



In search of the Wild Man of Stainfield

Legend says that for centuries a mysterious 'wild man' lived in the woods around Stainfield

Words:

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One of Lincolnshire's strangest legends tells of a ferocious wild man who once dwelt in the woods near the isolated hamlet of Stainfield, near Wragby. The creature is described in various accounts as 'naked', 'semi-human', 'covered with hair', and armed with 'a great club' which he used to kill animals and, allegedly, people.

The legendary wild man of the forest features prominently in the folklore of medieval Europe. But unlike the Wild Man of Orford in Suffolk, and the Wild Man of Salisbury in Wiltshire and similar tales from around Britain, Lincolnshire's very own wild man appears to have been overlooked in the wider studies of folklore, hence the legend is little known outside the county.

Did the wild man really exist? Many people believe that because so many stories about him still persist, there must be a grain of truth in them. But strangely, none of the stories can agree on the wild man's identity or indeed the date when he was supposed to have lived.

The version of the tale with which most people are familiar, first appeared, to my knowledge, in a book, 'Folklore round Horncastle' (1915) by the Revd James Alpas Penny, who writes: 'In Stainfield church, near Bardney, are to be seen the helmet of one of the Tyrwhitts of Stainfield, with the family crest of a wild man with a misericord dagger hanging underneath it on the wall, opposite the samples hung up over the communion table, which were worked by the ladies of the Tyrwhitt family, containing the creed, Lord's prayer and Ten Commandments'.

He then goes on to recount the popular legend, said to date from somewhere between 1700 and 1850, which has grown up around the crest and dagger. According to the story, one Francis Tyrwhitt-Drake, was promised all the land of Stainfield, including its 280 acres of woodland and the land of neighbouring Lissinglea, if he would kill the wild man who had long terrorised the district. As the wild man lay asleep on a bank by a pit, his presence disturbed a pewit's nest and the twittering of the angry birds attracted

Drake's attention. Seizing his chance, Drake ran the wild man through with his sword. Mortally wounded, the man jumped up streaming with blood and chased Drake for a mile through the fields before he fell dead. According to some versions of the story, the wild man's blood staining the fields gave rise to the name of the hamlet but Stainfield, mentioned in Domesday, derives its name from the Scandinavian 'stony feld (field) and ford'.

Another variant of the legend, set in the twelfth century, identifies the wild man as a Stainfield nobleman who had been away fighting in the crusades for so long, when he returned he found he had been dispossessed of his estates. When he failed to reclaim his lands, he went to live in Stainfield woods, where he became so dangerous, Drake-Tyrwhitt was forced to kill him.

The legend goes on to say that Drake was rewarded with the aforementioned lands and he was permitted to have three pyewipes – or pewits as Tyrwhitt is an old name for pewit – on the family crest to commemorate his valour. However 'The English Baronetage', Vol 1, 1741, gives a very different account of the origins of the Tyrwhitt crest.

It says: 'There is a tradition in the family which has been handed from father to son, that the first of the Tyrwhitts, valiantly defending a bridge (tho' the time not mentioned) was after the action was over, sought after by the general and found sleeping amongst some bushes and was discovered by the cries and beating of the lapwings from whence he was called Tyrwhitt, and afterwards he had three lapwings assigned him for his coat of arms'.

History records that the Tyrwhitts came to Stainfield from Kettleby after they were granted Stainfield Priory by Henry VIII during the Dissolution of the Monasteries. Sir Robert Tyrwhitt (1482-1548) built a spacious mansion on or near the site. On the death of Sir John de la Fountain Tyrwhitt (1706-1760) who was unmarried and the last of the line, the estates passed to his mother's family, the Drakes, descendants of Sir Francis Drake,

who assumed the name Tyrwhitt with the estates.

However, the Tyrwhitt-Drakes never lived at Stainfield and they took no part in local affairs. The manor house having fallen into a state of decay at the time of their possession, with the exception of the south front, it was demolished.

