

Hex & Hoax

The Myth and Misadventure of Molly Leigh



The tale of the Burslem witch Molly Leigh is as powerful a cultural watermark to the people of Stoke-On-Trent as Oatcakes and Sir Stanley Matthews. Yet all evidence of her life points to her being anything but the kind of character that we should associate with dark magic and fear. In fact, the whole witch narrative could well be an unfortunate consequence of one of the most bizarre and long-lasting practical jokes in British history.

Molly Leigh...Molly Leigh...

Growing up in Stoke-on-Trent, it was impossible to avoid the tale of Molly Leigh. The story of the witch buried at St.Johns Church in Burslem was a cultural touch-stone across the city, still is, and the rite of passage that came with the dare to run around her tomb calling out her name had been just as much a feature of my grandparents youth as it was my own. Quite what was supposed to happen when you invoked her spirit wasn't clear, not that it mattered too much; few made it around the tomb the requisite three times, with the sense of impending dread that accompanied the dare often resulting in a race off into the dark of the Churchyard well before the "spell" could be completed.

It's stories like that of Molly Leigh that have the greatest reach, those that have crossed over from history into the realm of true, everyday tradition within a community, tethered to that element of the supernatural which means that irrespective of personal belief, the local witch in the graveyard is something that everyone can be entertained by. The safety of experiencing fear within a locality you know and trust can be uniquely enjoyable; its like a real life horror film, and like a horror film, you get to partake in the experience and then leave, returning to the safety of your normal life, with only the occasional *heebie-jeebie* in the process. Yet while so many tales of the past are housed within a much broader tradition of folklore and legend, Molly Leigh was a real, local person; albeit one that history has remembered as a

devilish cartoon. We know that she existed not just because her grave is there at St. Johns Church in Burslem to this day, but because we have documentation too. And that is important, because it means that we can attempt to separate the fact from the fiction; which in the case of Molly Leigh, makes for a shocking contrast.

I love the theatre of her story, but as soon as I think about in the context of the motifs of legend and historical subjects it draws from, it never makes all that much sense. She is said have been a poor pedlar, selling milk to the people of village. How then, if true, did she come to have a four foot high table-tomb in the churchyard? Actually, come to think of it, if she really was a supposed witch, how did she become buried in the churchyard at all? Her deliberately mis-aligned burial of North-to-South itself is odd; as it is often more closely connected to those who died by misadventure and murder than a those accused of witchcraft. This alone suggests that, for the majority of her life - in opposition to the stories of her being reared on animals milk, having the mental capacity of an adult whilst an infant and keeping a talking blackbird as a pet - the “witchy” credentials of the legend were likely not to have been associated with her at all. As such, it strikes me that the wide suite of stories that make up the image of the Burslem witch have been applied entirely in death, not life; the *why* of which, being the real story at the heart of the tale of Molly Leigh.

The Myth

Questions as to the differences between folklore, legend and myth often prompt feverish debate within the circles that ask them. Personally, I have come to view folklore as the stories, primarily oral - and some of which are relatively transient - that have attached themselves to the history of a people over time. Legends meanwhile, are the stories that come down the years to us as a consequence of a defined, recorded historical event. The two often interweave, and beautifully so. Myth however, is different. There can be a sense of trickery to it, and on occasion deliberately so. It's where things, frankly, can simply get made up; where fiction can overrule history with ease. The more and more I learned about Molly Leigh, the more I found this idea of myth fitting. But that shouldn't put us off, not at all, because the history of the myth is perfectly captivating in its own right.

We know that Margaret Leigh was born 1685 in the village of Burslem, which was at that time a relatively remote settlement in the woods of North Staffordshire, but one that was nonetheless beginning its rise to eventual prominence as part of the world famous Pottery industry for which the area would become synonymous. We also know that she died in late March 1748 and was buried on April 1st of that year. Everything that happened in between however, is entire speculation.

Today, Molly Leigh is recounted as a local oddity, a woman who would sell milk in the village with her pet blackbird on her shoulder and whose sharp

tongue and independent nature was said to have made her unpopular with local figures of authority - and particularly with local church leader, Parson Spencer of St.Johns. It is he, it is said, that first accused Molly of witchcraft when her pet blackbird perched on the sign over the door of the Turks Head pub and turned the beer sour; a result of which saw Parson Spencer laid up ill for several weeks. After her death in 1748, it was Spencer who presided over her funeral, and following reports that her ghost had been seen that same night back at her cottage in Jackfields - an area near the modern day site of Vale Park - exhumed and reburied her in the churchyard on an axis that denoted her as a witch; her pet blackbird, retrieved from her cottage, thrown in alive for good measure.

