

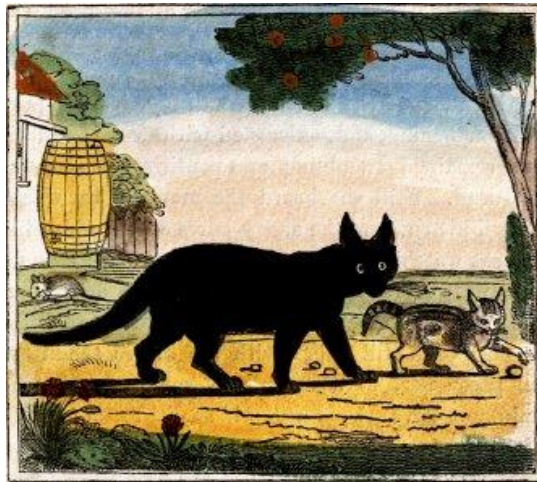
*folkonwight*

## **Island Folk History**

Adapted from *Cock & Bull Stories: Animals in Isle of Wight Folklore, Dialect and Cultural History* (2008), by Alan R Phillips

### **CATS & DOGS**

#### **CATS**



Alongside the bat, the wolf and the owl, the animal most commonly associated with witches was the cat. Whilst such stories would once have been prevalent on the Island, very few in fact were ever collected. Fortunately, the writer Ethel Hargrove recorded one original story in her *Wanderings in the Isle of Wight* (1913). At Wackland near Hale Common in the early nineteenth century Squire Thatcher's cook received a visit from a witch in the appearance of a black cat. The cook was frying pancakes at the time and threw a spoonful of lard on the cat, whereupon the creature ran off mewling with pain, and the witch-woman suffered from a painful back from then on. This is a fairly standard version of the widely held belief that witches possessed familiar spirits, usually in the form of a cat or dog; and their lives were so closely entwined that if the familiar suffered physical injury, so did the witch.

Haseley Manor at Arreton has long displayed a mummified cat with two attendant rats in a wall cavity, where all three were found. Between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries it was a common practice to bury mummified cats in the walls and roof cavities of houses to repel the plague of rats and mice. But because cats were so readily associated with witches, they could also act to ward them off; so a dead cat would be placed in a location that was vulnerable to witches and evil spirits entering the house. Cats were also known to sense ghosts and other

supernatural beings, and therefore it was believed that their presence in the walls of the house helped guard against such malign forces.



*D1 Mummified cat & rats at Haseley Manor. Courtesy of Haseley Manor*

In his book of essays on the Isle of Wight published in 1911, the poet Edward Thomas retells a story about a kitten from Henry Fielding's 1754 *Voyage to Lisbon*. There were no less than four cats aboard ship, and when a gale sprang up as it came to anchor off Ryde, the kitten went overboard. The captain was very upset about it and despite the cat's slim chances of survival the bosun leapt into the water, returning with the motionless animal in his mouth. Despite having been given up for dead by everybody, the kitten eventually recovered, to the great joy of the captain – but not apparently to the rest of the crew, "who asserted that the drowning [of] a cat was the very surest way of raising a favourable wind"! Having a cat on board ship was certainly one of the numerous omens of bad luck by which seamen were once surrounded.

As in several other areas of the country, there have been many sightings of a Mystery Big Cat on the Island in recent decades. The phenomenon took off in 1983, with 23 appearances of the Isle of Wight 'puma' between May and October, and changes to its coat from black to grey, sandy, silver, and 'reddish'. By September 1985, there were said to have been more than 120 sightings on the Island, and intermittent ones ever since. The reports are always tantalising but are never complete or resolved, and there is never a satisfying explanation as to where the creature came from or indeed what became of it.

## DOGS

An almost complete Roman copper-alloy figurine from the fourth century AD has been found on the Isle of Wight and represents a 'long-nosed hound', similar to the breed of dog now known as the Irish wolfhound. It rests on its haunches on a small rectangular plinth and

glances upwards with its head turned to the right; with an elongated nose and erect and pointed ears. In the Romano-British period dogs, like many other animals, often appear to have had divine attributes and may have been perceived as underworld creatures. The figurine



*Roman long-nosed hound figurine, perhaps 4th century. Courtesy of IW County Archaeology Service.*

is a significant Island find, comparable to the seven small bronze dogs which were dedicated to the Celtic god of healing, Nodens, in his important late 4th-century temple at Lydney in Gloucestershire. On a more practical level, dogs played an important part in hunting in the Roman period, and British dogs in particular were famed throughout the Empire.

Moving to modern times, Ethel Hargrove writing in *England's Garden Island* in 1926, tells us that "until about seventy years ago [i.e. the 1850s] dogs played a large part in aiding Island traffic. Of lurcher breed, strong and wiry, two were harnessed to a cart, tandem or pair. No reins were used: people sat on one side of the vehicle with their legs dangling till they nearly touched the ground. These carts were very narrow, so consequently they could pass through the bridle-road gates. Oil or rag-and-bone men would often drive them furiously along the highway, and sometimes crockery was entrusted to this jolting form of transit".

Dogs, like cats, were commonly credited with the ability to see ghosts, and often they would appear as spectral black dogs themselves. However, the claims about Black Shuck roaming the Wilderness area near Rookley owe more, it seems, to the overactive imagination of the former rector of Gatcombe from 1965–1973, the Reverend James Evans – who also invented the well-known story of Lucy Lightfoot in connection with Gatcombe church.

In Island dialect a greyhound was often referred to as a 'long dog', while a dog given to lying before the fire became, appropriately enough, a 'vire spannel'. A dog would 'pank' rather than pant: "How that dog panks under the taable!" 'Smellers' denoted the whiskers of both a cat or

a dog. A 'sowl' was a dog's hold on the ear of an animal, and by association used of pulling a person's ears: "The dog gid the wold zow a middlen sowlen all round the ground, avore she got to the gap". 'Yappen' was also transferred from dogs to some of those barking or yelping humans; an alternative word was 'yowl', which manages to combine a dog's yelping or howling in one evocative word. A person being 'pecked upon' or kept under might well have complained: "I was pecked upon all the time I was there, and used wuss than a dog".

The call 'hie' was used to encourage dogs to seek game: it would certainly have been used on 'thucksters', an old Island word for coursers or hunting dogs – perhaps it was used in the vicinity of Rodge Brook, which flows through Porchfield into Newtown Bay and whose name probably originated as 'the brook of the hunting dogs', from Old English *raecc*. There is a Dog Kennel Cottage near Thorley, and two long, very twisted fields, one in Arreton and the other in Wootton, were traditionally known as *Dogtail*.

