

THE MAKING OF A LEGEND: BLACK ANNIS AND HER BOWER

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This article explores the way in which the meaning and significance attributed to Black Annis and her Bower have changed over time. Folk lore needs to be regarded less as an 'object' which can be fixed and pinned down but more as a process in which there is a continuing 'core' aspect around which the details and, above all, the meaning and significance of the lore readily adapt.

*'Tis said the soul of mortal man recoil'd
To view Black Annis' eye, so fierce and wild;
Vast talons, foul with human flesh, there grew
In place of hands, and features livid blue
Glar'd in her visage; whilst her obscene waist,
Warm skins of human victims close embrac'd.*

Black Annis is probably the best known of Leicester's folklore characters. These lines from a poem by John Heyrick published in 1797 are the earliest detailed reference and epitomise the way in which she has been portrayed.

The Black Annis lore is an example of what folklorists define as legend, i.e. 'a short traditional oral narrative about a person, place, or object that really exists, existed, or is believed to have existed'. (Simpson and Roud 2000: 212.)

Legends and other folk lore do not simply amuse or entertain. Such lore also has a more practical function by helping to define what folklorists call a 'folk group'. These groups can be as small as two people or as large as a nation. The Black Annis legend, for example, helps to define a folk group comprising 'people from Leicester'. Such lore shared by a group is rarely retold in full, rather it is alluded to or re-told only in fragmentary form or as part of 'in' jokes and even insults. This means such lore defines a group mostly by who it excludes (i.e. anyone who does not understand what the fragmentary reference or joke refers to). So knowing the lore about Black Annis defines 'people from Leicester' in the same way as greeting people as 'Ey up m'duck', or pronouncing 'Catherine Street' with the emphasis on the '-ine', or knowing that someone that who has 'been in The Towers' has suffered from mental illness.

Until about ten years ago folklore was mostly transmitted by face-to-face conversations although some aspects of the lore – including that associated with Black Annis – occasionally appear in print and these versions may in turn influence subsequent oral re-tellings. (Since the invention of the Internet comparable processes of transmission take place by email and personal Web sites. Oral and Internet transmission together can be conveniently referred to as 'folkloric transmission'.)

The key thing about folk lore and legend is that there is no one 'master' version, still less an 'original' version from which the others have derived. Such concepts belong only to literary genres and are alien to orally-transmitted cultures. At any one time different renditions of a legend will be circulating, each of which has some common core aspects but which may differ from – or even contradict – other versions in detail. Over a period of time the lore will continue to adapt and many versions will simply die out, while other versions evolve, perhaps as a result of being influenced by similar lore or even comparable ideas in novels, films or other mass media. (For a broader overview of folklore studies, see Trubshaw 2002 Ch.3.)

Attempting a 'static' understanding of legends would be like trying to study a whirlpool by taking the water home in a bucket or understanding the tactics of a football match from a handful of still photos. However attempts to understand the history of a legend present exactly this problem. For early examples we can only look at written 'snapshots' of the lore which have been captured in documentary records.

SNAPSHOTS OF BLACK ANNIS

How has the lore associated with Black Annis been recorded? The earliest written reference to her dates to 1622, in William Burton's *The Description of Leicestershire*. Pedantically, he refers to Black Agnes rather than Annis and the reason for this will become clear later. Burton considers Black Agnes to have been an anchorite, so it must be assumed that in 1622 she had yet to acquire the demonic persona described by Heyrick.

No other references to Black Annis are known until 1764. Charles Billson quotes a letter from Sir John Mellor to the *Leicester Chronicle*, published 7th November 1874 in which he wrote:

'I have looked through my deeds... and find that the earliest deeds in my possession, dated 13th and 14th May, 1764, contain the following description:– All that close or parcel of land commonly called or known by the name of Black Anny's Bower Close...' (cited in Billson 1895: 8–9)

Clearly these deeds provide no indication of whether 'Black Anny' was a real or mythical person, or whether she had now acquired a reputation for anti-social behaviour.

Every Easter Monday since at least the early seventeenth century a fair was held on the Dane Hills, in the vicinity of Black Annis's Bower. Indeed part of the festivities was a mock hare hunt (see below) which started at Black Annis's Bower, then continued as a procession to the Mayor's door. Roy Palmer notes that the mock hare hunt and procession was 'already ancient when it was first mentioned in the town records in 1668.' He also states that, despite opposition from the owner of 'Dane Hill Closes' in the 1820s, 'The Dane-hill fair was crowded with visitors' according to the *Leicester Chronicle* of 1842 (Palmer 1985: 219). This clearly indicates that Black Annis's Bower would be well-known from the seventeenth century onwards until at least the 1840s.



