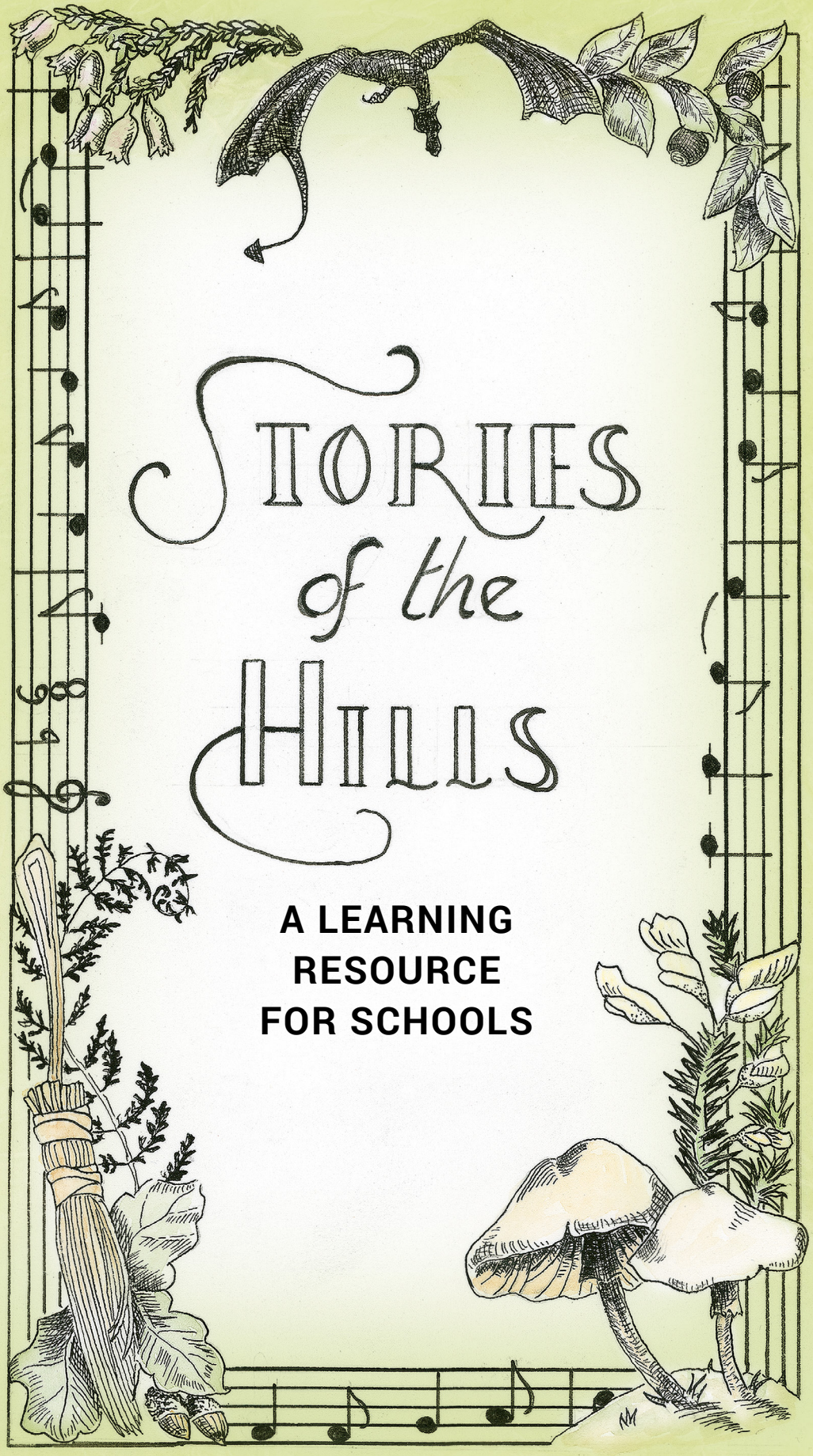


Stories of the Hills

A LEARNING RESOURCE FOR SCHOOLS

Made possible with Heritage Fund

Halsway Manor
National Centre for Folk Arts

Quantock Landscape Partnership Scheme

This resource is part of Stories of the Hills, a project here at Halsway Manor that is part of the NLHF funded Quantock Landscape Partnership Scheme, working with organisations across the Quantocks. The aim of Stories of the Hills is to explore the intangible heritage of the Quantocks, the stories, traditions and people often ignored by traditional historical written records. It is a heritage and knowledge that is in danger of being lost. We want to ensure that it is not forgotten; that it continues to live in and inspire the imaginations of a new generation, who in turn can hand it down for the future.

This learning resource is designed to go a little way towards this; to support schools with both information and ideas for creative activities inspired by folklore, folk music, traditions, traditional crafts and industry as well as interesting lesser known locals and visitors. It is aimed at KS2 but some activities would work well with KS1 and likewise the more in depth studies are easily adaptable to the KS3 history curriculum.

As well as this resource, there is a beautiful artist's map distributed locally, and designed to work in tandem with an online resource (**www.halswaymanor.org.uk/storiesofthehills**) which provides in depth articles on intangible heritage, expanding on the topics, stories and people covered in this document.

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

The Quantock Hills and their Intangible Heritage

The beautiful Quantock Hills lying in the North West of Somerset were the first AONB (Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty) to be designated in the country. Like all areas and landscapes they have certain things that make them unique and special: from the amazing ancient sessile oak woodlands, to high heather smothered heathland on the common, grazing ponies, red deer, whortleberries carpeting the ground, farmland, ancient tumuli and earthworks, villages and on its northern edge what was once known as the Severn Sea.

This landscape is special, but if we just focus on its nature, the historical facts from archaeological investigation, the modern working life of the hills, we miss a huge part of what makes it special: the more intangible aspects of its heritage that have done as much to form what it is today; that inform all of our lives more than we may realise.

Intangible heritage can be a mysterious term – what does it mean? Literally a heritage that we can't touch like we can artefacts in a museum? To an extent yes, the stories of the hills, the stories of people and place and ordinary lives that aren't always recorded definitely feature in it, but it also means traditions for which there may be "artefacts" - objects and records that ordinary people have saved, but not existing in museums and in common knowledge. What was once common knowledge is being lost.

The Quantock Hills is an area full of stories; of tales of mythical creatures, dragons, giants, pixies; of tales of extraordinary saints and miracles so strange they seem magical; of folk customs, of folk songs collected by famous collectors such as Cecil Sharp, of ancient crafts such as besom broom making, a once thriving silk industry, of fascinating people and hidden places just waiting to be rediscovered by their new local generation.

Intangible heritage is important to learning as it is part of our history, the history of ordinary people. It is fantastical at times and creatively inspiring, yet it is not just imaginative fancy, but what people really once believed and did, it is social history, it is creative history, it is the history of our landscapes, it is the history of us as we live our lives. It might not be provable the way factual history arguably is, but it is just as much part of history as a dramatic battle or the stories of Kings and Queens (in fact both often filter into folk history, adding an interesting element to any interpretation of how people felt at the time). It helps us understand, it helps us imagine and empathise, it helps bring places to life, it offers a living history that we can take and help evolve into our own futures.

FOLKTALES

What is a folktale? In its simplest definition it is good to start with the meaning of the words. Why not ask your class what does folk mean? What is a tale (as opposed to a tail!)? There are always a few children in a class who can answer this and straight away a term they are unsure about transforms into the simpler idea of a "people story", a story of the people, and consequently a genre of story they can both learn and create; that belongs to them.

A folktale is also a story steeped in history. We can create stories today using the tropes of old folktales, that then might become folktales of the future, but most of the folktales we know are likely very old. So a folktale is a people story from a long time ago. We don't know their exact age, though with certain ones we can guess if they include details from historical events. They are stories that have been handed down orally over generations in communities. They are told rather than written. They are site-specific, meaning that they are connected to actual places (unlike fairy tales which are often non-specific in location and more universal in terms of theme to teach a moral or make a point).

