



Guide to: The Fairies Chapel



Fairies Chapel before the flood

Although still one of the most beautiful parts of the Dell, time has taken its toll on the Fairies Chapel.

The "Thrutch," a narrow gorge, is fantastical feature, and was still more so before the great flood of July 4th, 1838, which destroyed what was known as the Fairies Chapel, This was:

"a cavern in the rock, which had a pulpit, reading desk, and seats, formed out of the rock by the action of the water".



Detail from larger picture



The flood rose to the height of 4 metres at Spotland Bridge, which it washed away, as well as other bridges. The rain and ice fell mainly on Rooley Moor, where, on the following day, pieces of hail stone were found weighing as much as 340 grams (12 oz)!

The storm was one of the most violent ever known in this neighbourhood, and its destructive works were evident throughout the Spodden valley with the mills at Broadley, Healey Hall, Foot Mill, and Mr. John Whitaker's dye works, at Spotland Bridge, being almost demolished.

The hail storm passed over the southerly side of Rochdale, breaking all the skylights of the houses, and windows in its wake, and also some weaving sheds. In particular at Mr. King's factory, at Moss Mill, where it was said to have broken 1,000 panes!



There have always been myths and legends surrounding such mysterious spots and Healey Dell is no different as shown from this quote from *The Pictorial History of the County of Lancaster*, published by George Routledge, London, in 1854:

'Some way or other all the pretty spots, at least in Lancashire, were haunted by ideal beings. The noise of the steam-engine seems to have scared them away; but he loves to study human nature, -in what it is, and who knows that the present is only the past over again - the garb, not the of body, being altered, -will not disdain to linger around the places to which our ancestors attached a feeling little less respectable than that of religious awe.

'Under the influence of some such sentiment as this we went in search of the "Fairies' Chapel," shown in the above cut. We found it hidden behind a ledge of rocks, at the base of which it lies, a sort of natural excavation formed by the attrition of the waters undermining the rock; and like other spots of the same secluded character, it has its "legendary lore."



Myths and Legends-

Fairies Chapel and the Byrons



Lord Byron

“Amongst the uneducated people in Rochdale,” said Mr Fferrand, “the superstition of fairies has not been dispelled. I have often heard a legend by an intelligent old woman respecting a love episode, in the reign of Edward IV, of Lady Eleanor Byron, a relation of yours, Lord Byron, and her betrothed Oliver Chadwick.”

During the winter months when the water-wheel at the Thrutch was frozen, Oliver Chadwick enjoyed many a day hunting and skating around the Dell. He did not visit his wife to be because of this, and she became lonely and unhappy. Lady Eleanor remained cooped up all day and all night, unsure of Oliver’s love and her impending marriage. Confused and alone, she visited a woman she knew to be a fortune teller. Amongst the locals of Healey Dell, she was known to be a witch.



Mother Bagden was her name, and she had often been heard telling others that she and her son, the owner of Th’Owd Mill l’t’h Thrutch, were on the most intimate terms with the Queen of the Fairies of Healey Dell. In contrast to the old woman’s withered and aged skin, the ancient Queen of Fairies pallor was as white as snow. Her horse’s saddle was made of ivory and interlaid with gold. She carried a quiver of arrows and was always accompanied with three beautiful hounds and followed by many handsome men and pretty ladies.



The old woman told Lady Eleanor that her son had been with the King and Queen of the Fairies the night before. Eleanor listened eagerly for what this had to do with her. She had been there a while and had begun to think that the witch did talk so. Mother Bagden eventually announced that the Queen had told her son that Eleanor would be a wife and a widow on the same day. Distraught, the Lady left, but on contemplation and local gossip, she decided that the old woman had lied to her.

On the day of Oliver and Eleanor’s wedding Rochdale’s church bells were ringing, flowers were strewn around, and the bride and bridegroom looked as merry as could be. As Eleanor rode home to her wedding celebrations, an old feud between the Byrons and another rich and prosperous family in Rochdale, the Traffords, was reignited. Oliver was killed, but no further trouble erupted. Eleanor, in distress, remained in her uncle’s Hall never again to doubt the prophesies from the fairies of Healey Dell. Mother Bagden remained at the Thrutch near to the Fairies Chapel, for after all, it must be remembered that witches and fairies are not always bad. Men and women just do not heed their warnings.



