



**Enter these enchanted woods,
you who dare ...**'(G. Meredith)

Myths and Legends often arise from dark and mysterious places and Shotover is no exception. With travellers from Kings to vagabonds having ventured over the wild and desolate hill in times past, it is not surprising that both fact and fiction have left us with a wealth of colourful tales...

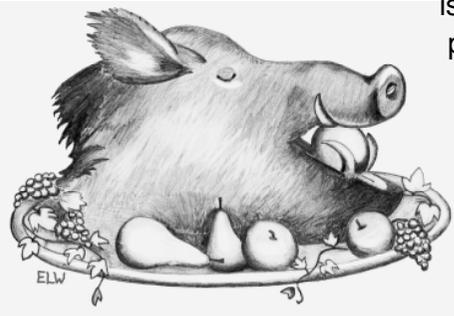
The Attack of the Wild Boar

Legend has it that a 15th Century student named John Copcot, of Queen's College, Oxford, was strolling through Shotover Forest reading Aristotle's 'Philosophy' when he was suddenly set upon by a wild boar. So alarmed was he, that he rammed his book down the boar's throat exclaiming "Graecum est!" and the beast fell down dead. Having severed its head, he returned with it to Queen's College where it was eagerly feasted upon for supper!

To this day there is a Christmas ceremony at which a boar's head, with an orange in its jaws,

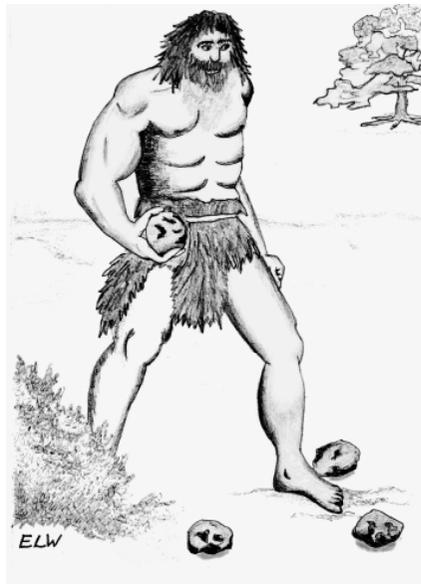
is carried in procession into the college Hall. A painting in Queen's College and a stained-glass window in Horspath

Church commemorate the legendary event. Some say the last Wild Boar in England was in fact slain in Shotover Forest.



The Shotover Giant

There are many legends regarding a giant that is thought to have once lived in Shotover Forest. The fun-loving Giant spent his time playing marbles on Shotover, and the fossilised remains are said to be scattered at the sandpit where he last played with them. There was also a large stone near the Ridings, known as the Giant's Loaf. When the giant died, he may have been laid to rest in the ancient barrow at the top of Shotover Hill known as the Giant's Grave. Unfortunately this was demolished by tank-testing operations around the time of the Second World War.



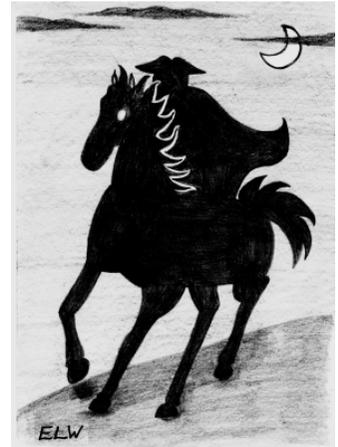
competing against their Cambridge rivals who, according to legend, carved their Gogmagog Giant into a Cambridge hillside. By all accounts the Shotover carving could still be seen in 1723 but had disappeared by 1763.

Perhaps in remembrance of the Giant, a huge figure bearing a bow and arrow is thought to have been carved into the ochre-red soil of Shotover Hill during the 17th Century. This may have been the work of undergraduates from Oxford

The Highwayman Robberies

Shotover Forest was a dark and desolate place by night, and saw many a dastardly deed... with wealthy travellers passing through on the Oxford to London road (now the Plain) tales abound of highwaymen ambushing stagecoaches and making off into the night with the rewards of their robberies.