In terms of subject there are two main kinds: those that include mythical creatures and those that have only human characters. Both can include elements from known history, for example in the Quantocks, Vikings/ Danes and King Alfred often appear. However the most common tales in the Quantocks involve mythical creatures, from dragons and giants to pixies and a very unusual black dog. There are also many ghost stories and some particularly fascinating local saint stories, details of which can all be found on the Halsway Stories of the Hills webpages.

Today folktales are kept alive by the few that still know them, and by storytellers who may adapt them, as is the evolving nature of a folktale (local storyteller Clare Viner's The Emerald Dragon is a good example of this for children). There are also thankfully written records, made by collectors and folklorists, often in the early twentieth century at a similar time to the great era of folk song collecting, who were afraid that these stories would be lost as older generations died. A local example is Ruth Tongue, who spent much of her life living in Crowcombe. Her book, containing many stories she overheard as a child, Somerset Folklore, was published by the Folklore Society in 1965 and was edited by eminent academic folklorist Katherine M. Briggs. (More about Ruth can be found on the Stories of the Hills webpages). It includes many Quantock folktales, including a version of the most famous: The Gurt Worm of Shervage Wood.

In the past folktales were kept alive as they were a key form of entertainment. Hundreds of years ago most ordinary people were illiterate, there were no printing presses, and books were the territory of the extremely rich and of religious orders with their tradition of illuminated manuscripts. Books were rare and precious, and were hand written on vellum (fine animal skin), paper coming later to the UK. Books were also concerned with serious academic and religious matter – the idea of writing down stories for fun was non-existent – it was hundreds of years before the origin of the novel. But that does not mean that stories as entertainment did not exist. In the days before the printing press, before our modern distractions such as television and the internet, people discovered stories by listening to people tell them. They would tell each other stories at home, they might tell them to friends in the community at gatherings, but one key way that stories were heard and travelled was via the wandering minstrels.

A wandering minstrel was a storyteller who travelled between villages telling stories, perhaps in return for food or any payment that could be offered. Their arrival would have been an event of great excitement at a time before motorized transport and instant communication, when villages were much more cut off from each other than they are today. An ordinary peasant wouldn't even have had access to a horse. In a village everyone would have known everyone. A stranger would have been exotic, and whilst some might be met with suspicion, a visit from a wandering minstrel would have been exciting. In some ways, whilst they told fictional stories, they also would have been the only way to hear news from other places in the country, meaning that they provided varied entertainment.

At a wandering minstrel show people would gather round to hear new stories, but rather than them being told as a storyteller would tell a story today, they were often sung to traditional tunes. This included what we would know as a ballad poem today – a long narrative poem that tells a folktale. Many stories of folk heroes that we know today, such as Robin Hood, would also have been disseminated this way. We obviously, due to their age, do not have any recordings of these stories being sung rather than spoken, but tunes would both aid

the memory of the minstrels and the listeners, ensuring the stories continued, as well as adding an extra level of entertainment in the form of music. The minstrels might tell the same tells in each location, but they would inevitably evolve by both the minstrels adding things they thought would appeal locally and then after they leave the stories remaining and being given local flavour as residents continued to tell them over time.

There were also court minstrels who would tell stories and entertain the lords and ladies and royals of hundreds of years ago.

The difference between a folktale and a fairytale

Many see the terms folktale and fairytale as interchangeable, but there are some key differences. Whilst both might explore the lives of people years ago, magic and mythical creatures, folktales have no known author. In fact they have many authors as there are different versions as they evolve over time and in each location they are told. Fairytales on the other hand often have a known author, such as Hans Christian Anderson, even if they are in part inspired by folktales the author might have heard.

Another key difference is that, as mentioned earlier, folktales are site-specific – they belong to a place. Fairytales on the other hand, might mention a specific country, though often they mention a mythical land, but in general they are written to be more universal – to not be part of a place and its people, so much as a general consciousness of all people who want to relate it to their lives.

Both folktales and fairytales can have hidden layers of meanings and morals. However this is not always the case with a folktale, whilst this is key to fairy tales, some famous ones arguably being metaphors for the message they are trying to get across, with psychologists analysing them to this day.

Ironically though, there are more fairies in folktales than there are in fairytales!

Some Key Examples of Quantock Folktales and their creatures (detailed text in Stories of the Hills webpages)

The Gurt Worm of Shervage Wood

The Dragon of Kingston St Mary

The Pixies of Stogursey

The Danish Boy (Dowsborough Fort)

The Black Dog of Weacombe

The Giants of Nether Stowey

The Giant and Devil stones of Battlegore – Williton.

ACTIVITIES

Write your own folktale

After introducing the idea of the folktale as a people story and giving some examples of local stories and creatures, introduce the idea that as these are our stories that writing our own is key!

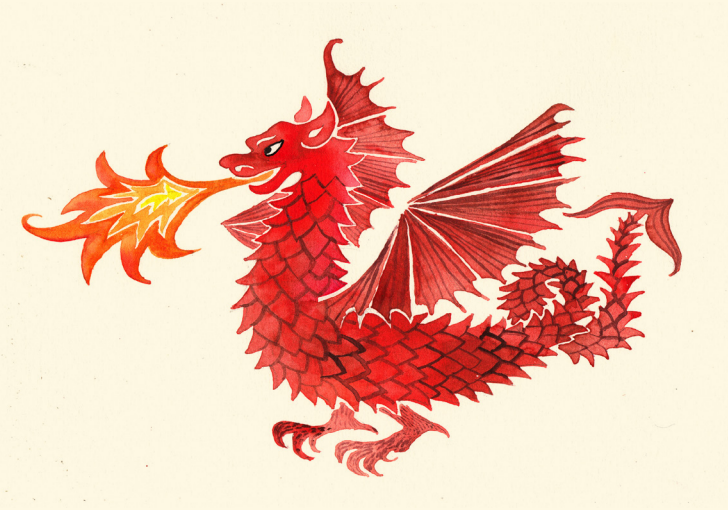
Some reluctant or nervous writers might prefer to take a tale such as the Gurt Worm and change it – this fits with the idea of folktales evolving and changing with each telling. However others will find the freedom of creating their own tale, complete with mythical creatures or ghosts, as liberating and more fun. The key here is that in terms of ideas there is no wrong answer – if something makes the story exciting and relevant to you then that is fine. In terms of it being a folktale there are just a few simple rules: it should be set in a specific real place, such as your village and it should work well told out loud. It can be full of mythical creatures if you want, it can be inspired by real historical events and mix these with the mythical, it can have a message or a moral, but none of these are essential. The main thing is that it is a site-specific story with local meaning and resonance for their lives today that they can see lasting into the future. These stories could then lead to the introduction of storytelling and the importance of telling stories out loud to each other as well as reading.

Design a dragon that disguises itself as something

One of the most memorable things about the Gurt Worm of Shervage Wood is that it strangely likes to disguise itself as a log! If you invented a dragon what could it disguise itself as? This is a great way to introduce the idea of camouflage in nature and give real examples from stick insects to octopi. Brainstorm and discuss your ideas, then draw them. If you like you could also forage in the school grounds for twigs and interesting things to add to the drawings in collage form – e.g. if a dragon can look like it's made of leaves. Alternatively this dragon might be bright orange and glittering and designed to be disguised when flying in front of the sun or colourful for rainbows – anything goes.
These dragons could be used to create a mural display, or why not cut them out and attach to sticks to make puppets for a wandering minstrel puppet show of your stories?

