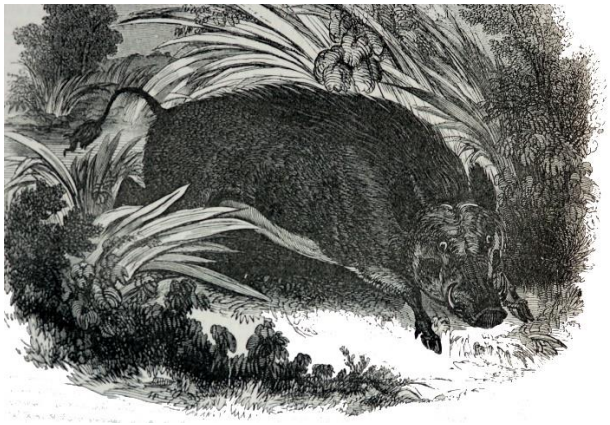
folkonwight

Island Folk History

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

PIGS:

WILD BOARS AND PIGGARDS



An excavation of a Middle Bronze Age round barrow (*c*.1500 BC) on Shalcombe Down in 1816 revealed several boars' tusks, which had been inserted with a human burial alongside a pair of disc brooches and a bone ornament. Wild boar as well as red deer would have rummaged the forest floor in the Roman period, and their tusks and antlers found at Brading Roman Villa indicate many successful hunting ventures; a wild boar tusk of the same period was also recorded in a cooking pot found at Lake. The importance of the boar hunt was stressed by classical writers such as Strabo, and wild boar were often depicted as symbols of warfare and aggression, though they could equally well become enchanted, Otherworld creatures in Celtic myth.

So valuable were wild boar and deer considered to be by the Middle Ages that in the reign of William I, their illegal killing was punishable by blinding. There are relatively few references concerning pigs on the Island in the medieval period, which is surprising considering the extensive woodland and its predominance of oaks. However, the Domesday Book of 1086 refers to "woodland at 20 pigs" (Calbourne and Shalfleet), "woodland at 2 pigs" (Heasley, Brading, Shanklin, and Watchingwell), and "woodland at 1 pig" (Wroxall, Preston and Barnsley, the latter two both near Ryde), and whilst these figures probably represent a system of quantifying woodland and not the actual number of pigs, they do at least make the connection between woodland and pig farming.

Under the lordship of Isabella de Fortibus in the late 13th century Bowcombe became the Island's most important manor, with 31 pigs and 35 piglets, and a boar for slaughter fattened on two bushels of beans. Then at the turn of the 13th century the monks at Carisbrooke

priory possessed twelve sows, thirty porkers, twelve piglets and one boar (together with five horses, sixteen lambs, twenty-two cows, one bull, eight oxen and fifteen calves). Boars' heads sometimes feature on medieval seal matrices and a silver one dating to the 13th century has been discovered on the Island, with the inscription 'LEGE TEGE', or 'read and conceal'.

Medieval boar's head matrix. Courtesy of IW County Archaeology Service

In his introduction to *The Oglander Memoirs*, W.H. Long affirms that in the early 17th century pigs were still feeding on acorns in the parks of Appuldurcombe and Watchingwell, as well as in Alvington - now Parkhurst - Forest. There has been a Hogleaze Copse in the Whippingham area since at least 1534.

During the 18th century Newport had its own 'Piggard' or pig driver, employed by the Court Leet: whilst pigs were allowed a certain amount of freedom round the town, it was this official's duty to see that they did not become a nuisance - a bit like today's dog wardens - and if they did, to round them up and put them in the pound; the same would be done for stray cattle. The job cannot have been a popular one as Court reports indicate that he was frequently obstructed in his duty, insulted and even assaulted, then to add insult to injury on one occasion in 1743 the Piggard was himself ordered to be set in the stocks for failing to have properly carried out his duties!

By the late 18th century an Island breed of pig had been developed, large and tall with black spots and producing good quality bacon for poorer households. It so happens that a species of crustacean called the sandhopper, resembling a shrimp, was plentiful in the vicinity of Shanklin at the same period, and "at low water they lie in vast numbers on the shore, and furnish the hogs in the neighbourhood with an excellent and nutritious repast" (Hassell, *Tour of the IOW*, 1790). Even in 1905 a pig farmer could confirm that pig-farming inland was less profitable than on the coast, where the sandhoppers still provided a nutritious and much-relished meal. In 1929 the Island pig population per acre was assessed as the largest in England: fifty was the average number on a farm.

