

The Talbot Curse

Lady Gwendoline and the Legend of the Chained Oak



The Chained Oak of Alton may be a unique piece of British folklore, but its creation story suffers from such a swathe of supposition that many have come to assume there is no genuine historical basis for the legend at all. Yet in the tragic history of the family who sit at the heart of the story, we may well find that the tale is indeed rooted in reality - as we look to uncover why an ancient oak tree has been wrapped in iron chains for the better part of the past 200 years.

Designs of Grandeur

There is one village in the Staffordshire Moorlands that has found its name known around the world. This is mostly due to the fact that it is home to one of Europe's most popular entertainment attractions, where each year more than 2 million visitors escape the hum-drum of daily life in a world of themed roller coasters, water parks and luxury accommodation. I am of course referring to the village of Alton and its world famous theme park, Alton Towers.

Outside of the feverish adventures to be had inside the park itself however, there is a lot more to the village of Alton than 99.9% of its visitors will likely have chance to realise. With more than 50 listed buildings dotting its roads and lanes, ranging from the twelfth century St.Peters Church to the village lock-up built in 1819, the village is home to an enviable architectural collection that vividly conveys the changing nature its rich history. It is a classic juxtaposition of English rural charm and the subtle embellishments brought by industrialisation-era wealth.

Of all the buildings and monuments that have come to find themselves in the village, it is the oldest which is perhaps the least understood. Alton Castle finds its structural origins in the early twelfth century as part of the great building project undertaken by the incoming Norman lords following their conquest of 1066, but many of its features that appear of the period, actually stem from its curious nineteenth century remodelling when by the 16th Earl of Shrewsbury commissioned the revered architect Augustus Pugin to revamp the site in the style of a replica Teutonic stronghold. This refurbishment saw the previous building, which was heavily damaged during the English Civil War, rebuilt in the Teutonic style complete with hospital and presbytery in a truly grand design.

The 16th Earl, John Talbot, was clearly a fan of such projects. The castle wasn't even his own official residence. Talbot was perfectly happy with his life at the nearby Alton Towers estate that had been built by his uncle Charles in the early 1800s; the grounds of which made for one of the largest formal landscaped gardens in the whole of Britain. Yet for all of this construction, evident wealth and influence, it is not his mock-medieval castle complex that he is primarily remembered by. Nor in fact is the Alton Towers site that is so famous today. Rather, it is the solemn, ancient oak tree that stands barely half a mile away from his former home, bound up in rusty iron chains.

The Chained Oak

The tree known as the chained oak stands amongst the woodland beside a Bed and Breakfast establishment of the same name, acting as a beacon of curiosity and puzzlement for all who pass by in its shadow. Visited by hikers, day trippers and on occasion, paranormal investigators alike it is a tangible, living testament to a folk tale that is quite unlike anything else found in the British Isles. Local legend tells us that it was at this spot, sometime in the mid-1800's, that the 16th Earl of Shrewsbury John Talbot was passing by on his way home at the nearby Alton Towers when his carriage was stopped by an old beggar woman.

The beggar, recognising the figure of the Earl, asked if he could spare some coins but found herself rebuked. Aggrieved, she reached out from her rags and pointed up to an oak tree on the slopes beside the trackway. From that night forth she said, for every branch that fell from the oak, a member of the Earl's family would die. That very same night, a storm broke across the valley and duly caused a branch to break free from the oak and the following morning, the Earl awoke to the news that a member of his family had suddenly passed away in the night. Vowing that the curse of the beggar woman would take no one else from his family, he rode out to the oak and ordered the its branches be bound in iron chains to ensure that none could ever again fall to the ground.

You may have noticed from the story of the Earl and the curse, that in comparison to many other instances of legend and lore, the chained oak is rather sparse of supporting detail. There are no definitive dates or names. Nor is there an attempt to contextualise the events surrounding the encounter. But, far from hampering its popularity, this streaming of narrative simply acts to create a story that can be retold and understood easily. It is snappy. It is scary. It is the kind of folklore that spreads and survives. That said, it is curious that the legend lacks a place within the local folklore collections that were so in vogue during the victorian period that followed the time in which the encounter was said to have taken place. There is not a single reference to it and yet there is no question that the chained oak existed during the period in Alton.

Over time, it is this lack of record that has contributed to a view that the whole thing may well be the result of a hoax. But enquiries into the context of the story and events in the areas history at the time in which the legend is reputed to have come into being could well yet secure a genuine origin for the tale. That's the thing with curses. Whilst many may view the idea of a curse to be little more than outdated superstition, there can

be little doubt as to the real power the concept can wield within the mind of those who believe themselves cursed.

Timeline of a Curse

Although the particulars of the chained oak legend have resulted in a truly unique piece of lore - there is no other comparable example in the British Isles - the manner of its creation is born out of a much older tradition.