Fig. 1. A depiction of Kali showing her dancing on a corpse with funeral pyres in the background. Gouache on paper. National Museum, Delhi.

Black Annis is specifically mentioned in a very different context in 1837, at a time when presumably the Dane Hills fair was well attended. Billson reports that on 4th December 1837 a play called *Black Anna's Bower, or the Maniac of the Dane Hills* was performed at the Leicester Theatre; he tells us that:

'The plot turned upon the celebrated murder of a landlady of the "Blue Boar", related in the Histories of Leicester, and Black Anna played a part similar to that of the Witches in Macbeth.' (Billson 1895: 9fn)

Palmer discovered that this melodrama was 'written for his benefit night by one of the actors, a Mr Higgle' and cites a review in the *Leicester Journal* (Palmer 1985: 151). Palmer also found that the following Christmas another play based on local themes included a character called Black Annis. This was called *The Broken Heart, or The Rose of Newarke* and may have been based on a chapter in *Legends of Leicester in the Olden Times*, written by Thomas Featherstone and published earlier in 1838. Palmer states that this play was written by the theatre manager and summarises the complex interplay of murder, madness, seduction and all-round destruction – all standard melodramatic fare of the time, but somewhat unusually set during the English Civil War. In the course of these histrionics the

demented heroine becomes identified with Black Anna and tries to murder her seducer (Palmer 1985: 151–2).

If this seems rather overly imaginative it is decidedly lack-lustre compared to John Dudley's speculations about Black Annis in his conjectural book *Naology: Or a Treatise on the Origin, Progress, and Symbolical Import of the Sacred Structures of the Most Eminent Nations and Ages of the World* published in 1846 (Dudley 1846: 249–50, cited in Billson 1895: 7–8). Interestingly, Dudley states that about seventy years previously (c.1776) Black Annis's cave was open but had subsequently filled up with rain-washed soil. He does not indicate the source for this observation.

Dudley goes on to suggest that Annis was the 'Celtic' goddess 'Anu' or 'Nannu' who was the same as the British Ked or Ket, the Grecian Ceres, the Black 'Cali' of India and the Black Ceres or Demeter of Greece. These supposed links are clearly nothing more than speculative comparison – although towards the end of this article it will be suggested that the links between Black Annis and Kali may be far more direct than Dudley recognised.

There seem to be no further references to Black Annis for about 30 years until, in 1874, William Kelly wrote about Black Annis in a characteristically sensational style:

'Black Anna was said to be in the habit of crouching among the branches of the old pollard oak (the last remnant of the forest), which grew in the cleft of the rock over the mouth of her cave or 'bower' ever ready to spring like a wild beast on any stray children passing below. The cave she was traditionally said to have dug out of the solid rock with her finger-nails. On my last visit to the Bower Close, now several years ago, the trunk of the old tree was then standing, but I know not if it still remains.'

Most interestingly, he continues with the only known description of the Bower,

'At that time, and long previously, the mouth of the cave was closed, but in my school days it was open, and, with two or three companions, I recollect on one occasion "snatching a fearful joy" by crawling on our hands and knees into the interior, which, as far my recollection serves me at this distance of time, was some seven or eight feet long by about four or five feet wide, and having a ledge of rock, for a seat, running along each side.'

(Kelly 1874, cited by Billson 1895: 8)

Note that Kelly was born in 1815 so his childhood recollections of the bower being accessible do not necessarily conflict with Dudley's statement that the cave had long since been blocked by 1842.

The memory of Black Annis must have thrived in the mid-nineteenth century as the *Leicester Chronicle* of 5th September 1874 is quoted by Billson (1895: 8) as saying:

'Little children, who went to run on the Dane Hills were assured that she (Black Anna) lay in wait there, to snatch them away to her "bower"; and that many like themselves she had "scratched to death with her claws, sucked their blood, and hung up their skins to dry."'

Black Annis becomes an indelible aspect of local lore in 1895 with the publication of Billson's *County Folklore* volume for Leicestershire, followed by

similar details being included in Billson's chapter on the supposed 'Vestiges of paganism in Leicestershire' which appeared in 1911 as part of Alice Dryden's *Memorials of Old Leicestershire*.

In 1907 J. C. Wall's survey of the ancient earthworks of Leicestershire for the Victoria County History describes the Dane Hills as:

... a marvellous maze of entrenchments generally facing south and south-west... The deep sunken roads and the high aggers, many of them forty-eight feet and sixty feet on the scarp, inclosing hollows probably used as primitive dwelling-places, present a formidable stronghold. Portions of these works have been destroyed, and the remainder are now in the market for building sites. The Ordnance Survey fails in giving a correct plan.

