



False Lamkin: teaching notes and background information for Key stages 2 and 3

By Mary Humphreys



The Full English

The Full English was a unique nationwide project unlocking hidden treasures of England's cultural heritage by making over 58,000 original source documents from 12 major folk collectors available to the world via a ground-breaking nationwide digital archive and learning project. The project was led by the English Folk Dance and Song Society (EFDSS), funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund and in partnership with other cultural partners across England.

The Full English digital archive (www.vwml.org) continues to provide access to thousands of records detailing traditional folk songs, music, dances, customs and traditions that were collected from across the country. Some of these are known widely, others have lain dormant in notebooks and files within archives for decades.

The Full English learning programme worked across the country in 19 different schools including primary, secondary and special educational needs settings. It also worked with a range of cultural partners across England, organising community, family and adult learning events.

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Additional Resource

An audio recording of this song by Mary Humphreys is available for free download from: www.efdss.org/resourcebank

False Lamkin

Collected from Yarrow Gill (born 1838), a former farm labourer, by Cecil Sharp,
11 Sept 1911, Ely Union, Ely, Cambridgeshire
www.vwml.org/record/CJS2/10/2654

Roud Number: 6
Traditional

The Lord says to the La - dy be - fore he went out "Be -
ware of false Lam kin he's a - walk - ing a - bout"

The Lord says to the La-dy before he went out
"Beware of false Lamkin he's a-walk-ing about."

"Fetch me your daughter Bessie she shall do me some good
She will hold the silver basin to catch her own heart's blood."

"What care I for false Lamkin or any of his kin
When the doors are all bolted and the windows close pinned"

Pretty Bessie being up at the window so high
Saw her own dearest father come riding close by.

At the back kitchen window false Lamkin crep in
And he pricked one of the elder babes with a bright silver pin

"Dear Father, dear Father don't blame not of me
It was the False Lamkin murdered Baby and she."

"O nursemaid O nursemaid how sound you do sleep
Can't you hear of those elder babes a crying and weep?"

Here's blood in the kitchen, here's blood in the hall
Here's blood in the parlour where the Lady did fall.

"How durst I go down in the dead of the night
Where there's no fire a-kindled and no candle light?"

False Lamkin shall be hanged on the gallows so high
And his body shall be burned in the fire close by.

The Lady went down and thinking no harm
False Lamkin he caught her right tight in his arm

"O spare my life! O spare my life! For my life is so sweet
You shall have as many bright guineas as stones in the street.

"O spare my life ! O spare my life till one of the clock!
You shall have my daughter Bessie she's the flower of the flock."

False Lamkin - lyric sheet

*Collected from Yarrow Gill (born 1838), a former farm labourer, by Cecil Sharp
11 Sept 1911, Ely Union, Ely, Cambridgeshire - Roud number: 6 - www.vwml.org/record/CJS2/10/2654*

The Lord says to the La-dy before he went out
"Beware of false Lamkin he's a-walk-ing about."

"What care I for false Lamkin or any of his kin
When the doors are all bolted and the windows close pinned"

At the back kitchen window false Lamkin crept in
And he pricked one of the elder babes with a bright silver pin

"O nursemaid O nursemaid how sound you do sleep
Can't you hear of those elder babes a crying and weep?"

"How durst I go down in the dead of the night
Where there's no fire a-kindled and no candle light?"

The Lady went down and thinking no harm
False Lamkin he caught her right tight in his arm

"O spare my life! O spare my life! for my life is so sweet
You shall have as many bright guineas as stones in the street.

"O spare my life! O spare my life till one of the clock!
You shall have my daughter Bessie she's the flower of the flock."

"Fetch me your daughter Bessie she shall do me some good
She will hold the silver basin to catch her own heart's blood."

Pretty Bessie being up at the window so high
Saw her own dearest father come riding close by.

"Dear Father, dear Father don't blame not of me
It was the False Lamkin murdered Baby and she."

Here's blood in the kitchen, here's blood in the hall
Here's blood in the parlour where the Lady did fall.