Recreate a wandering minstrel show

The wandering minstrel show was an exciting village event. Why not design your own one to be held at school or somewhere in the village? Take time planning what the event would entail. Children could take it in turns to share their stories, or designate roles and have a couple of children as the minstrels telling everyone's folktales. Do you want people to bring cakes and refreshments? Will you have a host? Do you want to speak or sing the stories and if the latter perhaps try to a local folk tune, or make up your own that you think could be a folk tune for the future. Are you going to dress up and design costumes? Who would you invite – are parents going to come? You could also use puppets made from folktale artwork for some of the tale tellings. Creating an event like this is a wonderful way of consolidating new knowledge and celebrating the children's own



creativity – folktales are people stories and this gives them ownership of their stories, with the added bonus of learning about how people shared stories in the past. Telling as opposed to reading is also a great opportunity for those with dyslexia or who struggle with reading. It is also a lovely chance to open it up at the end in case anyone in the audience wants to share a story.

Create a debate

Many folktales bring up issues that cause real problems in their communities. What would you do if there was a dragon on the rampage – would you try and kill it? Capture it? Be its friend? What if there were pixies constantly playing practical jokes? Either using one of the Quantock folktales or one the class has made up, create a debate with different children representing the different sides of the argument. For example if dealing with one of the dragon tales you could have dragon rights activists, vs those who want it to be destroyed. This could lead to an interesting debate on animal welfare, conservation and endangered species. Pixies offer a good way in to debating antisocial behaviour!

FOLK MUSIC.

What is folk music and how does it differ from other historical music? Folk music, put simply, is a traditional song or tune. It is unusual in terms of music in that we do not know the exact origins of the composition of each tune, rather we might know what part of the country it is from or who first documented it and who sang it to them. In this way, rather than composers or writers of tunes and songs, we have folk singers and folk music collectors. Whilst there are many famous folk singers and musicians, you don't have to be a professional or well known person to sing folk songs or play folk tunes. By its nature folk music is music of the people and many of the well known folk songs have survived because someone heard an ordinary person singing it and thought the words and music should be noted down so they were not forgotten. These days most people don't sing folk songs or play folk music at home, but in the past it was common to sing and play together as a form of entertainment, expression and pleasure. Therefore if it weren't for the folk music collectors many of these wonderful songs and tunes would have been lost, including many from the Quantock Hills.

A song collector is someone who travels a country searching out its traditional songs and tunes. This doesn't mean a tune that is simply popular, or a contemporary tune, or a tune where we know who wrote it, but rather an old traditional song or tune that has been handed down over generations, much like a folktale. In fact many folktales would have originally been sung to folk tunes. But how did the collectors tell what was a folk tune and old and what was not? It is hard to say exactly – it is not something that could be proved, unless obviously a well known song, so they had to go on instinct and experience – to listen to the tunes, the songs and their stories and make a judgement. With experience this is easier, as there is something recognisable, intangible in terms of explanation, in an old folk tune. Certain rhythms, scales (folk songs often use what are known as modes or modal scales which sound quite different to other scales) and combination of notes, often quite unusual and at the time of collecting not used by classical music or popular song composers. (There are famous examples of composers of the collecting era and after, most notably Ralph Vaughn Williams himself involved in folk music and collecting, who were deeply influenced by the folk tunes they discovered).

Perhaps the most famous song collector of all was Cecil Sharp, who travelled the country in the early 20th century and founded the English Folk Dance and Song Society. Cecil Sharp spent many months cycling around the countryside (he didn't use a car or other transport as he didn't want to miss any exciting discoveries – what if someone working at the side of the road was singing? What if he missed a gypsy camp full of songs?), but he particularly focused on Somerset, publishing 5 volumes of *Songs from Somerset* between 1904 and 1909. These included songs collected during his time in the Quantocks. We know that he collected many songs, particularly around Broomfield, Nether Stowey, Combe Florey and Crowcombe. He published a separate collection of sea shanties and 56 of these were collected from one man, John Short also known as Yankee Jack, in Watchet! These songs would have been ones that had been sung by local people, perhaps for hundreds of years. Sharp's collecting meant that these songs had a new life – they became fashionable and still influence musicians to this day – rather than being lost.

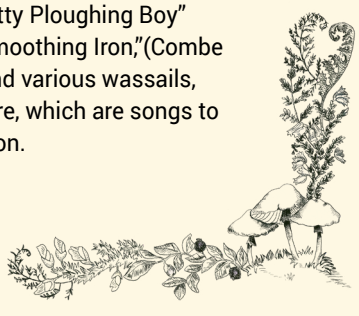
As well as professional collectors there were people who just thankfully made note of local folk tunes. One such person was William Winter who was born in Lydeard St Lawrence and then lived for a long time at West Bagborough. His notebook with tunes in it from the 19th century was found in the 1960s and is now in the Halsway Manor library. Because of this we know what he played as a local musician and these traditional tunes, often the accompaniment to folk dances, have survived. It is worth noting here that folk dance is a key companion to folk music (the tunes rather than songs), but whilst traditional folk dance such as Morris dancing and Maypole does take place in the Quantocks, there is not, to our knowledge, enough unique Quantock dances for their own section of this resource. Many Morris dancers for example, dance steps that are very traditional, but that originate in the Cotswolds. More information on William Winter can be found on the *Stories of the Hills* webpages.

Folk songs and music continue to be popular to this day. They are important as they are a key part of our heritage, an intangible part, passed down through generations and still at risk of being forgotten. They tell the stories of people and their lives: love, adventure, sadness, war and everyday work – there were folk songs to commemorate all moments of life; they are our sung stories, and they are part of our landscape. Just like with folktales, folksongs are site-specific and unique to each place. There are some songs where there are different versions collected in different places, and others that have only been recorded in one village. They provide a snapshot of a moment of time long ago in a community – we can hear a song sung or a tune played and know that we are hearing the same thing that someone else did hundreds of years ago. In this way they are a true living historical experience – one that we can really feel rather than simply speculate what it was like.

Examples of Local Folk Songs and Tunes

The William Winter manuscript contains over 400 tunes, mainly for dancing. Below are a couple of examples you might like to try and learn. A full publication of the tunes with a cd recording of them is available from Halsway Manor.

Cecil Sharp collected over a hundred tunes in the area, but only a few made it to the printed version of Songs from Somerset. They are "O no, John," (Bincombe) "Jenny of the Moor" (Combe Florey), "The Pretty Ploughing Boy" (Crowcombe), "Driving Away at the Smoothing Iron,"(Combe FLorey) "The Robber" (Crowcombe) and various wassails, including from Crowcombe and Enmore, which are songs to accompany the wassailing folk tradition.

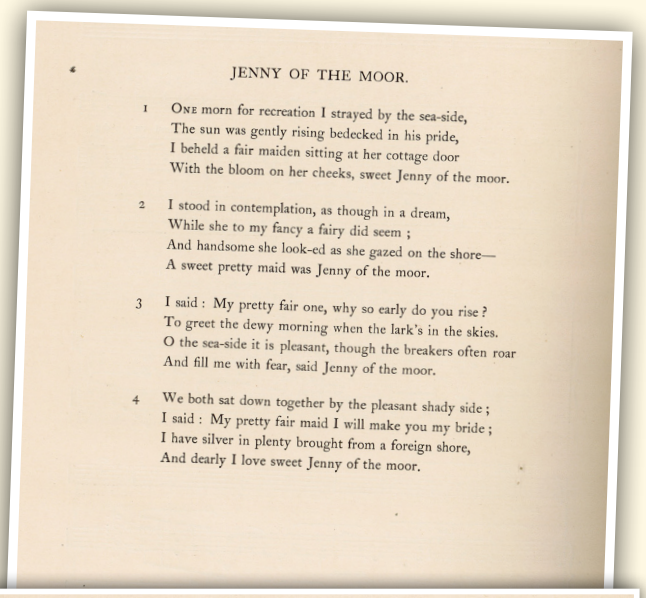


ACTIVITIES

Learn a local folk tune or song

Provided in this resource are some examples of local tunes. Many more are available in Halway Manor's library. For those teachers that read music why not try and teach a local tune? If you don't read music there are recordings of many folk tunes and songs available online, so why not try teaching by ear? Many folk musicians do not read music, just as many people who would have played and sung the tunes in the past would not have. Therefore this is a really good way to explore musicality and learning a tune. Try playing a recording then singing it back. Try clapping the beat. If anyone plays an instrument why not bring it along and see if they can guess what notes are in the tune? Don't worry if you make a mistake or if you change things slightly – this is the nature of learning music this way and there are many different versions of some folksongs.

