From generation to generation, people pass on their own ways of doing things to families, friends, colleagues and anyone they spend time with. These fragments of their culture can include all sorts of information - how to dress, how to speak to different kinds of people, what to do in certain situations, games and rhymes, customs to keep around the house or community, what seasonal festivals to observe and how, sayings and expressions and much more.

This body of acquired knowledge can be thought of as cultural tradition, and varies from place to place, helping to foster a sense of identity from family to village to school or larger unit, such as a country. It is more widely known under the name of folklore.

A major role of folklore is to express the 'common sense' of a community - in other words, the shared rhythms and beliefs and ways of doing things that are accepted and largely followed locally. In this way, it affirms the community awareness of those who share the same common sense, though it also differentiates those from a different cultural tradition. Even a few miles of separation can affect the expressions people use, the stories they tell, and the customs they maintain.

Other roles played by folklore are the normal functions of society - education and socialisation, maintaining as co-operative and harmonious group spirit as possible, and maintaining a sense of identity and validity amongst members of the group. Families, mills, chapels and churches, schools, neighbourhoods - all these folk have their own ways of doing things, their own lore, passed on informally amongst themselves. Alongside the broad sweep of history, with its laws and wars, its wills and bills, runs the everyday life of the people. Folklore, their own sense of how things are and were, is the cement that binds people and communities together.

Folklore thrives best in these conditions:

- a long history of settlement
- a network of close but separate settlements, each with their own sense of identity and economic foundation
- a need - such as trade, markets, work or finding marriage partners - for these communities to interact
- similar geographic, social and economic environment

These conditions are well met in upper Calderdale.

However, in modern-day Calderdale, the conditions which dismantle the web of cultural tradition are also active:

- Shortfall in local work opportunities
- Mobility and turnover of population
- Restricted availability of affordable housing

These factors lead to people moving away from their home areas. Settled communities, where families, friends and workmates often lived within streets of one another, knowing each others' names, family backgrounds and other aspects of their personal history, break up, and people find themselves in new communities where the old stories and histories are not shared knowledge, but points of separation.

Settled communities are easier to break than to make. Yet in time, and given stability, the new communities we form will create their own cultural tradition and folklore, their own shared networks of knowledge. Will we notice our new folklore as it forms? Probably not, because folklore is so enmeshed in the normal routines of everyday life, so familiar and commonplace, that few people realise that what they say and do conveys a lot of information about where they come from and who they know, especially to someone from a different place! We only really notice folklore when it is out of date, but like all life, as the old dies out, the new grows up to take its place.

A look at the cultural tradition of Upper Calderdale:

As time goes by...

Human life moves according to two primary rhythms - the rapid beat of the annual cycle, with its seasons and its festivals, and the slow background swell of the individual lifespan as it moves from birth to maturity to death. The customs that are associated with each of these rhythms provide a framework for a person's life within their society.

The year

Upper Calderdale is fortunate in having one of the country's most vibrant Easter traditions, in the form of the Midgley and Heptonstall Pace-Egg Plays, still performed every Good Friday in towns and villages of the upper valley.

Spaw Sunday was the first Sunday in May, and got its name from a custom of visiting certain springs known to have health-giving mineral waters - 'spa' wells. Often the waters would more palatable when mixed with liquorice. Many such spa wells existed around Calderdale, but the most popular was in Luddenden Dean. Thousands of people would go there, and might well catch a sermon, a political speech or a band concert from those taking advantage of the crowds.

A key annual event in most local villages, and different in tone from the other rather boisterous customs of the year, was the Sunday School Anniversary and Treat (also known as t'charity), around Whitsun. It was a time for new clothes Villages would spruce themselves up as relatives and former residents would visit on this day of gentle games and tea in the open-air - weather permitting.

Wakes Week was a period during summer set aside for mill holidays, which varied from place to place. Mills would shut down for a week, and their supporting communities would become

deserted as families took themselves off to places like Blackpool or Skegness. The last official Wakes Week in Calderdale was in 1995, though the custom itself largely died out locally in the early 1980s.

The revived Rushbearing at Sowerby Bridge, which takes place over the first weekend of September, is, like the Pace-Egg, a popular and well-supported event. It is a processional custom that appears to have started in East Lancashire and spread across the border into West Yorkshire and elsewhere. It grew out of the old practice of scattering rushes across church floors to keep in a measure of warmth, but any ecclesiastical solemnity was quickly lost in the associated spirit of celebration (locally known as the Thump, and usually associated with the local fair). Rushbearings and Thumps, held around late August and early September, died out in the face of public disapproval of drunken revels, but Sowerby Bridge was revived in 1977 and is going strong.