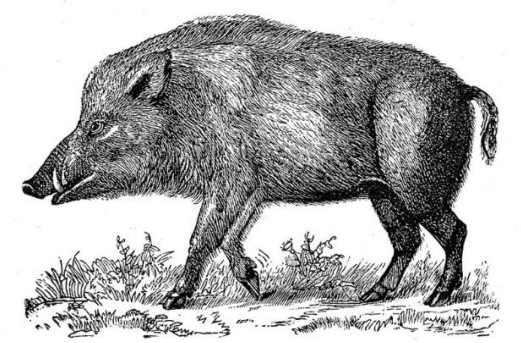
SARREN AND SNOODLIN'

In folklore terms, pigs were associated with the weather: they were said to be able to 'see the wind' and would rush round announcing its arrival; it was also believed that anyone who had slaughtered a certain number ran the risk of seeing the devil, who sometimes appeared in pig form.

A scupture of a pig at Osborne House

Isle of Wight dialect words for pigs were many and varied. Young growing pigs were 'slips' or 'shoots', while a large fat pig was a 'suskin'; a young castrated boar was a 'barrow pig', while its old castrated counterpart was a 'boor stag'. A farrow or litter of pigs was a 'straain': "My zow got a fine straain o' ten pigs this mornen"; the smallest piglet in the litter was a 'dolly', and a weakling piglet a 'joey'.

'Sic', or sometimes 'sook', was the call made to pigs to come to the trough, and 'sar' was a general term used for feeding animals: "I was gwyne to ax ye if ye wouldn't mind sarren my pig at dinner-time; I've mixed the vittles up all ready vor'n". The pigs might sometimes have been fed on 'pollards', a coarse bran, or 'graains', the remains of malt after brewing; and of course pigs were often 'up to their bellies in swile', mud or filth. Any person setting about anything eagerly or impetuously might be referred to as 'taail-on-end, as ayger as a pig aater the wash bucket'. 'Chammen' or chewing vigorously could be associated with several animals but especially pigs: "The pigs a' ben and chammed my smock frock all to pieces"; but applied to humans the word was used figuratively in the sense of chewing something over or ruminating over something niggling: "He keeps on chammen on't over".



'Snoozle' or 'snoodle' applied to animals, but particularly pigs, which nestled together: "I zee the wold zow and the little pigs be all snoozled in together". The word had the additional meaning of rubbing and scratching, and attending assiduously to pigs. W.H. Long refers to a case of pig-stealing tried in the mid-19th century at Winchester, when the chief witness for the prosecution was asked by the opposing council why he was so positive in swearing to the stolen pigs, as all pigs were very much alike. "I'll tell'ee for why: 'cause *I snoodled 'em*, and

could prid near undertake to zware to every heer on their backs". The term completely mystified counsel and judge and an explanation was called for; when it was found to mean that the witness had attended to the pigs daily, feeding them constantly with different foods, and then spent most of his leisure time rubbing and scratching their backs!

In terms of place-names, Yaverland is a development from the Old English *Ewerelande*, 'the cultivated land or estate where boars are kept'. It appears that the original name for Arreton Down was *Berdune*, and the first element of the name may possibly have been Old English *baer*, 'swine pasture' (though it could equally well have been *bere*, 'barley'). Likewise, a point on the Anglo-Saxon boundary between Shorwell and Brighstone parishes is recorded as *Swines heafod*, 'swine head', and may refer to a topographical feature on the nearby downland.

Most cottages in the Bowcombe Valley once had their own pigsty, which was housed in the same building as the 'dunnekin' or privy, so visits to the latter must have been interesting, to say the least! There is an amusing example of an early entry in the Best Boar class at the Royal Agricultural Show by the prison farm at Parkhurst: a pig that went by the name of 'The Governor'! And a nursery jingle once used in catching or counting children's toes - without doubt the local dialect version of *This Little Piggy Went To Market* - runs as follows:

This gurt pig zays, 'I wants meeat';
T'other one zays, 'Where'll ye hay et?'
This one zays, 'In gramfer's barn'
T'other one zays, 'Week! Week!
I can't git over the dreshel [threshold]'.

(Dialect references are to W H Long's *Dictionary of Isle of Wight Dialect*, 1886.)