We know from record that the time in which Talbot was a figure in the Alton area is relatively short. Despite some retellings stating a date of 1821, there is no plausible evidence of John Talbot residing in situ at Alton until 1831. He had inherited his title of 16th Earl of Shrewsbury in 1827 upon the death of his uncle Charles Talbot, who had himself built the new family seat at the site of Alton Towers. Upon his death, John may have inherited the property, but he was already perfectly comfortable in his own residence at Heythrop in Oxfordshire and only saw cause to move to Alton when Heythrop burnt down in a fire of 1831. He would stay at Alton until his death in 1852 - a period of just over twenty years in which the events of that lead to the legends creation could have possibly taken place.

The mid ninetieth century is rather late in the day when it comes to the idea of rural curses. Although not unheard of, they are far more commonly found in association with the witch craze of the early 1600s than they are in post-industrial Britain. Similar curses and incantations are mentioned in dozens of trial records from the period of the witch craze; a particularly illuminating example of which can be found at the heart of that most infamous episode that we remember today as the story of the Pendle Witches.

Recounted in his book *The Wonderful Discoverie of Witches in the Countie of Lancaster*, in which Lancaster Assizes clerk Thomas Pott details the series of trials that took place in August 1612 that would ultimately lead to no less than eleven people from Pendle being hanged for witchcraft.

Of particular interest in this work is the testimony around Alizon Device, who was said to have encountered a pedlar by the name of John Law out in meadows of Trawden Forest. She asked Law for some pins - handmade pins being relatively expensive in the early seventeenth century - only to be dismissed. At this rebuke, the court heard, Alizon uttered a curse upon Law, which - likely to the amazement of Alizon herself as much as anyone - then immediately took effect, striking down Law where he stood. Modern day interpretation of this event concludes that Law likely suffered a stroke, but the idea that

a curse could be uttered in such circumstances with real effect was one that travelled well and was ripe for recasting in local lore throughout the north-west of England.

At times, it is this depth of cursing-tradition, when placed alongside Earl John Talbot's reputation as a champion of the poor (commonly remembered to history as "Good Earl John") and an apparent absence of actual cursed victims in the historical record, which has pointed to the conclusion the whole affair is likely as a work of ale-house fiction.

Even if this were indeed the case, the questions remain of why and how did the chains come to be added to the oak tree at the centre of the story? Not only this, but the tress accessed via a series of twenty stone steps that lead up to its base atop the slopes beside the footpath. These steps are worn too, their centres depressed by feet much in the same way as we find with the surrounds of ancient butter crosses. If there really was to be nothing more than folly to the story of the legend, what on earth was the site created for?

Iron Heritage

It is perhaps no more than a strange coincidence, but the area of Alton and its surrounding settlements were renewed across the north of England throughout the Middle Ages - and right up into the industrial period - for one material above all others; the output of its iron forges.

The earliest evidence for this is found in a document from 1290 known as *The Secunda Carta of Cheadle* - essentially a letter of itinerary listing gifts made to nearby Croxden Abbey from the powerful local Santcheveral family - and we know that the industry continued to boom through to the 1800's at various sites in the area. Iron chains therefore, would be widely and readily available to many in the area. How they came to be hung from the Oak, in this view, is perhaps a ripe opportunity for far more prosaic explanation; whilst this would provide Earl John with plenty of opportunity for fast procurement as he attempted to stem the evil of the curse, it is not impossible that they were simply tossed up there by local children!

However, the matter of the steps is not so open to chance creation. In all likelihood, they were placed in their current site having being removed from some other, secured against the earth in order to frame the oak as a place of importance. There is no doubt Earl John would have ample access and means to undertake such a move, especially given that both Alton Towers and Alton Castle were undergoing various contraction projects throughout this time. Other than the steps being added much more recently, we should perhaps accept the idea of Earl John placing them in their current location as the

most likely means in which the steps reached the site of the oak. And so it is at this point that we find ourselves with a critical choice to make; the Earl was clearly a passionate builder, and as we have seen from the Teutonic design of Alton Castle, a man whose passion contained within it a vast capacity for imagination.

Either, this extended to deliberate creation of the chained oak site itself or he had a genuine desire to care for - and commemorate - the site at which he was cursed. I have come to believe there could well be a case made for the latter - as it would seem the night of the curse could well have directly proceeded a period of deep personal tragedy for the Talbot family.

A Kind Princess

Lady Gwendoline Catherine Talbot, born in December 1817 and the youngest of the Earl John's three children with his wife Maria Theresa, was known for both her beauty and her kindness. Described by King William IV as the "greatest beauty in the realm" her connections to Catholic Europe - courtesy of the Talbot's ancient lineage and stout Catholicism - meant she spent much of her youth on the continent with her parents. As a result, by 18 years old she was being actively courted by Italian nobility, and in 1835, married into the influential and much storied Borghese family.