False Lamkin shall be hanged on the gallows so high
And his body shall be burned in the fire close by.

Teaching notes for Primary (KS2)

This is a ballad that I have recently taught to a group of Year 4 pupils of average ability at a primary school. Although the song might appear daunting in its length I made no comment about this when introducing the song and as a result the pupils never considered it might be a problem. I was gratified to hear the head teacher say how amazed she was that they had remembered such a long song after their public performance.

I did not want the pupils to have nightmares about a modern-day Lamkin, so to reassure the pupils that this song was akin to a fairy story I talked about the lack of central heating and electric lighting in homes of the past before even introducing the song. Thus the children could picture the situation with "No fire a-kindled and no candle-light" and know it was a story from long ago.

In order to make the song memorable I suggested that the pupils devise actions to go with the words and that they drew pictures of their favourite characters. This we spent some considerable time working on after hearing the song a few times. After devising the actions we always used them when rehearsing and singing the song. It made memorising the story much easier.

We discussed the motivation for the murders early on in the learning of the ballad. Some versions of the ballad have verses which indicate that Lamkin was a mason who had not been paid for building the Lord and Lady's home. I did not mention this, so the pupils were able to bring their own ideas to bear on the motivation.

The unique method of torture of the baby and the request for the silver basin intrigued the pupils. It was at this point that I introduced the links to leprosy. For primary pupils from church schools this will not be such difficult issue to discuss as many of the Bible stories feature Jesus associating with and curing lepers. Reassuring information needs to be given here - that the disease, contrary to the old belief, is not highly contagious; that it is very uncommon in the Western world but still extant in third world countries but eminently treatable, given modern medicine. The superstition that a cure could be obtained from washing in the blood of innocents needs to be explained in the light of lack of medical knowledge at the time. Superstitious beliefs can be a topic of discussion as many children have their own - eg "Don't step on the cracks in the pavement - Bears will get you!"

We discussed the finale of the story line where Lamkin is both hanged AND burnt. This led to discussion of further superstitions regarding the power of witches and witchcraft which, in the Fens was an ongoing belief until recently. Enid Porter's book has many stories about witchcraft. Fen folk were never reassured that a dead witch would not come back to wreak havoc if buried. They would only rest easy in their beds if the body of the witch was burnt.

Teaching notes for Secondary (KS3)

The song lends itself to a much deeper exploration of the social history of mediaeval to modern times. Superstitions around witchcraft and links to mediaeval leprosy laws can all be topics for discussion. In addition, the reasons for the incarceration of Yarrow Gill (the singer) in Ely Union could develop into investigation into the rise of workhouses and Poor Law Unions. The demise of the workhouses after World War 11 owing to the setting up of the Welfare State can be investigated.

Further work could be done into the life of a fenland labourer early last century and now - the temporary or seasonal nature of their employment and the debilitating conditions in which they work and live. The lack of unionised labour even today, the use of gang-masters and the plight of immigrant labour can all be brought into this topic.

References

Enid Porter : Cambridgeshire Customs & Folklore

- Published by Routledge & Kegan Paul 1969.
- SBN 7100 6201 X
- Chapter 5 The World of Magic. Ghosts and Witchcraft.

Life in a Victorian Workhouse, Peter Higginbotham

- Paperback: 36 pages. Publisher: Pitkin Publishing (7 April 2014)
- ISBN-13: 978-1841653389

Voices from the Workhouse, Peter Higginbotham

- Paperback: 224 pages. Publisher: The History Press (1 Oct 2012)
- ISBN-13: 978-0752467498

Cider with Rosie, Laurie Lee

- Publisher: Vintage Books 2002
- ISBN 978-0099285663 Pp 108- 111. The account of the old couple , Joseph and Hannah Brown who are sent to the workhouse when they cannot manage on their own any more.

