Moore, whose grandfather, Stuart Ashwood, named his Hopwas home ‘Spion Kop’ in honour of the famous Boer War battle. For him, the name was a lasting tribute to the conflict that shaped a generation, and the house has carried the title ever since – a quiet connection between a local family and a global event.



Stuart Ashwood

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Spion Kop (meaning ‘Spy Hill’ in Afrikaans) is a hill in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, and the site of one of the most brutal battles of the Second Boer War (1899–1902). Fought between 23rd and 24th January 1900, the battle saw British forces attempt to capture the hill from Boer commandos to gain control of the surrounding area.

The fighting was fierce, with heavy casualties on both sides – around 2,000 British and 350 Boer soldiers were killed or wounded. Though the British initially seized the hill, they were forced to withdraw after enduring intense fire from Boer positions. The battle became a symbol of the challenges faced by British troops in the war, and the name ‘Spion Kop’ was later adopted for landmarks across the UK – including hills, streets and buildings – as a way to remember the conflict and those who fought in it.



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