Please note with the tunes collected by Cecil Sharp that, as is the nature of folksongs, that they are stories of love and, in The Robber, crime. Folksongs often tell of life's travails and therefore sometimes deal with adult issues. With those reproduced here we are deferring to your judgment in terms of which, if any, you share.



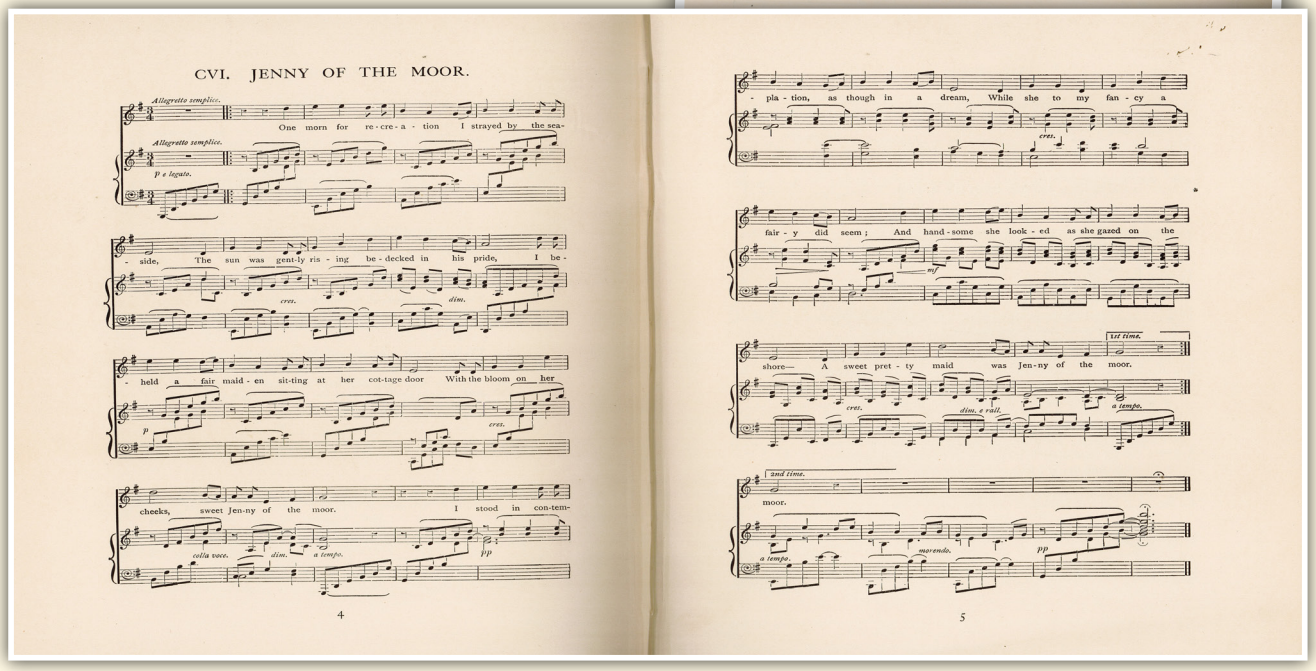
JENNY OF THE MOOR.

1 One morn for recreation I strayed by the sea-side,
The sun was gently rising bedecked in his pride,
I beheld a fair maiden sitting at her cottage door
With the bloom on her cheeks, sweet Jenny of the moor.

2 I stood in contemplation, as though in a dream,
While she to my fancy a fairy did seem ;
And handsome she look-ed as she gazed on the shore—
A sweet pretty maid was Jenny of the moor.

3 I said : My pretty fair one, why so early do you rise ?
To greet the dewy morning when the lark's in the skies.
O the sea-side it is pleasant, though the breakers often roar
And fill me with fear, said Jenny of the moor.

4 We both sat down together by the pleasant shady side ;
I said : My pretty fair maid I will make you my bride ;
I have silver in plenty brought from a foreign shore,
And dearly I love sweet Jenny of the moor.



CVI. JENNY OF THE MOOR.

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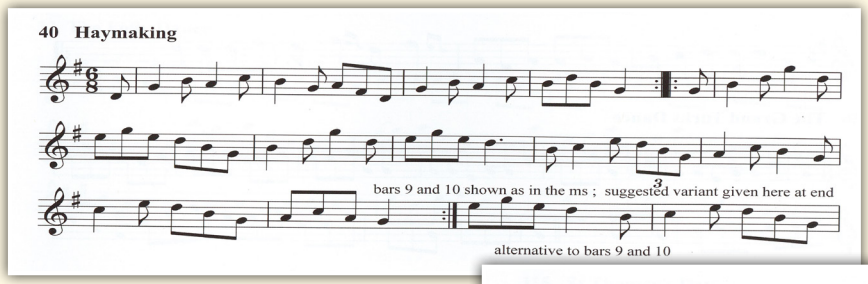
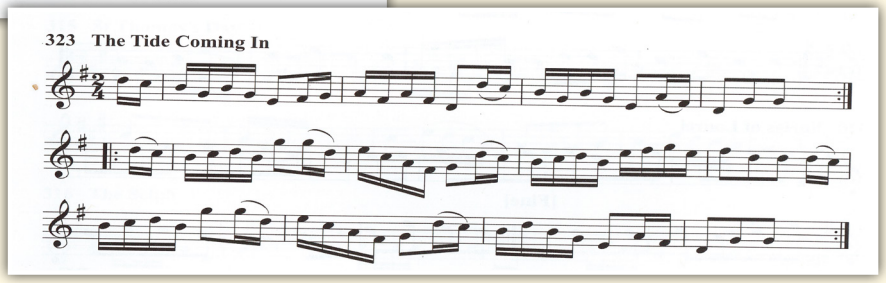


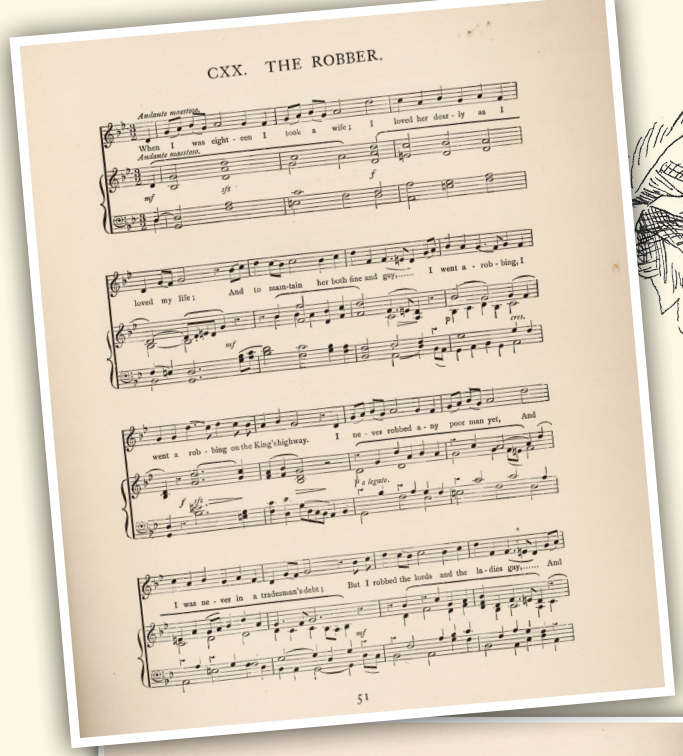
40 Haymaking

bars 9 and 10 shown as in the ms ; suggested variant given here at end

alternative to bars 9 and 10



323 The Tide Coming In


CXX. THE ROBBER.

Andante moderato.