(Wall 1907)

Sadly this seems to be only description we have of the Dane Hills before the builders moved in.

Roy Palmer researched Billson's references and added a little more information in his 1985 book *Folklore of Leicestershire and Rutland*. By then Black Annis had appeared in numerous popular publications, where Dudley's speculations and those of several mid-nineteenth century authors (to be discussed shortly) were taken at face value and she was regarded as a 'folk memory' of a pre-Christian deity. The spurious suggestion that folklore and customs retain 'fossils' of pagan religion had been critiqued in the 1920s, then later by Richard Dorson (Dorson 1968, esp. 11–17), and most recently by Ronald Hutton (Hutton 1991, 1994, 1996); I have previously summarised this literature (Trubshaw 2002: 37–42). Nevertheless these fallacies are sustained by many non-academic books, some of which reach a wide readership, such as Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough* and Robert Graves' *The White Goddess*. Indeed Graves specifically includes Black Annis in a wide-ranging but wildly unscholarly discussion of goddesses he considers to be linked to 'Ana', (Graves 1948 [1961:370]).

The terrifying hag-like aspects of Black Annis may well be derived or borrowed from medieval Scottish and Irish legends. In these the idealised feminine deities (such as Oilwen, Niamh or Etain) are contrasted with hideous and frightening female figures, such as A Mhuilessach Bhuidhe, the yellow hag of Highland tradition. According to J F Campbell:

Her face was blue-black, of the lustre of coal and her bone-twisted tooth was like twisted bone. In her head was one deep pool-like eye swifter than a star in a winter sky. Upon her head gnashed brushwood like the old wood of the aspen root. Her heart was merry for joy... and a hundred warriors she sportively slew.

(Campbell, 1861 (1984: 131))

In the Isle of Man such a hag-like goddess is known as Berrey Dhone, while in Ireland her intrinsic traits are shared with the Cailleach Bheare, who inhabits Sliabh Na Collighe, the hag's mountain near Oldcastle in County Meath. (McMahon 2006: 82)

Whatever Black Annis may or may not have been in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, by the end of the twentieth century for most people she was regarded as a pagan goddess.

BLACK ANNIS, DEAD CATS, AND ANISEED

In 'Vestiges of paganism in Leicestershire' (Billson 1911) Billson repeats the information given previously in *County Folklore* (Billson 1895) then adds the following description:

It is perhaps not surprising that some traces of the reverential awe once associated with the rites of this dark Celtic goddess should have lingered, even until recent years, upon the spot where she was once worshipped, for these rites were formerly commemorated with municipal pomp and ceremony. 'It had long been customary on Easter Monday,' writes Throsby, the historian of Leicester, 'for the Mayor and his brethren, in their scarlet gowns, attended by their proper officers, to go to a certain close, called Black Annis' Bower Close, parcel of, or bordering upon, Leicester Forest, to see the diversion of hunting, or rather the trailing of a cat before a pack of hounds... The morning was spent in various amusements and athletic exercises, till a dead cat, about noon, was prepared by aniseed water for commencing the mock-hunting of the hare.' The cat was trailed, it appears, at the tail of a horse, in zigzag directions, through some of the principle streets, followed by the dogs and huntsmen, until it reached the door of the Mayor's house, where a mayoral banquet was then held. This old municipal custom began to fall into disuse about the year 1767, but traces of it lingered more than a century later in an annual holiday or fair which was held on the Dane Hills on Easter Monday. It appears from the town records that the dead cat was originally a living hare, and a similar municipal custom of hunting the hare seems from the Chamberlain's records to have taken place at Whetstone, a few miles from Leicester. It was also one of the ancient customs in the city of London.

Billson's sources presumably include Robert Read jnr who provides more detail of the Easter Monday hare hunt in *Leicester 1881: Jottings of personal experience and research Vol.3 Amusements old and new*. He quotes M. Paul Dare's poem about the fair and hare hunt, written 'on the spot' in 1852 and continues:

Many too would visit 'the old tree which occupies the site of what is said to have been the retreat of Black Anna – that mysterious female, whose solitary mode of life, weird influence, and cruel practices are said to have made her in bygone times the terror of the people of Leicester.'

(Read c.1882: 196–7)

Read gives no source for his quotation although this may also be from Dare.

Easter Monday is also the occasion for another hare-related event in Leicestershire, the Hare Pie Scramble and Bottle Kicking at Hallaton; this custom is known to have been thriving in the mid-eighteenth century.