It has been suggested the story of the wild man was simply put about to explain the curious relics belonging to the Tyrwhitts once found in St Andrew's Church, Stainfield. These were vestiges of tattered cloth hanging from the wall and reputed to be the remains of the wild man's clothing. And near it the aforementioned dagger, gloves and helmet, with a wild man for a crest, said to have belonged to the man who killed him. These rags are in fact the tattered remnants of three banners embroidered by the ladies of the Tyrwhitt family, now in the care of the Archives Office in Lincoln.

The wild man surmounting the funerary helmet that also forms the supporter of the Tyrwhitt family crest, is a medieval 'wodewose'. Like the lion and the griffin shown defending other family arms, the 'wodewose' is a heralding symbol of strength, fertility and honour. Unfortunately when I made inquiries to photograph the armour for the purpose of this article, I was informed it was stolen from Stainfield church in 1995.

As a matter of interest, the Tyrwhitt crest can still be seen on the sign above the sixteenth-century Tyrwhitt Arms public house at Short Ferry, Fiskerton. The pub, which passed from the Tyrwhitt-Drakes in 1943, was often referred to locally as 'The Wild Man'.

Yet another version of the tale – though the time is not known – says that the Wild Man was killed not by a bold knight but by a hand of farmers known as 'The Hardy Gang'.

Having had enough of the Wild Man killing and eating their livestock and generally terrorising the neighbourhood, they banded together trapping and killing him in a wood between Langton and Stainfield still known as 'Hardygang Wood'. However, in Fiskerton wood it is said there is an unusual black stone marking the spot where the Wild Man was killed and that it was his blood that turned the stone black.

Further research into the Wild Man saga led me to a series of letters published in the 'Lincolnshire Echo' in 1974. In a letter headed 'Refuge from the Armada' a gentleman from Essex suggests an interesting theory that the Wild Man could have been an escaped Spaniard from one of the many ships of the Armada wrecked

by storms and battles with the English fleet in the North Sea. He says: "The theory is that a survivor of one wreck evading capture, escaped inland and lived in the woods around Stainfield. Of strange garb and countenance, speaking a strange tongue and dependent on what food he could steal, it is not surprising he terrified the local inhabitants who regarded him as a wild man. Certainly, the clothes I saw in Stainfield church very many years ago, a helmet, gloves and remnants of a leather jerkin, are not inconsistent with such a theory."

Another writes: "I always understood that Mr Tyrwhitt poured a barrel of rum in the pond where he knew the wild man drank, and he drank the water and got drunk and that is how they killed him."

A lady in Brant Broughton adds another twist to the saga. She was told a Squire Turner went to the woods one day with his gun and shot the Wild Man as he lay asleep in the bracken, then buried the body under a stone just outside the church – presumably St Andrew's, Stainfield. Now it would appear that the Wild Man had achieved immortality, having apparently survived successive attempts to kill him over the centuries, as the writer of the letter in 1974 concludes by saying, 'she has heard her friends and mother talk about the wild man who was still

alive when she was a girl'.

The lack of any real historical evidence of the existence of the wild man suggests the legend most probably did originate from the misidentified relics belonging to the Tyrwhitt family once house in Stainfield church. However, it is possible that over the years a mass of hearsay concerning one or more harmless vagrants could have perpetuated the Wild Man myth.

One such notable eccentric was the hermit of nearby Sudbrooke Park, a magnificent 120-acre estate once dominated by the elegant Georgian Sudbrooke Holme Manor which burned down in mysterious circumstances in 1921. The park was sold and redeveloped in the 1970s but many years before, the hermit lived out his solitary existence amidst the forgotten weed-choked gardens and wood groves of the estate.

When he died in the late 1950s, in his hut was found a huge pile of letters dating back fifty years, including his call-up papers for the First World War, but most intriguing of all, at the very bottom of the pile was his personal invitation to ride with the local hunt.

Evidently, this latter-day Wild Man had once held a position of social standing. It is therefore ironic that he chose to live out his last days in the forgotten ruins of a once important estate.



A nineteenth-century illustration depicts a wild man carrying off his next victim