

## Local myths and legends

### Ninety- Nine Yews

The beautiful churchyard of St Mary's in Painswick contains not only remarkable tombs, reflecting the woollen trade but also a famous group of neatly trimmed yew trees. Not only do the yews add a picturesque beauty to the scene but they are also participants in an interesting legend. The trees planted in 1792, despite many efforts to grow an extra tree, are never allowed to achieve one hundred in number. It is said that the devil will not permit the number to increase.

Perhaps this is fortuitous however, for according to the local rhyme:

'Painswick maidens shall be true  
Till there grows the hundredth yew'

### The Clypping Ceremony

This is not a ceremony involving the trimming of the yew trees in the churchyard as its name might suggest and its current peaceful nature bears little similarity to the original "Feast Sunday". Once a year on the first Sunday on or following the 19<sup>th</sup> September, the children of the village encircle the church, join hands and sing a traditional hymn. It is a symbol of 'clypping' or embracing the church and held to celebrate the nativity of the Virgin Mary. Following the ceremony the children are given a Painswick Bun and a coin. This is a substitute for 'Puppy dog pie', a traditional pie baked on Painswick Feast Sunday, in which the pastry is supported by a china dog. The origins of Feast Day in Painswick do appear to have had a pagan influence and there is mystery surrounding the initial significance. Robert Raikes, the founder of Sunday Schools on visiting Painswick on Feast Sunday in 1787 was dismayed at the licentious nature of the celebration and over the years the celebration has assumed its current respectful form.

### Painswick Bow-Wows

Traditional rivalry has always existed between the local villages and towns and the issue of the 'puppy dog pie' fuelled further antagonism between Painswick and Stroud. The origins are varied but most are based upon a story of a group of people from Stroud on a visit to Painswick. The host for this particular occasion having by misfortune no promised venison for the visitors slaughtered his dog for the pie filling. When discovered, this increased hostility between the two localities. The nickname of Painswick 'Bow-Wows' was adopted in a derogatory way to refer to its inhabitants. Painswick responded to Stroud residents in a similar way, labelling them 'Gothamites' or simpletons.

In a similar vein nearby Dursley male inhabitants became 'Dursley Lanterns' following the story that the men used to hang out the tails of their shirts for the ladies to follow them in the dark in order to prevent them getting lost on their way back from the local Inn.

### Paradise

One mile to the north of Painswick lays the little hamlet of Paradise and there are a number of stories relating to the origin of this particular title, the following being the most prevalent:

After his defeat at the battle of Worcester in 1651, Charles II retreated to Gloucestershire and spent a very uncomfortable and cold night camped on the heights of Painswick Beacon. The next morning he was made so welcome by the small community below that he said "this must be Paradise". The hamlet possessed one Inn called appropriately the Adam and Eve but this is now a private house. Interestingly Cromwell at an earlier date, on losing some of his men to drunkenness at an "ale house" just below Paradise referred to what is now Oliver's Cottage as 'The Serpent'.

### **Painswick and Pan**

During the eighteenth century there was a revival of interest amongst aristocratic intellectuals in customs and rituals which were seen as having been passed down from ancient ceremonies of Greece and Rome. One such ritual was the worship of Pan, the Greek mythological god of herds and pastures who became the creative spirit of nature and protected the lush vitality of Arcadia. The goat-foot god became central to Painswick's Feast and during the eighteenth century part of the celebration was 'Pan's Procession' from the churchyard to a point on the Beacon.

Benjamin Hyett the owner of Painswick House was central to this neo-pagan revival and commissioned the erection of temples and towers in the Rococo garden and added the six feet high lead statue of Pan which can be seen on entry to the garden. He also built Pan's Lodge on the opposite side of the valley in Frith Wood. The site of Pan's lodge is now marked by a seat. During this revival a further statue of Pan was erected on the south wall of the church. In the 1950's this statue was buried in an unmarked grave by a disapproving vicar, his helpers were sworn to secrecy and to this day the exact location is unknown.

### **Iddel's Tump**

Hidden on the hill behind the Royal William is the site where Eidel the high church official from Gloucester is reputed to be buried. In 507 the Saxons had moved up into the Cotswolds and there was naturally rivalry between the newcomers and the resident British. A high ranking Gloucester official and his entourage were invited to a feast at Cranham provided they came unarmed. At the banquet the Saxons fell upon their guests and slaughtered them all apart from Eidel who tore up a wooden stake, fought determinedly and escaped. Later Eidel became ill and strangely consulted a Saxon for medicinal aid. Instead of receiving help, this most trusting of notaries was administered poison and died. His ghost is said to haunt the lane near Edell's mill. Cranham still celebrates feast day each year, fortunately now quite safely centered around festivities and competitive events.

### **The sheep with two heads**

Readers of Laurie Lee's *Cider with Rosie* will be familiar with the story of the sheep with two heads. This remarkable old animal lived in Catswood on the far side of Slad Valley and could only be seen when lit up by lightning. It could speak and sing in harmony and several people had heard it but not seen it. Apparently if you were brave enough to converse with it in a thunderstorm it would tell you how and when you were going to die. Most people avoided this area when a storm threatened.

### **The Phantom Coach**

The crossroads named Bulls Cross just up the road from Slad was also a place to avoid when Laurie Lee was a boy. The marks of the ancient crossing of stage roads are still imprinted on this small area of open grassland overlooking both the Slad and Painswick valleys. This was many years ago the site of a fatal stagecoach accident and in '*Cider with Rosie*' we are told of the ghostly apparition which periodically appeared. The surrounding villages were aware of the ghostly silver-grey coach and horses and the disaster which had taken place. This tragedy was re-enacted at midnight but having witnessed the scene it was not a story to relate to others. Those who related their vision were likely to turn white in the night, lose their teeth and later die of trampling.

### **The Gibbet**

Bull's Cross was also the site of the local gibbet and in '*Cider with Rosie*' Laurie Lee relates the tragic story of the hangman whose job it was to fulfil this task. One night the hangman was called out to dispatch a young felon and being skilful in his work he had no problem operating in the dark. It was only when the clouds parted and the moon revealed the face of the poor unfortunate on the gallows that he realised he had hung his own son. Mortified he returned to his dwelling in the woods below and took his own life in the same manner.