THE LOCATION OF BLACK ANNIS' BOWER

As already noted, Sir John Mellor's letter to the *Leicester Chronicle* published 7th November 1874 refers to deeds dated 1764 relating to Black Anny's Bower Close. This area of land was part of the Dane Hills which remained an area of 'rough, hillocky ground' (Palmer 1985: 219) until after the Second World War, when houses were built. For some years the site of the bower could still be reached along a footpath known as 'The Black Pad' (Palmer 1985: 219).

The current owner of a house near Western Park reports that the deeds describe the eastern end of the property to be part of 'Black Annis Bower Close'. Indeed, the far end of the garden drops down almost vertically about 2.5 metres. Below this steep slope the ground has been levelled off into a small lawn and, according to the owner, the ground surface was previously several feet lower. In the adjoining garden this steep slope curves around but, because of the whole street being built on a fairly steep hill, adjoining gardens do not share this dramatic feature. The total length of the steep slope as it curves around is probably about 20 to 30 metres. Although there is no surviving 'bower' or shallow cave (Kelly notes that the cave had long been blocked off by 1874), this natural geological feature seems entirely plausible as the location of a cave with the sort of dimensions Kelly recalls.

For a number of years the all-female Black Annis Morris dance team have danced on the small lawn beside the supposed bower during the evening of the Midsummer Solstice; I was privileged to be invited to witness this on 21st June 2005.

BLACK ANNIS AND THE BATTLE OF BOSWORTH

Since the early nineteenth century Black Annis has been portrayed as a somewhat 'witchy' character, it is therefore no surprise that she has been conflated with legends about enigmatic prophecies made when Richard III set off from Leicester to the Battle of Bosworth in August 1485. This has entered the annals as verse:

*The boar that has silver hue
The king's return shall change to blue
The stone that tomorrow his foot shall spurn
Shall strike his head on his return.*

According to the associated legend the following day, when Richard left his lodgings at the Silver Boar Inn, his heel struck a stone pillar as he went over Bow Bridge. After losing the battle, the king's body was thrown across the back of a horse and brought back to Leicester. As he came back over the bridge, his head was hanging down as low as the stirrups and is said to have hit the same stone.

King Henry VII's soldiers intended to take Richard's body back to the same inn where he had slept just a few nights before but they were told there was no Silver Boar Inn. Instead they were taken to where a freshly-painted sign showed a blue boar; the landlord did not want Henry to think he still supported the old king.

Palmer provides a comprehensive account of the lore associated with Richard's death but gives no indication of early sources. Of the person making the predictions, he notes that she was 'A woman, some later said Black Annis herself...' (Palmer 1985: 13) There is no evidence that Black Annis was known before the early seventeenth century, and even if Black Annis is a distorted memory of Agnes Scott (see below) she had been dead 30 years by the time Richard lost his life. It is entirely consistent with folk narratives that characters and events become conflated although rarely does the origin of such conflation become clear. However the suggestion that Black Annis made the prophecy at Bow Bridge does

have a known origin – it was invented by a Leicester teacher and writer (Margaret Penfold, pers. comm. December 2005) and her ‘elaboration’ has lived on among her many pupils.

FROM WITCH TO PAGAN GODDESS

As already noted, folk narratives tend to become ‘paganised’. Dudley’s extravagant speculations in *Naology* have thankfully been all-but lost in the mists of time. The same cannot be said for Robert Graves’ even more excessive suppositions in *The White Goddess*. In the space of half a page Graves manages to see links between Black Annis and a whole horde of pagan deities from different cultures, Anu, Agnes, Angness, Yngona, Anna of the Angles, Nanna, Angurboda, the Hag of the Iron Wood, mother of Hel, the Hag, the Blue Hag of Milton’s *Paradise Lost* and Beare, before launching into a further stream of consciousness about Arianrhod and concluding that ‘if one needs a single, simple, inclusive name for the Great Goddess, Anna is the best choice.’ (Graves 1948 [1961: 370–2]) Elsewhere he creates links between his vision of Anna and black Madonnas, with ‘Black Annis’ implicitly a non-Christian manifestation.

Even though Graves’s word-play associations are the antithesis of academic analysis they have seduced a great many non-academics and popular writers. For example, *The White Goddess* was a key inspiration for Gerald Gardiner who, at the time Graves’ book first appeared, was in process of re-inventing English witchcraft under the rubric of ‘wicca’.¹

T. C. Lethbridge was inspired by the mid-twentieth century revival of witchcraft and incorporated Black Annis and the suggestion she was a manifestation of the Irish goddess Anu in two of his widely-read books (Lethbridge 1957; 1962). Ronald Hutton devotes a section of his book analysing the ‘invention’ of wicca, *The Triumph of the Moon*, to discussing Lethbridge’s appropriation of Black Annis (Hutton 1999: 274–5).