One notable victim was the Reverend Charles Wesley who was travelling on horseback from Oxford to London on a dark October night in 1739, when his horse suddenly went lame. He started to pray for Divine protection, singing the 91st Psalm, talking of the Almighty delivering him from 'the



snare of the hunter' and the 'terror of the night'. As he reached the hut on Shotover Hill (presumed to be Titup Hall, near to where the Crown and Thistle now stands) he was ambushed by a highwayman who demanded he hand over his money. Wesley gave up his purse with its thirty shillings, but the robber demanded more. Having handed over some halfpennies from his pocket, the robber asked him a third time. Wesley could not bring himself to lie, and so told his ambusher to search for himself. The robber, assuming this to mean there was no more to be had, turned and vanished into the night. Luckily the Reverend was spared the loss of the thirty guineas he had in another pocket!

The Tears of Empress Matilda

Empress Matilda, also known as Maud, was the daughter of King Henry I and rightful heir to the throne of England. When Henry died in 1135 Matilda was in France, and Stephen, a favourite nephew of the King, and grandson of William the Conqueror, was crowned instead. Matilda was outraged at this and in 1139 she invaded England to claim her rightful position as Queen. Her arrogance alienated her from the people of London, and before she had secured her coronation an uprising left her with no option but to flee from London. Disguised as a corpse on a funeral bier, she escaped the Capital and made the arduous journey to Oxford to seek safety from her enemy.



Legend has it that upon reaching the brow of Shotover Hill, she was so relieved to see the dreaming spires of Oxford that she burst into tears. It is said by some that the large stones at the Shotover sandpit are the fossilized tears of Empress Matilda.

The Name Shotover...Fact Myth or Legend?

Shotover was first mentioned in the Domesday Book of 1086 as 'Scotorne'...

- ~ The most likely origin is from the Old English 'sceot ofer' meaning 'steep hill'.
- ~ It has been suggested that 'Shotover' may be a derivative of a reference to the green Royal Hunting Lodge of days gone by, named 'Chateau Vert', French for 'Green Castle'.
- ~ Much more captivating are the tales that link the name to the legends of arrows or rocks being shot over the hill; some say two giants shot large stones over the hill at one another; arrows may have also been shot over the hill by Robin Hood or cannon balls by Oliver Cromwell. There was also a local man named Harry Bear, who lived near Headington (at Harry Bear's Bottom!). He and his friend Lears Hill, who lived in Wheatley, are said to have shot arrows over the hill to send messages to each other...and so it goes on!

Shotover Wildlife is a voluntary organisation founded to research and communicate the importance of Shotover Hill for wildlife

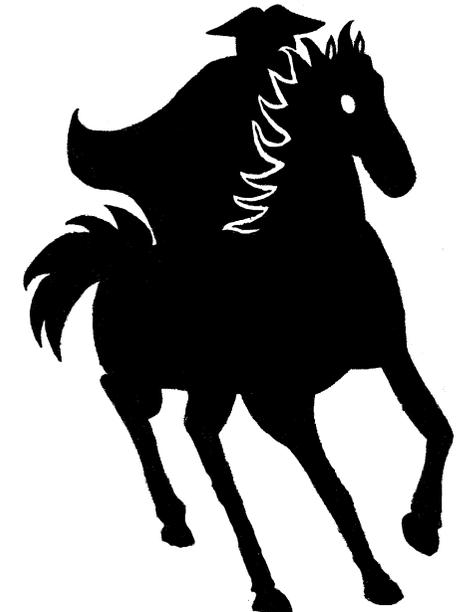
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Related leaflet titles:

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Leaflet written and illustrated by Elly Wright
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MYTHS AND LEGENDS on SHOTOVER



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