Come November 5th, and it was Plot Night - rarely called Guy Fawkes Night in Yorkshire in deference to his long-established and otherwise respectable Yorkshire family. As in other areas, bonfires were lit in communities across the hills, and for weeks before youths would go out 'chumping', 'progging' or 'cob-coiling' (depending on where you lived) to collect fuel, which would then be guarded against theft by rival bonfire-makers. Midgley children chanted this nominy as they went from door to door:

Little Jackie Lantern 'e gate-catched down in a cellar hoil
striking a match, a stick or a stake, for King George's sake
Pray, a cob o'coil or ought you've a mind
to chuck up Midgley bonfire hoil

The customs of Yuletide are common across the country, and traditions of carolling, gift-giving, family get-togethers and rich food at Christmas, and the 'lucky bird' of New Year (the first visitor of the New Year, who should be a dark-haired man bearing a gift, usually of coal) have long been the standard fare of Calderdale households too.

However, the spirit of renewal that characterises this dark time of the year was expressed in the custom of 'mumming' or 'mummering'; this was not a folk 'mumming' play, but a sweeping custom performed in the nights before New Year. By all accounts, it had an unearthly atmosphere, as, typically, groups of adults, in disguise with cross-dressing and blackened faces, would make their way from house to house, bursting in at the door and sweeping the main room and especially the hearth, all the while speaking not a word, but humming (or 'mummering'). Children in some villages would seek extra pennies for the festive season by making up a 'milly box', a container in which was constructed a little Christmas tableau. Less overtly religious was the 'wesley bob', or the vessel cup - 'wesley' and 'vessel' being derived from 'wassail', an old Anglo-Saxon word meaning 'good cheer'. Midgley had a distinctive 'wesley bob' that consisted of two hoops of wood set cross-wise into a flat square plate, and decorated with tissue paper; inside might be set a tableau in keeping with the chapel preferences of the village.

"Here we come a wesleying among the leaves so green
here we come a-wandering so far as to be seen
for it is Christmas time that we travel far and near
so God bless you and send you a happy New Year…"
Calderdale version of a traditional wassailing song

A recent custom, started in 1966, is the New Year's Day swim at Lee Dam in Lumbutts, originally a fundraising event that grew a life of its own. Another new event, dating from 1971, is the World Dock Pudding Championship in Mytholmroyd; this custom derives from a local dish cooked with the leaves of bistort, or 'passion dock'. Like the mineral waters taken on Spaw Sunday, this meal helped refresh and replenish the system after the rigours of winter - a kind of traditional 'detox'.

The life

Many 'cradle to grave' traditions are common across the country, with minor variations in some localities. These are just a few of the 'life traditions' recorded locally.

On entering the world, a baby would be given something to symbolise prosperity in life - perhaps a coin, like a silver threepenny piece, but sometimes a small jug, or a silver spoon. Other places in the West Riding are known to have offered also salt and bread, even matches, to the new-born. Meanwhile, the father disappeared to the pub, to stand a round of drinks - known as 'weshin t'baby's yead'.

Starting school or work signified a major step in life, especially for boys entering a trade. Newcomers could expect some kind of initiation rite, a practical joke played on them by their fellows. Usually these would be embarrassing and even humiliating - sometimes even dangerous - but thereafter the new worker was an accepted member of the in-group. A common trick was and still is the fool's errand, like being sent to fetch a bucket of steam, or told to see the supervisor for a 'long stand'!

Courting a girl out of your own district was a risky business - if it didn't provoke a fight, the offcomer might find himself required by local youths to pay a levy, known in parts of West Yorkshire as 'socket', if he wanted to proceed.

Local brides would wear something old, something new, and something borrowed - though the 19th-century gentleman who recorded this said nothing about 'something blue'! If someone stumbled going upstairs, it would foretell a wedding to come; though if they stumbled in the aisle or on the home threshold on returning from the ceremony, then some would say it was a bad sign for the marriage! Often the bride would be formally presented with the fire-irons as she entered her new house, symbolising her new responsibility over hearth and home.

On leaving the church or chapel, a wedding party might find their way barred by a rope stretched across the way; to proceed any further, they would have to pay a 'toll' or tip, sometimes known as 'hen silver'. Alternatively, or perhaps additionally, a local couple might find themselves pelted with old shoes for good luck!

Wedding parties were good business, and local pubs offered incentives like a copper kettle or other useful household implement for couples to choose their establishment for their reception. During the party, or before the couple set off for a honeymoon, friends might be given the key

to the new marital home - this custom, still encountered today, guarantees some practical joke will greet the newly-weds on their return home!

When Joseph Dobson founded his now famous sweets firm in Elland in 1850, he specialised in Bride Cakes and Funeral Biscuits, customary confectionery at these gatherings.

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House and home

The place where folklore is passed on (or not) most readily is the home.