With influential, albeit ill-informed, writers such as Gardiner and Lethbridge regarding Black Annis as a pagan goddess, little wonder that subsequent modern pagan writers have extended this confusion to conflate Black Annis with pre-Christian deities such as Brigit, Brigid, Bride or Brigantia.

A fairly typical example of modern pagan developments of the Black Annis legend comes from Anna Franklin, who has been leading wiccan groups in Leicestershire for over 25 years and written several books about modern paganism. She writes,

¹ Interestingly, Dudley’s suggestion that Black Annis was a manifestation of Kali was ignored in the quest for British pagan origin myths. This is all the more surprising as Kali was back in the mainstream of British culture after 1952 following the publication of John Masters’ novel *The Deceivers*, in which a band of ‘Thugees’ ritually murdered and robbed travellers in the guise of worshipping Kali. (In 1988 the novel was made into a film, albeit one which reveals more about Hollywood stereotypes of India than about the country, its culture, or even Masters’ novel.)

Black Annis may be connected with the several other crone-like Annies and Annises found throughout Britain and Ireland, such as the Scottish Gentle Annie (or Gentle Annis). Many of these hags are also described as 'blue faced' such as Scotland's Cailleach Bheur. These hags were once winter goddesses, their faces blue with cold, who brought in the time of cold, dissolution and death. It is possible that her bower was once the cave womb where she was worshipped. Some think she may be a local version of Anu, Brighid or Brigantia, or the dark mother goddess who took the souls of dead human children into her care, like Perchte. The Dane Hills (possibly from Danu, or the Celtic *dun* i.e. 'fort' or the Saxon *dain* i.e. 'dead'²) may have been the centre of her cult. Black Annis is likely to be the crone goddess who brings the winter; the dark lady holds the souls of the dead in her embrace. However, the wheel turns, and in the spring she would have transformed into the bright maiden, and her underworld tomb becomes the womb of rebirth.

(Franklin 2002)

Although such associations have no respectable origins, they are good examples of the way in which folklore evolves and adapts.

DANE: DANISH, *DUN*, DANU, DANNETT OR DUNE?

Just as Annis's name has been subject to extensive speculation, so too has the location of her bower on the Dane Hills. Billson is the first to dismiss the links with 'Danish' (1895: 7) and suggests the word is a corruption of 'dunes'. Graves includes the parenthetical query 'Dane (Danaan?) Hills', so even by his own standards associations with this goddess were dubious (1948 [1961: 370]). As noted above, Anna Franklin adds the suggestions that there may be links to the Irish mother goddess Danu (also known as Anu) or to the Celtic word *dun*.

The main problem with attempting to understand the origin of the name Dane Hills is that the earliest reference is quite recent, in 1689 (Cox 1998: 221). As the Dane Hills are above Dannett's Hall, one possibility is that the name is a corruption of 'Dannett'. Alternatively, as Barrie Cox suggests, another possibility is that the name is 'an antiquarian creation' of the seventeenth century.

Characteristically, Black Annis's Bower is located in an enigma, at least from the perspective of place-name studies.

THE SWITHLAND CONNECTION

As already noted, the first reference to Black Annis's Bower is in William Burton's *The Description of Leicestershire* of 1622. He describes a memorial brass in Swithland church commemorating Agnes Scott, who died in 1455, and transcribes the wording as,

*Hoc in conclave jacet Agnes Scot camerata
Antrix devota Dominae Ferrars Vocitata,
Quiquis cris, transieris quero, funde precata;
Sum quis cris, fueramque quod es; pro me, pecor, ora.*

² There is no Old English word similar to *dain* (Bill Griffiths, pers. comm.).

Burton continues,

‘This Agnes Scott, as I guess, was an anchoress; and the word *antrix* in this epitaph coined from *autrum*, a cave, wherein she lived; and certainly (as I have been credibly informed) there is a cave near Leicester, upon the west side of the town, at this day called Black Agnes’s [sic] Bower.’

In the church there is the following translation:

Enclosed in this tomb lies Agnes Scott,
called the devout mother of Lady Ferrers.
Whoever thou shalt be who shall pass by
pour out prayers, I beg.
I am what thou shalt be.
I used to be what thou art.
Pray for me, I pray.