Over the years, reappraisal of the Molly Leigh story as seen her cast as the unwitting victim of eighteenth century cultural perception. At one end of this spectrum is a narrative that casts Molly as an unfortunate soul, odd looking and peculiar. At the other, the idea that she was in fact a relatively wealthy local business woman that was the target of mean spirited local men who were envious of her wealth and standing.

This second view has become popular in recent years following the discovery of Molly's last will and testament in local archives. The document does indeed reshape the image of Molly Leigh, and pours scorn on much of the myth attributed to her life. In the document, Molly leaves her home at Jackfields to her mother, Sarah Booth - instantly removing the poor orphan element from the traditional story - and states that other tenants on the land should pay all

according profit and rent to her too. It's the first clue we have that Molly was indeed a local landowner, and not just at Jackfields - as land in an area known as "Wall Flats" is also mentioned together with Astbury in Cheshire. More than this though, later in the document we get a touching insight into her real character, as she makes provision for the widows of Burslem and Sneyd.

Some elements of Molly's personal relations are also revealed through her will. She gives order that nothing should be given to a Mr Joseph Booth, listed as her father-in-law (the most likely meaning being her stepfather), which is the first sign we have as to any element within her life from which animosity could potentially have arisen. Similarly, her request that funds be left to serve the upkeep of a family tomb, with any surplus going to poor of the village, and not the local church coffers, could also suggest a route to the motivation surrounding her apparent character assassination. With a pension also left for her aunt, she stipulates that upon her death, a sum of £400 be divided amongst the children of her cousin Ann Donavan. A wide range of silver plate is mentioned too, as are gold mourning rings for each of her immediate family.

I estimate, based on the £400 figure alone being equivalent to around £80,000 today, that the estate Molly left would have had a modern value of more than £250,000 in 2021. It is something which in light of the manner in it was divided up, with an emphasis on provision for those less fortunate than herself, would make her own good fortune a gift for the good of the people of Burslem in the mid-eighteenth century. Where on earth then, did we get the

idea of Molly Leigh the witch? The perceived slight to her step father actually shows little more than a desire to protect her mothers future income, after all he was left a gold mourning ring. The issue of surplus burial funds being left to the poor of the parish, as opposed to the upkeep of the church, may initially be seen as an obvious connection to the association of the witch that has become so relevant to the figure of Parson Spencer, but in full consideration of the document, it really is quite a stretch.

In isolation, the last will and testament of Molly Leigh serves to highlight her independent and generous nature, but little of substance to make her a candidate for rebranding as a witch. It would seem, at the point of her death, the idea of her being a witch was simply not on the table. But Molly Leigh's last will and testament is not the only historical evidence we have in connection to her, and it is in this other document that we find the clues to how this wild association as a witch may have come into existence, courtesy of an eye-witness account to her funeral...an event that may well have played host to one of the most elaborate and long lasting practical jokes in history.

Witch or Ghost?

Dogs, cats, hares, toads and all manner of animals had come to be associated with the figure of the witch throughout the century in which Molly was born due to their association as *familiars*. They were thought to be the demonic companions of the witch, through which they would do their

bidding, whose worldly appearance would be disguised as an animal.

Throughout the witch trials of European history, you're never too far from such a familiar and Molly's blackbird would be an unfortunate and easy candidate for such a role; but beyond this, there is literally nothing to tie her aesthetic to the traditional view of the rural British witch. I emphasise this here for the purposes of what I relay next, because discounting the whole idea of Molly Leigh *the witch* brings her story into a new and much more logical light. Instead, we must think of Molly Leigh, *the ghost*.

That we have an eye witness account of Molly's funeral is quite amazing. It is left to us thanks to an entry in John Wards work *The Borough of Stoke on Trent* from 1843, in which Ward recounts a report of a conversation that took place in the year 1810 in the Turks Head pub in Burslem. Under the title of *A Burslem Dialogue*, the conversation was recorded between two elderly gents of the area and touches on a number of memories they had from their younger days. One of those two men was an 82 year old Ralph Leigh, cousin of Molly, who discussed the issue of her burial with his friend, the 70 year old John Telwright. I have "translated" the conversation shared here from its original form, which was in early nineteenth-century Potteries dialect. None the less, the implications are clear;

Telwright: *Ralph, remember your cousin Peggy who lived at Jackfield and was buried across the way in the church yard? I often remember,*

when I was younger, scampering about at a rate past the churchyard, afraid of seeing her boggot.

Leigh: Who'd be such a fool? Forgive me, sorry but you must have been sure of seeing her ghost to run so fast!

Telwright: They said she'd only rest for seven years...but you know more about it.

Leigh: Sure I do, for I was there at the burial, and saw her laid quietly in the grave, east to west. But when we got back to Hamil, there was a pretty fuss amongst the bearers, for those that went in first to the house had seen her sitting in the nook, knitting as she used to do. I didn't see her myself, but Parson Spencer, that buried her, was fetched to lay the ghost and pacify folk's minds. So the next day, he asked Madam Egerton about it and they agreed to get some more Parsons to help them.