When I was eight - een I took a wife; I loved her dear - ly as I loved my life; And to main-tain her both fine and gay..... I went a - rob - bing, I went a rob - bing on the King's highway. I ne - ver robbed a - ny poor man yet, And I was ne - ver in a tradesman's debt; But I robbed the lords and the la - dies gay..... And

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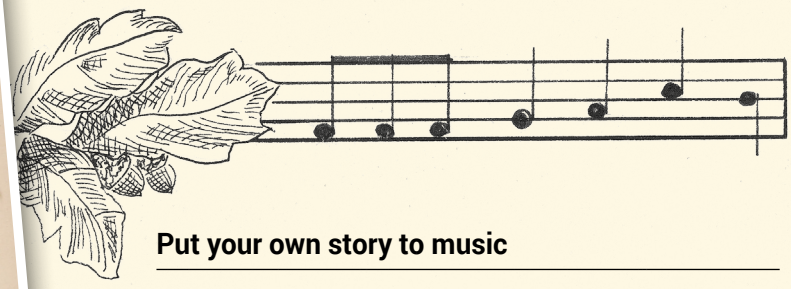
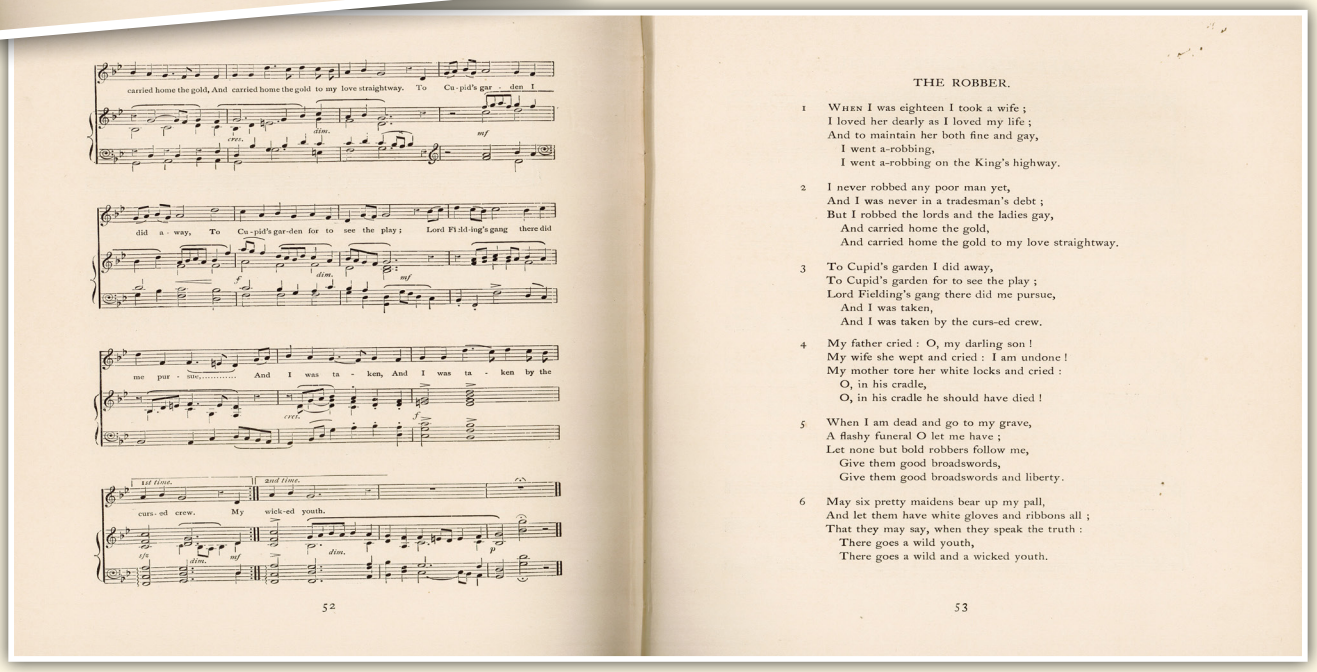


Put your own story to music

If you have written a folktale as suggested in this pack why not try putting it to music (or another story about your life in your area if you like)? You could either invent a tune or try fitting it as words to one of the traditional tunes listed. Does it help you remember the story if you hear it sung rather than spoken? What kind of rhythm and tune suits different kinds of story – would a sad love story have the same kind of tune as a story of an epic battle?


carried home the gold, And carried home the gold to my love straightway. To Cu-pid's gar - den I did a - way, To Cu-pid's gar-den for to see the play; Lord Fiel-ding's gang there did me pur - sue,..... And I was ta - ken, And I was ta - ken by the curs-ed crew. My wick-ed youth.

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THE ROBBER.

1 When I was eighteen I took a wife;
I loved her dearly as I loved my life;
And to maintain her both fine and gay,
I went a-robbing,
I went a-robbing on the King's highway.

2 I never robbed any poor man yet,
And I was never in a tradesman's debt;
But I robbed the lords and the ladies gay,
And carried home the gold,
And carried home the gold to my love straightway.

3 To Cupid's garden I did away,
To Cupid's garden for to see the play;
Lord Fielding's gang there did me pursue,
And I was taken,
And I was taken by the curs-ed crew.

4 My father cried: O, my darling son!
My wife she wept and cried: I am undone!
My mother tore her white locks and cried:
O, in his cradle,
O, in his cradle he should have died!

5 When I am dead and go to my grave,
A flashy funeral O let me have;
Let none but bold robbers follow me,
Give them good broadswords,
Give them good broadswords and liberty.

6 May six pretty maidens bear up my pall,
And let them have white gloves and ribbons all;
That they may say, when they speak the truth:
There goes a wild youth,
There goes a wild and a wicked youth.

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Make your own scratch orchestra

Why not try making your own instruments out of scrap or things we normally chuck away or recycle? Strings, drums – can you come up with things that could be used to create these? Then use these new instruments to create your own tunes and sung stories.

Work Songs

It was often traditional, whether working in a factory or out in the fields, to sing whilst working. Sea shanties were also used to help keep the sailors working in rhythm (Yankee Jack from Watchet was said to have been employed sometimes on ship as a "shantyman" to aid this). Why not create the lyrics and tune for your own class work song to help you concentrate, when clearing up or doing a practical task. What words would give you motivation and make you enjoy the chore more? What rhythm would help you get things done? Why not try from this point on singing this rather than playing music on the laptop when doing certain chores.

Cecil Sharp – the song collectors mini-project

Imagine what it would have been like to be a song collector over a hundred years ago, travelling the country meeting people and writing down the music and words to their songs. Imagine the adventures Cecil Sharp might have had and the people he met. A chance for a deeper investigation into Cecil Sharp and song collecting with a deeper delve into the people he met in the Quantocks (see Story of the Hills web pages). Also think about what the equivalent would be today. Do you think in some countries there are still song collectors? (answer yes – ethnomusicologists). They don't really collect in this country any more – can you think of what an equivalent could be? As well as factual research this is rich materials for stories.

FOLK TRADITIONS

Introduction – what is a folk tradition?