Saint Chadde's Church

Adapted from William Robertson, *Rochdale and the Vale of Whitworth*, 1st Edition 1897, 2nd Edition 1992 George Kelsall, The Bookshop: Littleborough.



Robin the Outlaw



It all started on a wild and stormy night in the year of our Lord 1180, upon the hill now known as Robin Bank, that an old, tall but bent woman with wild elf-locks of dirty white hair, green eyes and two fang-like upper teeth stood stirring a cauldron. Not far away lay a long-handled broom and, wherever she moved, a large black cat followed her with arched back and tail.

Presently, from Healey appeared Robert heir to the Earl of Huntingdon. Robert had been brought up at Healey Hall by his childless uncle. However, upon his uncle's death it had been demanded that he produced his uncle's ring to show that he was indeed the heir to the title. This he could not do, because his cousin had taken the ring and therefore the title.



The witch told Robert that if he did what she asked, she could retrieve the ring by magic, but Robert would have none of it. So she told him to look into the holy well of St Chadde where he would see his future and perhaps change his mind. Robert could see no harm in that, crossed himself and gazed into the well little knowing that she had charmed it! However, instead of seeing what the witch had expected him to, he saw that he lost his title and became the outlaw Robin Hood!



Enraged at being tricked Robin tried to kill the witch, but she leaped on to her broomstick, and escaped. Yet even as she flew away she cast a spell, and he passed out.

Robin woke to find a little man not more than a metre in height. It was the Fairy King who had come to help Robin save his soul from the witch, but sadly told him that he would not be the next Earl of Huntingdon as the only way to break the spell was to throw his uncle's ring into the witches cauldron.

Robin was told to go to the summit of the cliff, above the "Thrutch," where he found a whole coven of witches dancing around the bubbling cauldron. Robin scaled a tree, and dropped the ring right into the midst of the bubbling broth.

With a clap like the loudest thunder the cauldron flew into a thousand pieces and, as the terrified witches came to a sudden halt, they saw the Fairy King.



"The time hath come," he said sternly. "Too long have ye defiled the fair woods and glades of Healey Dene. Now by your failure to make the holy well lie, ye are delivered into my hands." At that, the whole crew shrivelled up into tiny elves of hideous ugliness. They sprang screaming into a fissure in the rock where some of the pieces of the cauldron had fallen.

"There" the King said, "practice your unholy rites. There you have a chapel for your evil worship. And long may it be ere any mortal be so foolish as to seek you out in your wicked den."

An extract from *In Olden Days Lancashire Legends: The Legend of Healey Dell* by The Rev GR Oakley, St Andrews, Dearnley.



The Fairy Queen and Healey Dwarf

Once upon a time, in the dim and distant past, a dwarf called Healey lived in the Dell. He was as tall as a child and yet had grown a huge bushy beard the colour of leaves in the autumn. Dressed in green and brown checked trousers, a crisp white shirt rolled up at the sleeves and a crimson red waistcoat, he blended into the forest as though he had been born of the land in which he lived. His friends were the birds that frolicked above his head and the animals that lolloped between his feet.



But more than anything he desired to know the fairies that he had seen out of the corner of eye when he had sat by the River at the Thrutch. In the rushing grey-green water there was a Chapel made up of a stone altar, pulpit and seats that stood as though they had been pushed from the heart of the earth. No matter how hard Healey tried he could never quite see the fairies clearly, as soon as he looked directly at them they were gone with a flash of colour and tinkling giggles... He began to wonder if he was mistaking the dripping of the water from the rocks above his head, or the falling leaves, for the little people of the Fairies Chapel.

One warm and sunny day, the kind of day when you can feel the old magic of the valleys and the craggy hills floating in the air, Healey was once again at the waterside. He had tied a rope knotted from ivy and spiders webs that could hold his feather-like weight to a knobbly old tree root and tried to swim out to the Chapel. But no matter how close he got, he could not reach it. He was left wet, exhausted, disappointed, and a little mad he had to admit. He sat on the edge of the River and cried. He stamped his feet and was jumping up and down with exasperation.