References to F.J.Child and his ballad collection

- Wikipedia: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Francis_James_Child
- www.contemplator.com/child/
- www.springthyme.co.uk/ballads/child_child.html

Some online information about leprosy

- www.who.int/topics/leprosy/en/
- www.ilep.org.uk/facts-about-leprosy

Background Information

The song False Lamkin was noted by Cecil Sharp from Ely Workhouse resident Yarrow Gill in 1911.

Ely Workhouse

Most of the workhouse records are missing, though a few are extant in the Cambridge Records Office. Sharp records that Yarrow was his mother's maiden name.

A workhouse in Ely was established before 1725 in union with several local towns/villages, including Haddenham, Littleport, Sutton & Witchford. Ely Union workhouse was built in 1836-7 to a design by William Donthorn. It was built to accommodate 300 inmates and cost £7,000 in a style that echoed the architecture of the Lantern Tower at Ely Cathedral. It was converted into a hospital in 1948 and has now been redeveloped as luxury apartments, Tower Court.

Ely Union Circa 1900



Tower Court 2009



Yarrow Gill

Yarrow Gill appears in the Census of 1911 (see below) as an inmate of Tower House, Ely (the name for the workhouse). He was born in Littleport in 1839 to a family of farm labourers and was variously employed as a shepherd and a farm labourer during his working life. He never married and probably became incapable of work from infirmity and old age, although these days 71 is not regarded as being very old.

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NAME AND SURNAME	RELATIONSHIP to Head of Family or Particular in Institution	AGE		PARTICULARS as to MARRIAGE	PERSONAL OCCUPATION	Industry or Service with which, Whether or otherwise	Whether Employed or Working on Own Account	Whether Working at Home	BIRTHPLACE of every Person	NATIONALITY of every Person born in a Foreign Country	INFIRMITY
		Males	Females								
1 Charles Fisher	Annals	41		Single	Formerly Colonial Duties	350			Annals	Ely	
2 John White	Annals	69		Single	Barman or Brewer	130			Annals	Ely	120
3 William Roberts	Annals	61		Single	Workman on Farm	130			Annals	Ely	
4 William Hill	Annals	47		Married	Iron Turner	210			Annals	Ely	
5 Thomas Best	Annals	70		Single	Blacksmith	140			Annals	Annals	000
6 Stephen Brooks	Annals	56		Single	Formerly Farm Labourer	110			Annals	Annals	
7 William Roberts	Annals	63		Single	General Labourer	140			Annals	Annals	
8 James William Davenport	Annals	20		Single	General Labourer				Annals	Ely	
9 William John Tomsett	Annals	22		Single	General Labourer				Annals	Ely	
10 Ralph Howard	Annals	48		Single	General Labourer				Annals	Widford	
11 Richard Cross	Annals	48		Married	General Labourer				Annals	Ely	000
12 James Highson	Annals	68		Married	General Labourer	140			Annals	Annals	170
13 Dennis Roberts	Annals	59		Married	Blacksmith	210			Annals	Annals	
14 Charles Best	Annals	46		Married	General Labourer	360			Annals	Ely	
15 Leat Jagg	Annals	46		Single	General Labourer	140			Annals	Ely	
16 John Best	Annals	47		Single	General Labourer	140			Annals	Widford	
17 Robert Best	Annals	47		Single	General Labourer				Annals	Annals	Infirmity
18 George Brown	Annals	65		Single	General Labourer	140			Annals	Annals	
19 Thomas Jagg	Annals	61		Single	General Labourer	330			Annals	Ely	
20 John Mason	Annals	55		Single	General Labourer	140			Annals	Annals	
21 Arthur Hoff	Annals	46		Widower	General Labourer				Annals	Annals	110
22 Thomas Swainson	Annals	67		Widower	General Labourer	220			Annals	Annals	1100
23 Charles Bartlett	Annals	73		Married	Formerly Farm Labourer	140			Annals	Annals	
24 John Fisher	Annals	65		Single	General Labourer	140			Annals	Widford	
25 Henry Morgan	Annals	76		Single	Formerly Church Organist	1405			Annals	Ely	
26 Robert Jagg	Annals	77		Single	Formerly Farm Labourer	140			Annals	Annals	
27 George Brooks	Annals	66		Single	Army Pensioner Formerly a Soldier	051			Annals	Annals	
28 Thomas Best	Annals	64		Single	General Labourer	140			Annals	Annals	
29 James Hill	Annals	72		Single	Formerly General Labourer	140			Annals	Widford	
30 James Hill	Annals	71		Single	Formerly a Soldier	070			Annals	Widford	
Total		30		30							