However there is a real ambiguity to this inscription, which all hinges on the use of the word *antrix*, which is not a standard Latin word. It could mean ‘ancestress’ or ‘forbear’ (but not specifically ‘mother’, as given in the translation in the church). According to medieval Latinists the translation of ‘antrix’ as literal ‘parent’ is never found, they are more inclined to read ‘antrix devota’ as ‘the anchoress who acted as a spiritual parent to Lady Ferrers’. This would not be an uncommon religious arrangement for the time; pious rulers such as Philip II of Spain had their devoted anchoresses. (Ronald Hutton pers. comm.)

As there is no other known connection between Agnes Scott or Lady Ferrers and Black Annis’s Bower at Dane Hills, the probability is that Agnes Scott was not an anchoress but rather a ‘spiritual parent’ to Lady Ferrers (who presumably commissioned the memorial). Indeed such an elaborate commemorative brass suggests that, if she had lived as a recluse, she was uncommonly popular.

However we cannot completely rule out the possibility that Agnes, dressed in a black habit, was the original eponymous resident of the Dane Hills cave. If this is so then, as Hutton observes:

‘The gentle and pious Agnes seems... to have been turned first into a local saint, then into a local demon, next into a Celtic goddess, and finally into a witch goddess; and all the while her bones have rested in apparent peace at Swithland.’
(Hutton 1999: 275)

Ah, behold the ever-evolving nature of legends!

The seemingly spurious connection between Black Annis and Swithland was noted by T. R. Potter in his *The History and Antiquities of Charnwood Forest* published in 1842. This widely-read book would have further generated awareness of the Black Annis legend in the county.

Just over a hundred years later Burton’s dubious translation was popularised nationally – and further compounded with speculation – by Lewis Spence in his book *Minor Traditions of British Mythology* published in 1948. In Spence’s account Black Annis devours both sheep and children, and as she grew older her youth returned and she became a nun (Spence 1948: 93).

DOING AN UNDERGROUND FLIT

Charles Billson's final reference to Black Annis brings in another legendary aspect. He states:

'Some warehouse girls told me a short time ago that she [Black Annis] was a witch who lived in the cellars under the castle, and that there was an underground passage from the cellars to the Dane Hills, along which she ran!' (Billson 1895: 9)

The exclamation mark is understandable, as such a tunnel would need to drop down very steeply indeed to pass underneath the river.

Palmer also draws attention to Black Annis's associations with the castle:

'Until recent years, Leicester children living near the Newarke were afraid to pass at night through Rupert's Gateway, leading to the castle, because a witch called Cat Anna was reputed to lurk there. (Palmer 1985: 218)

'Cat Anna' seems a likely corruption of Black Annis and her reputation for scratching children to death with her claws. Rupert's Gateway is not far from the entrance to the castle cellars, suggesting that Billson's 1890s warehouse girls and Palmer's mid-twentieth century children were recounting a legend with shared origins.

Underground tunnels of improbable length are one of the most common examples of place-related folklore (Simpson and Roud 200: 368)³. Another such tunnel supposedly runs from Leicester Abbey to the Hoston (or Humberstone) nearly three miles to the north-east; the legend further suggests that there was a nunnery near the Hoston (although no documentary or physical evidence supports this) and the tunnel therefore enabled the nuns to visit the monks at the abbey (Billson 1895: 10; Billson 1911: 195; Palmer 1985: 26). Other local legendary tunnels are from Groby Castle to Bradgate; Newton Linford to Leicester; and Newton Linford to Ulverscroft Priory (Billson 1895: 24). Loughborough has two such legends, one associated with the Old Rectory and the other with Burleigh Hall near the University.

Monastic sites feature again in the legend of a tunnel from Garendon monastery to the nunnery at Grace Dieu and the suggestion of scandal between monks and nuns. However Grace Dieu really does have a substantial underground 'tunnel': over 100 metres of stone-built medieval drains just over a metre high were discovered by Ernie Miller in 1967. Although part of the drains collapsed when the railway embankment was built in the nineteenth century a modern trap door provides access to the unblocked section. Evidence from elsewhere in Britain strongly suggests that such substantial sanitary arrangements were characteristic of monastic sites (Ernie Miller, pers. comm.)

³ Ronald Hutton made the following comment after reading a draft of this article: 'As no ecclesiastical court, or even Henry VIII's muck-raking visitors, ever discovered any evidence for such an arrangement, they are fairly clearly aspects of that virulent popular hatred for Catholicism in general, and regular Catholic clergy in particular, that set in once the Reformation became firmly established. That would, incidentally, also be a plausible context for the demonisation of Agnes, as an anchoress of the old-style Catholic sort, in later Protestant folk memory.'