Successive generations seek to transfer the values, knowledge and skills that they think younger members of the household will require. Sometimes, changing social circumstances will mean that the younger people will abandon some of what they learned at home, if it no longer seems necessary in their lives.

Donkey stones, for instance, were once - and not so long ago - an essential part of scouring the threshold and keeping the home 'respectable', but are nowadays never seen.

Similarly, a familiar sight around this district was to see, one day a week, whole streets closed to motor traffic by lines of washing strung out across the road - nowadays, thanks to changed work patterns, tumble dryers and the higher priority demanded by drivers, this is a rare sight.

Indeed, many of the roles that were considered to be a wife's obligation a generation or so ago have been abandoned or shared with other family members as gender restrictions and community requirements - the 'done thing' - have loosened.

Home remedies have also declined, which has no doubt contributed to our longer waits for surgery appointments! All kinds of ailments and accidents were treated at home in the first instance, using substances that, though still common, are never found in the home - like juniper, recommended by quarrymen for bad backs, or bethony, which had a variety of applications from dissolving bladder stones to anaesthetising toothache and dispelling panic attacks. Other local recommendations had less of a herbal character - a red silk bag containing two hazelnuts, hung around a child's neck, protected them against drowning and the common cold, while mouth sores could be alleviated by a live frog placed in the mouth and pulled out by its back legs.

Other local household traditions recorded include:

- loaves were marked with a cross before going into the oven
- never kill a robin or destroy a swallow's nest
- spilling salt was unlucky, but misfortune could be avoided by tossing the salt over the left shoulder
- coins received as a gift should be spat upon and put in the pocket wet
- a drawn tooth was dipped in salt and thrown on the fire, or it became unlucky
- guests should always knock before entering a house, even if the tenant is at the door welcoming them.
- amongst a range of unlucky things were: opening umbrellas indoors; putting shoes on a table; crossing on the stairs
- amongst lucky things were leaves blowing into the house; spit; a swallow nesting on the house; black cat crossing one's path

As society changes, and loses some of its traditions, new folklore emerges. The contemporary saying, 'the family that washes up together stays together', would have been barely thinkable in the middle of the 20th century, and reflects the changing organisation of the home. A highly visible and increasing part of modern folklore is the wayside memorial, set up at the site of accidents.

Constantly changing are the catch-phrases that are picked up from the media, and then used at home, at work or in the pub - one of the best-known of such phrases today, derived from Kenneth Wolstenholme's famous football World Cup commentary in 1966, is of course 'they think it's all over - it is now'.

This is, thankfully, something we can never say about folklore, no matter how fragile it appears to be.

As the basic unit of society, the household and all those within it have needed a sense of security from misfortune, whether intended or accidental. Hence, a number of measures have been employed locally to protect the home by more or less magical means. A common theme to them all is their location at the threshold, in all cultures associated with uncanny intrusions and protective rituals.

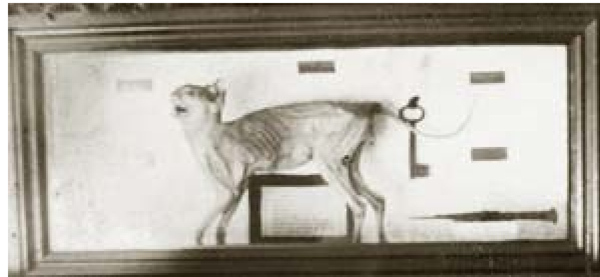
Everyone knows the horseshoe placed at the threshold as a luck-bringer, although the notion that the horns must point upwards, 'to catch the luck', is a relatively recent addition employing the symbolic virtue of the cup. The real luck-bringer is the iron itself, which has the power to keep witchcraft, fairies and suchlike away.

Windows and doorways of 17th-century houses in Calderdale sport a range of designs, some of which are protective in intent. Chief among these is the 'archaic head', a simply carved stone head which watches over the house and protects it from magical attack; though very popular in the Calder valley in the 17th and 19th centuries, the pedigree of the head as a protective motif can be traced back into prehistory.

Other symbols found on local vernacular architecture are the roundel, which protects against the evil eye; the 'devil's arrow', either an arrow or heart-shape on its side, which similarly targets ill intent; and the spiral, a symbol of smoke and thus associated with protection against fire.

Pinnacles on top of house gables are often seen, and were said to prevent witches from perching on the roof, while a rowan branch should also keep witchcraft away. Some houses feature a diagonal cross, often in the apex of the gable - though we may think of it as St Andrew's Cross, its origin is the Viking dag rune, which was used to keep out unwelcome influences. A device with a less pagan background is the sacred monogram of Jesus, which invokes Christian blessing upon the house.

Perhaps the most barbaric of traditions designed to protect the luck of the house and its occupants is the custom of walling up a live cat, which then mummified as it starved to death.