We all have our traditions: from family traditions on Christmas morning or other celebrations, to general cultural ones from wedding receptions to New Year to blowing out the candles on a birthday cake. A folk tradition, or custom, is not all that different. In fact many of our traditions we observe have their origins in folk traditions, such as Bonfire Night on 5th November or carnival in Bridgwater, and many folk traditions would have arisen in much the way we create our own family or societal traditions today.

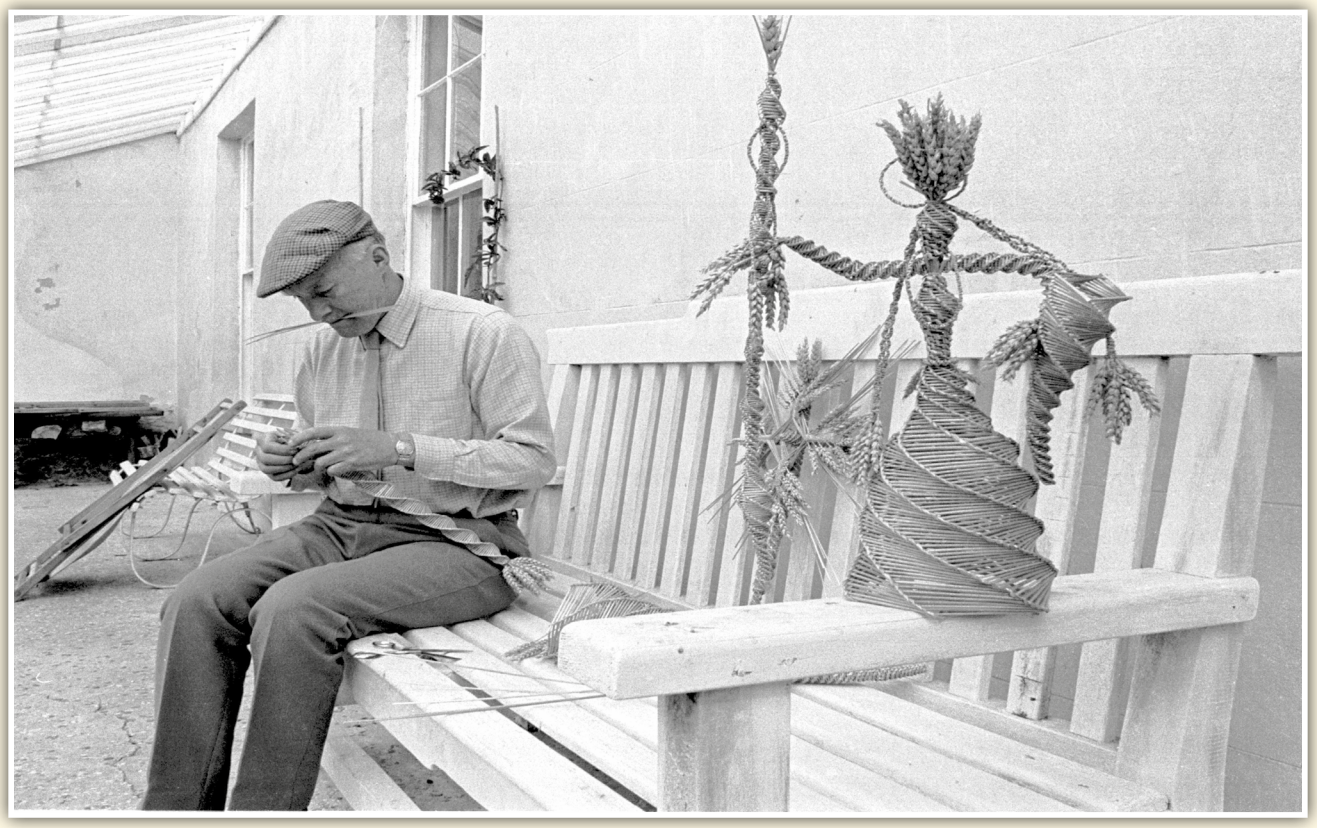
The most common definition of a folk tradition though, is that of an old traditional ritual, event or action, often linked to a celebration or a commemoration. These rituals, actions and events can take the form of a parade, or a race, a ceremony, or even decorating a special location. They are linked to the calendar and there are key points in the year, such as May Day or those connected with the harvest where there are more connected traditions than others. They are not only pagan and many link to the Christian calendar, with Lent, Easter and Christmas having many connected folk traditions, even if the religious connotations aren't always apparent!

Folk traditions also link with other forms of folk culture. For example dancing around the May Pole on May Day is both a folk tradition and a form of folk dance, accompanied by folk music! Wassailing, a tradition prevalent in Somerset where people "wassail" apple trees to ensure a good harvest, is both a ritual and a musical event, with many well documented folk songs being wassails. In this way folk traditions have helped ensure that certain other aspects of folk culture haven't died out.

Examples of Quantock and Wider Somerset Folk Traditions

Stogumber Shrove Tuesday Eve – In Stogumber on the eve of Shrove Tuesday people went from door to door (a bit like trick or treating!) saying give me a pancake. If people refused they might have pottery thrown at their door! It was tolerated as a tradition, but there was a risk of punishment – any young men in the house you called on would rush out and try and catch you and if you were caught your face was blackened with soot, however you were still given a pancake. It is important to know that there were no racial connotations to this, as blackening the face today as a form of dressing up is unacceptable and seen as a racist action. It was simply a mark to show you had been caught. There was also a song linked to this tradition. People sang give me a pancake to a tune similar to the traditional nursery rhyme Patticake Patticake.

Corn Dollies – Corn Dollies were traditionally made at Harvest Time (see also traditional crafts). Sometimes a corn dolly (referred to in parts of West Somerset as a corn baby) was allowed into Harvest services in church as a decoration. Other churches refused this, seeing the corn dolly as a pagan harvest symbol. Some farmers also wove a corn dolly into the corner of one of their stacks to bring good luck.



Wassailing – Wassailing traditionally takes place on or around January 17th and is particularly prevalent in Somerset as it is a cider producing county with many apple orchards. These days it is a practised tradition in Carhampton near Minehead, but there are examples of Wassailing songs from many Quantock villages including Crowcombe. In fact many villages had specific trees they liked to wassail, that might still be growing without people realising.

Wassailing is a ritual event. People gather around an apple tree and sing a traditional wassail song to it. Villages often had there own words they traditionally used. They then might "bless" the tree by pouring cider on it. This was an offering to the good tree spirits to ensure a good harvest. People would also make loud noises to scare away any evil spirits, that might harm the harvest. Traditionally this included shooting guns into the air! However today people rather make a loud noise by clashing pots and pans. Local folklorist Ruth Tongue said wassailing was also referred to as going to "apple howl" the trees.

In some locations a grateful farmer might provide wassailers with warm spiced cider from a communal wassail bowl or cup.

Triscombe Revel – Triscombe Revel was a village celebration held on the last Sunday in August. It was essentially a huge party to celebrate harvest time. People danced and sang what we would consider folk dances and songs and ate whortleberry tart and cream, made using whortleberries gathered on the Quantock hills.

The Sailors Horse – Whilst Minehead is not in the Quantocks the famous Minehead hobby horse is worth mentioning as it is very much a folk tradition that is still alive today and some children might even have seen it! There are many hobby horses in folk traditions – from Hob Nob that took park in parades in Salisbury, to the Padstow hobby horse that was said to scare away invaders. The Minehead hobby horse is connected to May Day traditions, though how exactly is a bit hazy, and parades through the town. Traditionally it was accompanied by masked men called Gullivers, who played practical jokes and tried to gather donations. People traditionally left their doors open to let them parade through and it was seen as unlucky not to. However the Gullivers got into trouble and once their antics even led to a fatal accident so the way it parades has changed. Old photos show how frightening they must have looked.