A real tunnel, just a few tens of metres in length but high enough to walk through, survives at Ashby de la Zouch castle. Burrough Street in Castle Donington, formerly known as Burrows Street, takes its name from a large number of cellars and tunnels under the street.

About fifteen years ago the occupant of the old rectory at Long Clawson informed me of a legendary tunnel of a more plausible length across the road to the church. This may well have been inspired by the discovery of a medieval drain. Indeed the widespread folklore of improbable tunnels is most probably a distorted recollection of the accidental discovery of medieval drains at monastic sites or, perhaps in this case, by the long medieval cellar associated with Leicester Castle.

LEICESTER'S POLITICALLY-CORRECT 'BOGEY PERSON'

We can only speculate how and when part of Sir John Mellor's estate acquired the name of Black Anny. However there are parallels for a place taking its name after a notable female inhabitant, such as the settlement of Nanpantan to the south-west of Loughborough which seemingly takes its name from the house of a real-life Nan Pantan who must have lived there before the earliest recorded use of this name in 1745 (Bourne 2003: 65).

Whether there was a real person called Black Anny or Annis, or only ever a legendary figure, we perhaps will never know. Either way the idea of a woman living on her own in a small cave would have suggested someone with an antisocial reputation. Indeed, such a solitary, presumably older, woman could easily have had an unpleasant side to her personality. One way or another such a person could have exemplified the type of nasty person that have been called upon through the ages to coerce or threatened children. ('If you're naughty the bogeyman will get yer!').

Charles Dickens epitomises these childhood anti-guardians in Chapter 5 of *Dombey and Son*, when the nursemaid demands a little girl to go to sleep with the words, 'My goodness gracious me, Miss Floy, you naughty, sinful child, if you don't shut your eyes this minute, I'll call them hobgoblins that lives in the cock-loft to come and eat you up alive'.

However, here in Leicester political correctness seemingly started in the mid-eighteenth century as we have a 'bogey woman', or should that be 'bogey person'? Black Annis seems indeed to have been a 'bogey woman' who survived until the mid-twentieth century in the popular culture of Leicester as a malign allusion. Roy Palmer notes that, 'Until recently, any particularly unpopular woman was referred to as Black Anna and a spiteful one as Cat Anna.' (Palmer 1985: 219)

Presumably the alternative appellation of 'Cat Anna' developed from the repeated allusions to feline claws, Heyrick's description of 'vast talons', Kelly's emphasis on Black Annis having dug out her cave with her finger-nails; and – most clearly – the *Leicester Chronicle* of 1874 allegations that children were 'scratched to death with her claws'. And, quite separate to the Black Annis lore, unpopular women may be deemed to behave in a 'catty' manner.

MULTI-CULTURAL LEICESTER CIRCA 1797

There may however be more to Black Annis's political correctness than crossing the gender stereotypes as a pioneering 'bogey person'. She could also be evidence of precocious multi-cultural influences in Leicester in the last decade of the eighteenth century.

Apart from William Burton's suggestion of a link with the hermetic Agnes Scott and simply being named in Sir John Mellor's deeds, the oldest description of Black Annis is in John Heyrick's lurid poem. When, some twenty years ago, I first encountered the verse which opens this paper, the description reminded me of Kali, the Hindu goddess of destruction, who is characteristically depicted with blue skin, a grotesque face, poking tongue, exceptionally long fingernails, a necklace of skulls, and dancing barefoot on a corpse.

John Heyrick styles himself as a Lieutenant in the 15th Regiment of Light Dragoons, which later became the 15th/19th King's Royal Hussars. The 15th's official on-line history states in the fifty years after being founded in 1759 they 'fought all over the world... notably in India and North America.'⁴ However Roberta Twinn, Cuatorial Assistant at the Soldier's Life Discovery Museum, Newcastle upon Tyne, kindly checked the regiment's records. She told me that John Heyrick first served in the Leicestershire Yeomanry Cavalry and was subsequently appointed cornet in the 15th Light Dragoons on October 3rd 1795 before being promoted to lieutenant on February 10th, 1796. He died a year later aged 35. Between 1795 and 1797 the regiment were stationed in Holland, Germany and predominantly in England. John Heyrick would not have served in India or Ceylon with the 15th Light Dragoons.