The House of Borghese was an incredibly well connected institution. Amongst Gwendoline's new relations were the sister of Napoleon Bonaparte and various esteemed members of Italian regional royalty. In fact, although sometimes overlooked, Gwendoline's marriage to Marcantonio Borghese brought with it a royal title of her own; her husband was a Prince of Sulmona, a title created in relation to a town in the southern Italian region of Abruzzo 1610 for Pope Paul V's own nephew, also called Marcantonio Borghese. Courtesy of her marriage, Lady Gwendoline was now an actual princess. Yet she had no great desire to act as one, at least not in the high society fashion frenzied manner for which many of the period have come to be remembered.

Residing in Rome, Gwendoline quickly established a reputation as a patron of the sick and an individual genuinely fortified against the pursuit of material luxury that many in her circle were transfixed by; a great example of the practical implications of her attitude is found in a story that describes how, when sitting for a portrait, it was suggested by the artist for her to dress in a fine velvet Turkish shawl that he had previously seen her wear, she replied that she had long since given it away and was perfectly happy to be painted in a dress borrowed from one of her maids instead. But it was during the cholera epidemic

that had swept through Rome in 1837 that her kindness of character really found its stage.

Having finally relented to pressure and removed her family from the city, she returned to lead efforts of relief, working tirelessly to ensure the welfare of the children orphaned during the outbreak, petitioning influential families within her social circle to offer food, clothes and medicine to the worst affected and - in disguise as to allow her to work more freely - would personally lead efforts to wash, clean and feed those in need.

It was an intense and dangerous period, and it was only once the epidemic finally began its wain that Lady Gwendoline decided, in 1840, that the time was finally right to visit her parents back in Alton and for the first time in the five years that had passed since her marriage. Lady Gwendoline would spend the better part of five months in Alton, reconnecting with her parents and even being so thoughtful as to give birth to her third son whilst there; but it is the period around end of her stay that October in which we find cause to associate her visit with the legend of the chained oak. Just a week after her return to Rome, Lady Gwendoline fell gravely ill. It was scarlet fever and with that, on the 27th October, Lady Gwendoline Talbot, Princess of Sulmona, and she who had come to be affectionally known by the people of Rome as *Mother of the Poor*, was dead.

For Earl John Talbot, this would undoubtedly have been tragedy enough; that all three of Gwendoline's sons then perished, one after another, due to a local outbreak of measles in the months that followed, would have shook his soul to the core. Especially in light of what an old beggar woman had said to him just weeks before.

A Matter of Belief

The story of the chained oak describes how a storm had taken place on the night of the encounter with the beggar. In light of this, and given our learnings about Lady Gwendoline's ill fated return to Rome, if we are to accept any connection between the legend and history, I feel it appropriate to suggest that it was in the October of 1840, with its seasonal inclination toward tempestuous weather, that is the most likely point in time for Talbot's encounter with the beggar to have taken place. When held beside the family tragedy unfold in its, it would be perfectly understandable if the Earl should suddenly find cause to give the implications of the curse more merit than he initially had; especially once he had discovered that branches of the cursed oak had indeed since fallen to the ground. And given his deeply held religious beliefs, means and natural aptitude for construction, does it not perhaps then follow, that his grief would have

manifested in the issue of the chained oak?

There may be several routes toward the likely origin of the legend of the Chained Oak, but on balance, the effects of the tragedy that fell upon the Talbot family in 1840 are hard to overestimate. As such, the idea the chains were placed upon its branches in a simple but practical attempt to prevent further ill fortune feels less and less like fiction. For John Talbot, an intensely committed Catholic, superstition and the concept of evil would have been far from a matter of fantasy.

One further note in support of the legend's origins having a place in real history may be found via an enquiry into the nature of Earl John's nickname. In no way would I wish to paint a picture of the man's character in opposing reflection of the "Good Earl John" that has been attributed to his attitude towards the poor, but there is a misunderstanding at play here.

Earl John Talbot received this moniker from those who were benefactors of his wealth and influence in respect of his endeavours to improve the properties of the Catholic Church during a period known as the *Catholic Emancipation* and not in respect of his actions towards the poor.

Most notably enabled by the Roman Catholic Relief Act of 1829, the emancipation saw the Catholic church being freed from many of the penal laws that had been imposed upon it way back in 1662 by the Act of Uniformity; a body of law passed in a when the issue of religion in Britain was a truly dangerous and volatile topic. Therefore, the idea that "Good Earl John" would never spurn a needy beggar in the manner reported in the legend is based entirely upon a misplaced assumption. This doesn't make him an ogre, rather it simply places him squarely within the more unsavoury boundaries of common aristocratic attitude of the time.

When I began looking into the legend of the chained oak, I genuinely had little idea as to where the trail would lead. I had been aware the legend for a long time, and at times had assumed it little more than an local oddity. The process of writing about it however, learning and understanding as I went, served to once again illustrate the depth of history available to us from the window of our local lore.

Ultimately, the Chained Oak is a personal story of tragedy, love and superstition. The real star though is not the oak, the beggar and nor is it the Earl of Shrewsbury himself. It is Lady Gwendoline, a woman who appears to have been a shining example of that most rarest of things; a genuine force for good in a cruel and unforgiving world.