Mummified cats have been found in a few locations around Calderdale, including Heptonstall Old Church.

An important factor in all of these talismans is the use of symbolism and association with desired outcomes. At one level, to see them kept those outcomes in the householder's mind, a traditional equivalent to our 'positive thinking'. At another level, they are testimony to a heritage of protective magic preserved within folklore's repertoire from ancient days, thanks to the enduring perception of their needfulness.

Further reading

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Peter Brears, *North Country Folk* Art (John Donald, 1989)

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The legendary landscape

Upper Calderdale's suitability for the preservation of local cultural tradition is nowhere shown as strongly as in its wealth of folk tales about places, many of which are still being passed on by word of mouth. Prominent landmarks anywhere tend to attract stories and legends, perhaps explaining some event thought to have taken place there, or expressing the local community's feelings about that place, and a distinctive landscape like the Calder valley naturally lends itself to a rich repertoire of story.

Place legends, however, are also vulnerable to loss - just as they are remembered (and retold) whenever that place is seen or visited, they can be forgotten when that place is no longer in one's local environment.

Stoodley Pike

Stoodley Pike, one of the valley's most distinctive landmarks, has long been thought to be a mysterious place. Before the peace monument was first built in the early 19th century, there was apparently a stone cairn on the spot; and if ever a stone was dislodged, flames would be seen emerging from below, and misfortunes would occur amongst the farms on the hillside below until one of them repaired the cairn.

Although the cairn is no more, some people still say that on some nights you may see a light issuing from the hillside there, indicating that the way to the otherworld is open. Unsurprisingly, Stoodley Pike is also reputed to be a focus for UFO activity - perhaps a case of modern folklore putting a contemporary spin on a long-familiar event.

Great Rock

Stoodley Pike also features in a story associated with Great Rock, near Blackshaw Head. Legend tells how God and the Devil looked out over Hebden Bridge from Stoodley Pike and decided on a wager. If the Devil could step in one stride from the Pike across to the Great Rock on the other side of the valley, he could have the souls of the little town in the valley. Naturally, he failed - but only just. His hoof landed on the rock - which is also known as Devil's Rock - but slipped, and he lost the bet. You can still see the imprint of his hoof on top of the rock, and the crack it made as it slipped down the front of the rock.

Robin Hood

This great character of English folklore was no stranger to upper Calderdale, roaming the landscape at will and occasionally moving great boulders while digging or playing games. Standing Stone in Sowerby, which he used as a mark for playing quoits, has now vanished, as has Robin Hood's Pennystone at Wainstalls. We can still visit another Robin Hood's Pennystone, however, on Midgley Moor, or other places bearing his name: Robin Hood Rocks at Cragg Vale, Robin Hood's Bed on Blackstone Edge, Robin Hood's Cave in Skircoat or Robin Hood's House and Well above Widdop. Or we can enjoy a drink at one of the two Robin Hood Inns in the upper valley, in Cragg Vale and Pecket Well. The old ballads also tell us that Robin Hood died in Calderdale, and his grave stands on a private estate near Brighouse

Bridestones

The focus of the Bridestones legend is the Bride Stone itself, a standing gritstone pillar weathered into the shape of an upturned bottle. Beside it, there once stood a similar pillar, known as the Groom, and it was between these stones that according to the tradition, the first marriage in the area took place, between Nan Stone and Jack Moor.

The young couple set up home among the rocks, but their wedded bliss was short-lived, and they separated in anger. Jack took against the institution of marriage and against those stones that had tricked him into it, and he vowed to destroy them.

Jack and his friends attacked the Groom with picks and sticks, and soon managed to lay him low; but when they turned their attention to the Bride, they hesitated - and when Jack at last swung his pick at its narrow waist, an unearthly scream tore the air, and the demolition gang took to their heels.

Churn Milk Joan

On the edge of Midgley Moor stands a boundary stone erected in the early 17th century, which has attracted a remarkable amount of folklore. Its name commemorates a milkmaid - churn milk is local dialect for buttermilk - who died at the spot. She had been fetching milk from a nearby farm when she was overtaken by a snowstorm - although some say she got lost in fog, and Ted Hughes, the Poet Laureate who was born in Mytholmroyd in 1930, heard that foxes killed her. Whichever it was, the stone is her last testament to us today.

Visitors to the stone still customarily reach up and check the basin in the top of the stone; if they find any money there, they remove it, taking care to replace the coins with an equal or greater amount from their own pocket, for as long as they give as good as they get, they will be assured of good fortune.

Local children used to hold hands and dance around the stone to make a wish, and the stone is said to turn round three times if it hears the church bells from Sowerby or Mytholmroyd at midnight on New Year's Eve.

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