“Now, now Healey Dwarf,” the most beautiful lilting voice laughed over the roar of the water and the small man’s grumblings. “That is no way to behave in front of the Queen of the people you are so desperate to meet.” Healey could not speak. He could not move. His rabbit skin boots were as heavy as his heart as he sat getting wetter and wetter. The Fairy Queen continued, “So my little friend, why have you called the ancients from our peaceful halls?”



From below the land, rising like a wave crashing on golden sands, she appeared. Her skin glittered with the wealth of all nature’s goodness, pale and shimmering, her hair caught the sun as the little rays played amongst her curls. She wore a delicate and vibrant dress of silk made from cobwebs, intertwined with the dust the moon dropped upon the earth every night.

“O Fairy Queen,” Healey quaked, his voice cracking like wet wood on a burning fire, “I have so wanted this day to come, and now it has I just don’t know what to do!! As he was beginning the deepest, humblest bow he could muster, he fell. And fell. And fell.

Water dried him, and the rocks that he could see moved away from his head. The Fairy Queen had taken him into her citadel!



“Sit, Dwarf.” A voice echoed around the cavernous palace that caught the colours of the rainbow and then threw them from snow white wall to snow white wall. Poor Healey was stunned. He had no idea where he was or what he was supposed to do. He sat down. He thought that was the best thing he could do. This was where all of the fairies lived! He saw them. Some were only as tall as his little finger, others fifty feet high, and yet there was no problem with them fitting into the mounds and hills of Healey Dell.

A table appeared, full of the most delicious food he had ever seen and smelt. The bowls were made of huge waxy leaves such as Healey had never imagined before. The cups were hollow nuts, some the size of acorns, other the size of a horse. The things in the Fairy halls were from countries and worlds that Healey could never have dreamt of. The food itself was luscious. Tastes and sensations no human person has ever experienced passed the dwarf’s lips. Water that fizzed and changed from blue to burnt orange and then to lilac spluttered from waterfalls emerging from the deepest darkest depths of the fairy’s abode.



“Please tell me,” Healey finally was able to say, “That I will never have to leave this wondrous place. I have no friends that stay with me in the Dell. The birds leave to go to warmer countries and the animals nest away for the bleakest months. I am sometimes so alone, but I know that here I would be happy. If I could just go up to the Dell sometimes, because that’s where I come from and where part of my heart lies.”

“We have been watching you Healey,” said the Queen from the dwarf’s side. “And we have often thought that you might be happier here. But you are not a fairy. You are a child of the Forest whilst we are Mother Earth’s children. There is only one thing we can offer you, but we hope that it will fulfil your wish in some way.” Healey listened entranced. He was mesmerised by the Queen’s beauty and thought to himself that he could never say no to her. The Fairy Queen continued in her nectar sweet voice, “We have chosen the beautiful woods of Healey Dell as the entrance to our world. It is here that you can reside. By the Chapel, in the River, there is a spot that you would be safe. I can allow you to live outside in the Dell whilst still being close to us down here. Your friends the birds can sit with you and the fish can swim by your feet. And of course whenever you want us to come and talk to you we will be there. You will be our protector from man, for he is becoming much more inquisitive in these times, and in return you will live for centuries...”



Healey had not listened. The magic of the little people flowed through the air in ripples, but he did not notice. Agreeing automatically to whatever the Queen had said, he was suddenly slightly cold. He could hear the chattering of his friends of the air and those under the earth in the multicoloured world of the fairies... It is there that he still stands in the middle of the River

Spodden. The alter and the seats have since washed away, but the Fairy Queen had promised Healey safety. Made of stone, he waits for the day the fairies will come back to talk to him.

By Rhiannon Hayday 2006, influenced by R. Standing’s *Healey Dell, or the History of Fairies: Meetings of the Fairy Queen and Healey Dwarf in the Fairy Chapel*, Rochdale 1882.