There is a possibility that Heyrick's interest in India was instigated by conversations with fellow officers who had served there and he could have encountered Kali without visiting India. In 1784 the pioneer scholar of Indian culture, Sir William Jones (1746–94), founded the Asiatic Society of Bengal. Its journal *Asiatic Researches* (known as *The Journal of the Asiatic Society* after 1832) started publication in 1788. This journal, together with Jones' trailblazing English translations of Indian religious texts, quickly made Indian iconography (such as Kali) fashionable and familiar among the British literary world of the 1790s. Quite reasonably John Heyrick could have combined Kali's striking image with existing lore of a 'bogey woman' which was already current among children in Leicester. Indeed, in anticipation of the scare tactics used by Miss Floy's nurse, it is perhaps possible that Black Annis was memorably invoked by his own childhood nurse to command him to close his eyes 'this minute', or otherwise toe the desired behavioural line.

John Dudley was correct to see a link between Black Annis and Kali but he failed to recognise that the 'inventor' of Black Annis's appearance (for that seems to be the role John Heyrick has performed, intentionally or otherwise) may have been inspired by descriptions of Kali. If Heyrick was inspired by depictions of Kali

⁴ www.lightdragoons.org.uk/regimental_history/index.php and www.army.mod.uk/ld/regimental_history/index.php



Fig. 2. A recent interpretation of Black Annis inspired by Indian depictions of Kali. Drawn by Jenny Clarke, a professional tattoo artist, for the cover of *Leicestershire Legends re-told by Black Annis*, published by Heart of Albion, 2004.

then Black Annis has to all intents and purposes been a pagan deity for the last two hundred years, not because she is an implausible echo of pre-Christian paganism, but rather as a pioneering example of Hinduism influencing local lore.

To Hutton's suggestion of local saint turned local demon, Celtic goddess, and witch goddess perhaps we should include 'pioneer of multi-cultural Leicester'? Despite all the enigmas and uncertainty there is one thing of which we can be sure, over the next two hundred years the lore associated with her will continue to adapt and evolve as it has over the last two centuries.

ON A CAVE CALLED BLACK ANNIS'S BOWER

(being an answer to a very young lady's enquiries about the story of Black Annis)

Where down the plain the winding pathway falls,
From Glenn-field vill, to Lester's ancient walls,
Nature, or Art, with imitative power,
Far in the Glenn has plac'd *Black Annis' Bower*.

An oak, the pride of all the mossy dell,
Spreads his broad arms above the stony cell;
And many a bush, with hostile thorns array'd,
Forbids the secret cavern to invade;
Whilst delving vales each way meander round,
And violet banks with redolence abound.

Here, if the uncouth song of former days,
Soil not the page with Falsehood's artful lays,
Black Annis held her solitary reign,
The dread and wonder of the neighb'ring plain.

The Shepherd griev'd to view his waning flock,
And trac'd the fistlings to the gloomy rock.
No vagrant children cull'd the flowerets then,
For infant blood oft stain'd the gory den.
Not Sparta Mount* for infant tears renown'd,
Echo'd more frequently the piteous sound.
Oft the gaunt Maid the frantic Mother curs'd,
Whom Britan's wolf with savage nipple nurs'd;
Whilst Lester's sons behld aghast the scene,
Nor dar'd to meet the *Monster of the Green*.

'Tis said the soul of mortal man recoil'd
To view Black Annis' eye, so fierce and wild;
Vast talons, foul with human flesh, there grew
In place of hands, and features livid blue
Glar'd in her visage; whilst her obscene waist,
Warm skins of human victims close embrac'd.

But Time, than Man more certain, tho' more slow,
At length 'gainst Annis drew his sable bow;
The great decree the pious Shepherds bless'd,
And general joy the general fear confess'd.

Not without terror they the cave survey,
 Where hung the monstrous trophies of her sway:
 'Tis said, that in the rock large rooms were found,
 Scoop'd with her claws beneath the flinty ground;
 In these the swains her hated body threw,

But left the entrance still to future view,
 That the children's children might the tale rehearse,
 And bards record it in their tuneful verse.

But in these listless days, the idle bard
 Gives to the wind all themes of cold regard;
 Forgive, then, if in rough, unpolished song,
 An unskilled swain the dying tale prolong.
 And you, ye Fair, whom Nature's scenes delight,
 If Annis' Bower your vagrant steps invite,
 Ere the bright sun Aurora's car succeed,
 Or dewy evening quench the thirsty mead,
 Forbear with chilling censures to refuse
 Some generous tribute to the rustic muse.
 A violet or common daisy throw,
 Such gifts as Maro's lovely nymphs bestow;
 Ten shall your Bard survive the critic's frown,
 And in your smiles enjoy his best renown.

* Mount Taygetus, in a cavern near to which it was the Lacedaemonian custom
 to expose deformed and weakly children to perish.

From *First Flights* by John Heyrick, junior
 Lieutenant in the Fifteenth (or King's) Regiment of Light Dragoons
 Published London 1797

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