The horse itself is brightly decorated with scarps of fabric and traditionally had a cow's tail that people had to be careful not to get too near in case it swiped them and slashed their skin!

ACTIVITIES

Invent your own folk tradition

Folk traditions come about to celebrate and commemorate events and beliefs in ordinary people's lives, or to ask for something that was needed such as a good harvest. What is important to you? If you could create an event or ritual to celebrate or ask for something in your life what would it be? A spring ritual to celebrate wildlife and flowers? A special harvest dance? Does it have a theme like trying to halt climate change or celebrate diversity in the community? Spend some time discussing in class what you might want to create. Pupils could work in small groups and pairs to create their different traditions, make up dances, songs, words to ask for something, or a whole class tradition could be thought of and different pupils could work on different areas. When you have finished try performing it for the rest of the school.

Connected to the above

Many folk traditions entail invented characters with fantastic costumes like the Minehead Hobby Horse. Why not design and make some costumes to be worn during your class folk traditions?

Folk traditions also often commemorate something. Why not commemorate your folk tradition to by creating art and writing inspired by it? You could create a collaborative art work to hang on the wall showing scenes from the tradition, or write stories about children witnessing the tradition and something exciting or mysterious that happens to them on the day… Traditional Crafts and Industry.

When we think of work in the Quantock Hills we might think of farming or people travelling to local towns, but traditionally there were others ways that rural people made a living. There was industry such as the silk mills at Holford and there were smaller individual businesses with fascinating stories, involving skills that would fall into the category of traditional crafts today such as besom broom making.

A traditional craft or skill doesn't need a complicated explanation in that it simply means a craft or skill that is traditional to that place. They are also a craft or skill that entails doing something by hand. Traditional skills could be something that is part of a larger process such as dying silk, or be part of the rural landscape such as traditional hedge laying or dry stone walling. Traditional crafts are more likely to be something that an individual did in order to make something to sell. Much of Somerset is famous for weaving and basket making for example.

TRADITIONAL CRAFTS IN THE QUANTOCKS

Historically the most common traditional craft in the Quantocks was the making of besom brooms for sale by men known as Broomsquires. A besom broom is a traditional broom – one that looks like what you might think of as a witch's broomstick! However they were the brooms that most ordinary people would use. In fact the word besom comes from the Old English word "besma" meaning "bundle of twigs", which is what the end of a broom stick is!

They were usually made of birch and hazel, though sometimes in Somerset willow was used. The hazel would have been used for the handle and traditionally birch was used for the twigs that made the head of the broom. These twigs were skilfully gathered around the handle, with longer rougher twigs in the middle and shorter smoother twigs around them, before being tied in place with a supple wood such as willow (a modern besom broom might use wire). In areas of the country where good materials were scarcer sometimes things like heather were also used.

Quantock brooms were well known throughout the West Country, interestingly not so much by those that bought them, but by the travelling sellers, the pedlars that would buy the brooms from the Broomsquires and take away with them to sell all over Somerset as well as further afield, such as to Wiltshire, Dorset and Devon. These pedlars were sometimes of the Romany people and would set up camp, often in Buncombe woods and travel across the hills to Bincombe near Nether Stowey, where a well known family of Broomsquires lived: the Palmers. Romany are a traditional travelling gypsy people with an amazing ancient heritage in this country and the selling of brooms door to door was a useful way for them to make a living as they travelled between locations, in traditional wooden caravans and sometimes setting up tents made of fabric stretched over bendy wooden arches, known as bender tents. There are many well known Romany families in the Quantocks. As well as sometimes being broomsquires they also possessed an amazing wealth of folk knowledge including tunes and tales. Many of the songs that Cecil Sharp collected were from Romany people.

Other traditional crafts include the making of corn dollies. These small shapes of twisted corn were made more for decoration and use in folk traditions, particularly around harvest, than for any practical purpose.

In terms of local industry one of the most interesting and forgotten is the silk industry that was centred in the silk mills in Holford, now a ruin. These silk mills were set up by Huguenots. Huguenots were a persecuted protestant group from France who fled as refugees in the 16th and 17th centuries. When they arrived many of them set up their traditional trades in England. Whilst many settled in East London, especially around Spitalfields, some made their way to the Quantocks. They wove silk, using imported silk from France, but they also used silk from silkworms that were farmed in Over Stowey! The silk was dyed using traditional dyes made from plants. Many of these would have been plants found on the Quantocks such as whortleberries, nettles, bracken, birch, gorse, dock and many more. Some insects and lichens were also used! People didn't have the chemical dyes they do today so a local source of natural dyes, as well as local springs as a supply of water essential for the process, were required. Holford was ideally situated for this.

ACTIVITIES

Make a besom broom

There are two options here – either go out and forage branches and twigs and make a broom this way, or use paper and card, wool, tinsel – anything that you think would make an interesting broom! Remember the basic construction is to wrap a bundle of twigs around the end of a long handle, tying them in place with a flexible material. Once they're made why not try them out cleaning up anything that's fallen on the floor of the classroom whilst making them?

Mini project – who were the Broomsquires?

The Broomsquires are fascinating in terms of local history and the working class rural community that was often forgotten. Whilst not all Broomsquires were Romany, the fact that we know that some of the Quantock ones were also provides a wonderful chance to investigate the rich heritage of the Romany people. This would also be fascinating material for an independent study.

Working children – a story

Many children up until the early 20th century worked, especially in rural communities, whether helping out with the harvest or helping parents with their trade. Imagine what it would have been like to be your age at this time and a working child rather than a richer or more urban child at home or school. Write a story exploring these feelings – do you enjoy it, does something go wrong whilst doing your job?

Textile project – natural dyes

Whilst it might be a bit of a health and safety risk to gather your own plants for natural dyes, unless with an experienced forager/gardener, you can still use many things you might find at home to make natural dyes that were traditional. A great example is red onion skins, which when boiled up will dye any fabric added to them. Edible berries also make good dyes – you could try whortleberries if you want to be local – though blueberries might be similar. Nettles and other easily identifiable plants we know are safe could also be tried out. Do you notice a wide range of colours, or do you think the palette of natural dyes would have been more limited? Is the colour the one you expected from the plant?Interesting

LOCAL PEOPLE

When history remembers people in connection with places it tends to remember famous individuals. For example when people think of the Quantock Hills they often think of the poets Wordsworth and Coleridge, both of whom briefly lived and wrote in the area, but neither of whom grew up locally. When thinking of intangible heritage it is also important to think of the real life human stories that might have been forgotten and the ordinary people doing extraordinary things, that are worth remembering for the future. Details of some of these people can be found on the Stories of the Hills webpages, but below are a few examples that might be of particular interest. There are a couple of suggested activities, but the below would all work well as more in depth projects.

Sarah Biffen

Sarah Biffen was an extraordinary painter born in the 18th century in 1784 and dying in 1850. Her work achieved fame in its time, but Sarah's success was particularly extraordinary as not only was she a woman, unusual for a successful artist then, but she also was born without arms and her legs weren't fully formed, so she learned to paint with a brush in her mouth! She was only 37 inches (95cm) tall.

Sarah was born in East Quantoxhead, to a family of farmers, but her talent led to her travelling around the country after she was apprenticed at 13 to a man named Emmanuel Dukes and taken around the country as part of travelling freak shows, where she painted as people watched. Sarah painted landscapes and miniature portraits on ivory. She was highly skilled yet exploited by Dukes who paid her very little. The idea of the freak show seems awful and wrong to us today – it seems quite extraordinary that people would pay to stare at people with disabilities. But freak shows were common back then – a bit like taking a trip to the theatre or circus.


