

Fenland Superstitions and Cures.

Superstitious beliefs were part of every-day life and there was a strong belief in witchcraft. The wild fens were said to harbour horrors like “boggarts, boggles, dead hands and will o’wisp” and it’s easy to imagine stories being told about such horrors to deter adventurous children from danger in the Fen, not to mention scary tales in the village beer houses on wild nights.

There were some traditional ways of protecting a new house by burying a shoe, or sacrificing a cat and burying it a wall. It was sensible to carry a ‘lucky charm’.

An ancient tradition was that if a fenman was in danger he would be aided by another so long as he could show a split goose feather.

Fenland Voices

Ellen Costelow

The fear of illness must have been ever present and the damp and cold of the Fen could lead to life threatening ailments. There was a knowledge of herbal remedies, but also there were DIY cures. A particularly common complaint was the ‘ague’, now known to have been a strain of malaria and severe rheumatism and arthritis were probably unavoidable.

So the advice was:

To ward off the ague keep a dried rat’s tail in a pocket.

To treat the ague swallow live spiders rolled in dough.

To ward off fatigue eat rabbit droppings rolled in oil, floured, then fried.

Sophie Biddle in the Eastern Daily Press.

No doubt there were many more.

There were however cures which had a scientific basis. For example:

Quinine and aspirin from fenland willows were known to reduce fever. In Later Georgian times poppies were grown and used to make opium which was widely used in some parts of the fens, quite often with unfortunate results, for example when used to calm a teething child. Opium addiction in adults was not uncommon.

Although the use of opium mentioned here relates to the Lincolnshire Fens, because Lakenheath’s environment was broadly the same ailments may well have received similar treatment.

Joanne Major

Lakenheath’s isolation from large towns like Bury St. Edmunds may well have been of advantage at times. Villagers might not have seen too many vagrants because rich Bury St. Edmunds wasn’t so far away and due to the distance of the village from large towns religious turmoil may have been less

severe than in some places. Perhaps villagers 'kept their heads down' and carried on as best as they could. Whatever, the village seems to have survived quite well, and some folk have prospered.

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