Yarrow Gill sang this song, and several more, to Cecil Sharp, who wrote down both tune and words in his notebooks which are in the Clare College Cambridge archives. We therefore have all the local words. The action of the story does not differ greatly from other versions of the ballad, numbered 93 in the Francis James Child collection The English and Scottish Popular Ballads, although it does omit the initial motive for the revenge murders. Many of the versions have Lamkin as a mason who built the lord a castle but received no payment for it.

Links to Leprosy

One reason suggested for the strange ritual surrounding the murder of the baby is connected with a legendary cure for leprosy - bathing in the blood of an innocent. Leprosy, now named Hansen's Disease, was endemic in Europe and Asia for centuries. The disease was considered (incorrectly) to be highly contagious so lepers were required to carry a bell or a clapper for warning others that they were around. They were required by law to live in colonies away from the public. In Cambridge in the 11th century there was a Leper Hospital in Barnwell which had the chapel of St Mary Magdalene, dating from about 1125, at its centre. The chapel still stands and in addition to being a functioning church is now an exhibition and concert space.



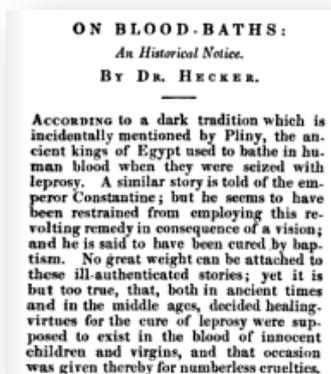
Saint Mary Magdalen, or the Leper Chapel, Barnwell Junction, Cambridge

The Leper Hospital was given a dispensation to hold a fair on Stourbridge Common, which became a most successful fund-raising event in the mediaeval calendar.

<http://www.leper-chapel.24to24-hosting.co.uk/history.htm>

There has been a suggestion that Lamkin was given that sobriquet because his skin appeared as white as a newborn lamb, indicating that he suffered from leprosy. His threat to extract blood from the baby and Bessie was an attempt at a cure, they being classed as "innocents."

Dr Hecker, in the London Medical Gazette (Vol X111. Sat Feb 22nd, 1834) wrote:



“According to a dark tradition which is incidentally mentioned by Pliny, the ancient kings of Egypt used to bathe in human blood when they were seized with leprosy. A similar story is told of the emperor Constantine; but he seems to have been restrained from employing this revolting remedy in consequence of a vision; and he is said to have been cured by baptism. No great weight can be attached to these ill-authenticated stories; yet it is but too true, that, both in ancient times and in the middle ages, decided healing-virtues for the cure of leprosy were supposed to exist in the blood of innocent children and virgins, and that occasion was given thereby for numberless cruelties.”

Constantine's leprosy is now believed to be a legend and not the truth, though it still leads to hot debate in academic circles.

Mary Humphreys

Singer, musician, and song researcher

Mary, a graduate of the University of Manchester, taught in schools in Greater Manchester and Yorkshire for many years. She now works as a freelance workshop leader and has recently been working in several Cambridge primary schools as part of the Full English Project and with the Enid Porter Project.



Mary's main focus for research is songs and tunes from East Anglia, specialising in Cambridgeshire and its near neighbours. She has written an award-winning book on Cambridgeshire folksongs collected in the last century.

Mary has worked on several schools' projects initiated by EFDSS, Cambridgeshire County Council, East Anglian Traditional Music Trust and Suffolk Folk. She also leads children's workshops at festivals.

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