The Greatest Wonder in the World.
During the Fair.
PATRONISED BY THE
Royal Family.
THE CELEBRATED
Miss BEFFIN
Miniature Painter.
WHO WAS BORN
Wtihout Hands & Arms.
IS NOW EXHIBITING
DURING THE FAIR.
EACH VISITOR
Will be Entitled to a Specimen of her Writing.
Correct Miniature Likenesses taken on Ivory,
From 3 to 10 Guineas Each.
Admission, Ladies & Gentlemen 1s. Children & Servants 6d.
T. ROMNEY, PRINTER, Bridge-road, Lambeth.

Eventually Sarah's fame went beyond the freak show circuit and her skill led to her becoming quite famous. She received a society of arts medal in 1821. She was even commissioned to paint the Royal Family, and appears as a character in the novels of Charles Dickens, yet still she is largely forgotten today. However recently her work and her astounding talent as a disabled artist has led to a new appreciation of her paintings and one recently sold for over £100,000. It is quite an extraordinary story for a farmer's daughter from East Quantoxhead, born with the odds of society at the time stacked against her.

Andrew Crosse – The Wizard of Broomfield

Whilst he is often referred to as the Wizard of Broomfield, Andrew Crosse's experiments had nothing to do with magic but rather science. He was one of the most innovative scientists of his time, investigating amongst other things electricity, at a time when virtually nothing was known about this mysterious force we take so for granted today.

Born in 1784, the same year as Sarah Biffen was, his home life couldn't have been more different. Indeed he was born and died (in 1855) at Fyne Court in Broomfield, a grand country estate. He took over the family estate at the age of 21 and built a laboratory for his electricity experiments. He was particularly interested in electrocrystallisation and one of his experiments led to extreme controversy when it looked like he had created insects from nothing during his experiment! However he had not claimed the power of creation, but rather presumed there were insect eggs on the materials he was using. But his unusual experiments earned him the nickname of wizard.

Mary Anne Gunningham

Mary Anne is a wonderful example of someone who was so key to their community, yet history forgets. She was a telegram delivery woman. In the days before the internet telegrams were a way of getting important information to people quickly, especially if they did not have a telephone, as many ordinary people did not. She spent most of her life walking the Quantock Hills with her job. She was still working in her 80s!

Katherine Sorby

Katherine lived in Enmore then Over Stowey and helped Cecil Sharp with his song collecting. She also taught folk singing and morris dancing!

ACTIVITIES

The above all work well as more in depth or independent local history studies. Sarah Biffen in particular also raises interesting issues to debate around disability and exploitation/voyeurism, with strong contemporary comparisons. However there are a couple of ideas for activities that might help bring the stories of these Quantock people to life.

Why not run an art class where children have to paint with the brush in their mouth like Sarah Biffen (obviously with non-toxic paint!).

Or why not set up a scenario where something dramatic has happened and a message has to be taken by telegram across the school like Mary Anne Gunningham? It could even be used as a new messages system between classes, giving the ordinary task of taking a message new historical meaning.

SAINTS AND HOLY PLACES

Introduction

There is one category of story that exists in the Quantocks, that is slightly different from a folktale, though some of the events seem fantastical. They are also very much located in specific places, like folktales are, places that we can visit today and have significance in the Christian heritage of the area. These are the amazing stories of local saints and the holy places that scatter the Quantock Hills. As with folktales we do not know the origins of these stories, and sometimes such stories themselves seek to make sense of the world and the origins of things people did not yet understand.

They are an intrinsic part of our local heritage – influencing the names of places and churches. They are also an intrinsic part of folk heritage as so many folk traditions intertwined with Christian traditions as the latter took over from the former as the main belief of ordinary people. The powers high up in the church might have frowned upon what they may have seen as pagan beliefs, but it was logical to an ordinary country person that you might have a sacred tree in a church yard or a holy well, that was also a place of a nature spirit or where pixies were once said to live. The more extraordinary saint stories might have become frowned upon during the protestant reformation, when saints and relics and stories were seen as very much part of the Catholic church, but these stories were part of the places, as un-detachable from them as the land itself.

Below are some examples of particularly interesting local saint stories and holy places. Some also have interesting folktales situated nearby and more details of these can be found on the *Stories of the Hill* webpages.

St Keyna – Kilve Beach

St Keyna lived in the 5th century and is one of the saints that was said to have come across the Severn Sea from Wales and landed in North Somerset. She is said to have been the daughter of a Welsh prince and wanted to find somewhere new and quiet to live as she did not want to get married. However on landing she found that the beach was full of snakes. Using her staff she turned them to stone, and that is the origin of all the ammonite fossils on the beach! People in the past didn't have a concept of prehistoric times or dinosaurs and what fossils were, so to see them as petrified snakes was a way of making sense of things.

It was said that St Keyna then travelled on up towards Bath and Bristol, and rather than in the Quantocks, it is here that a place takes her name, the town of Keynsham. There she asked a local prince if she could live here peacefully but he tricked her and led her to a place full of snakes, which she then turned to stone. Some of the snakes escaped, including to the Quantocks, so it could be that this is where the Kilve snakes came from and that they turned to stone on their arrival, rather than when St Keyna first landed. It seems logical that there were snakes at Kilve in the legend, due to all the fossils. Perhaps both were the case and there were a lot of snakes around!

St Decuman – Williton

Like St Keyna, St Decuman was said to have travelled across from Wales, this time some reports say floating on a cloak or a hurdle, accompanied by a cow! This cow was to supply him with milk. On landing at Watchet he built a hermitage, but the local pagans were not happy with his arrival and cut his head off! Other versions of the story say that it was a Viking that got angry and did this. Then the story gets even more miraculous… It was said that rather than dieing, St Decuman simply picked his head up and put it back on! There are some variations on the story as is the way with old tales. Some say where his head fell a spring sprung up and that is the site of what is known as St Decuman's well – a holy well. Others say that it was already there and he simply washed his head in it and his blood is what made the well holy, before lying down and dying peacefully. Holy wells are often seen as places of power as well as pilgrimage and St Decuman's well is said to have healing properties. He has a traditional festival day on 27th August.

St Agnes's Well – Cothelstone

St Agnes's Well is one of the loveliest and easiest to visit of the Quantock wells and is especially interesting as it is both a holy well, connected with St Agnes, and known as a pixie well in local folklore. It lies in a field just up the lane from Cothelstone Manor and if you visit today you can still see evidence of people leaving offerings to St Agnes.

St Agnes is a saint of girls and love, so women who wanted to meet their future husbands would go to the well and touch the healing water, perhaps leaving an offering as well. Ruth Tongue also reports that it was a wishing well in folklore. If it is also a pixie haunt this would fit with the idea of asking for wishes to come true. Pixies can be tricky and should never be crossed, but if you offer something or help them in some way, they have been known to leave gifts or grant wishes in return. Whilst there is no evidence of this happening at St Agnes's Well, there is a widespread tradition in parts of the country for decorating wells.

ACTIVITIES

Snakes and fossils

If possible a fossil hunting trip to Kilve Beach would be fantastic, especially if looking for stones that could have once been snakes! But there are many ways the story of St Keyna could be used in class, from making stone snakes from clay, to rewriting the story of her arrival. It is also an interesting story to use in any discussion of how beliefs change over time as science and knowledge develop.

Create a shrine or decorate a place/holy well

Holy Wells and shrines act as places of pilgrimage. If you were to create a shrine what would it be for? Would it be Christian or another well known religion, or would it be to commemorate something or someone important? What would it look like? Is it a place that already exists or would you make something new? If the former why not decorate it, if the latter why not make a shrine structure. The key is that it is of importance to you.

Write about a place of personal meaning

Places of meaning are not just churches and wells or famous places, they could be a corner of a garden, a favourite day out location, a room in our house. Write a description of a place that means something to you and why. Why do you think it is important that we value the ordinary places of our lives?