Telwright: Do you know what they did?

Leigh: I don't really know how they did it, but Master Spencer to the Clark and the sexton with a lantern and candle, and they took up the coffin and dug the grave cross-ways, and laid her in the shape of a blackbird and said "for seven years in the red sea".

Telwright: And where were the other Parsons at the time?

Leigh: It was said they'd ran away, left Parson Spencer to the job himself. Then there was a big lad, used to milk the cow, and after that

day he was fearful of going round in case her saw her ghost, but he never said anything.

Telwright: I've heard the Parson said he hoped that he shouldn't live to see the what happened after seven years.

Leigh: He was afraid he would see her after the seven years?

Telwright: I believe so, and yet he lived long after that time, and her old ghost has never troubled him.

Leigh: The old Parson was fond of drink, and the coffin bearers were full of it before the burial, and when they came back again to bury here I guess they were no more sober.

Telwright: You think they couldn't see straight?

Leigh: I suppose they couldn't. The old Parson had used to get boozy pretty often and fall asleep in the ale house till he was sober.

Telwright: Your aunt Molly, Ralph, would be burred cross-ways as was your cousin?

Leigh: Yes, she lived twenty years after Peggy, and then the tomb was built as it stands at the side of the church, cross-ways, for folk to look at.

Telwright: It was a queer concern, and I think I've heard your cousins burial was on April Fools Day, so I suppose it was an April fools joke.

Leigh: Well, it was the 1st of April...

This is as good as it gets for personal accounts in the realms of local history during centuries gone by. Not only is the key event in the Molly Leigh story discussed at length, but by an eye-witness who himself was a reaction; a relation that I should add, makes no attempt to dismiss the family connection for fear of embarrassment or shame. In it, we are enlightened to a scenario that changes the whole picture of the circumstance surrounding the origins of the Molly Leigh myth. In interpretation of the conversation, I am deliberately trying to steer away from any element of conjecture due to the nature of the scene it sets, bar the issue of the reburial having being made in connection with a period of seven years rest; which I am inclined to believe is most likely in reference to either the seventh day of the rest in the Bible or the seven petitions of the Lords Prayer.

Here we have a situation where Parson Spencer - and apparently most of the burial congregation - are drunk, and acutely aware of the burial taking place on April Fool's Day. It was a tradition that by 1748 had already been in existence for at least fifty years in the manner that we know it today, and the group, on returning to Molly's house for the wake, seem to have come up with the idea of claiming sight of her ghost. Whether this was designed to result in quite such an elaborate hoax or not, it seems that the fever of the night swept them up together in a wind of mischief; the result of which saw the involvement of the equally drunk Parson Spencer arranging an exhumation and reburial. Once underway, it would have taken a hell of a lot of courage to

turn back on the ruse when we consider the nature of the circle affected included close family and the Church.

It is wandering spirits, or those that may inclined to wander and haunt the living, that are most commonly found buried at an alternative axis. It is a practice we see in dozens of examples across the Midlands and the North West of England, with many more apparent throughout the British Isles. A report that Molly's ghost had been seen so soon after death is precisely the kind of thing that would motivate such a re-burial; the belief being that should she rise from the grave at a different orientation than that of standard burials, her spirit would become confused and unable to locate the people and locations she was likely to haunt. It is exactly that kind of event that has inspired instances of grave lore like Molly's throughout history. The witch story, most likely, is simply a later addition to her story. We should note that there is no mention of it at all in the account recorded by John Ward.

There is confusion around the issue of cousins and aunts and the names of Peggy and Margaret. I think this is most likely in the pen of the original writer, as the only order in which this would make sense, makes perfect sense. Molly was Ralph's aunt, committed to the ground first. Peggy was the cousin, committed to the family tomb at a later date and therefore naturally also buried "cross-ways". That said, Peggy is a common nickname of the time for Margaret. We'll never resolve this, but it shouldn't detract from the general theme of the conversation, which is like ice to the flames of the original myth itself.

Margaret “Molly” Leigh may well have marched to the beat of her own drum, but it was one of remarkable social conscience and strong independent spirit. A landowner across both North Staffordshire and Cheshire, she had done well for herself in life and was understandably protective of matters concerning her legacy in death. She was a figure that would naturally have come into conflict with those who looked to delve into her business, but far from a troublesome force in the community. Parson Spencer may well have had his run-ins with her, but ultimately was likely as much a victim of the April Fool's Day prank as Molly herself. As a result he is remembered to us today as a cruel hearted and boozy Parson whilst Molly is the witch that simply never was.

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