

Stoodley Pike

John Billingsley digs out a metanarrative behind a West Yorkshire peace memorial

As I write this, half an eye is on the window to my left, which looks out over the upper Calder valley of West Yorkshire. Most of the view is sky; the horizon is a line of dark moor, slightly, very slightly, undulating. Pretty much directly looking S, that horizontality is breached by an extrusion that stands up from the moor, and out from the sky. An obelisk, like a needle stitching the land together with the heavens. Often, it's even visible at night, thanks to the glare of the East Lancashire conurbation that lies beyond. It stands – never sits – on a headland of the moor that may just be the most visible headland in the entire valley. It's hard to be sure, because the obelisk draws the eye anyway.

Perhaps it's there *because* this is the most prominent headland. Perhaps it's there to underline that point. It had a forebear, an earlier acknowledgment of the point, and before that there was another marker, and maybe another. That is, it has ancestors. This is not a place, it's a succession of places, making the same point, marking the same point, a fixed point that is never entirely still.

Around it there is movement – the clouds, driven by the wind; the mist, drifting like its memory; the hikers and hang gliders and cyclists that are drawn to its demanding attention. The world, spinning. And stories.

The first one I heard I never saw in print until I put it in print myself.¹ An acquaintance told me that on foggy nights you may see a bluish light emanating from the hillside – **this meant that the door to fairyland was open**. And by enticing implication, that one might enter that realm. Now I realise that if this story were voiced 200 years ago, it would be taken not as an invitation to explore, but as a warning, to avoid the place and to check the fastenings on doors and windows. Anyhow, that story was a shock to my naïve sensibilities. Surely the gate to faerie could not be marked by such a solid, stolid, even faintly grim, grey monument? The intangible vied with the tangibility. It was tempting to privilege the tangible and the visible.

Others had much the same idea, it seems. Various friends decried the monument's supposed phallocentrism. And others who are definitely not friends, too, like David Icke, who climbed the stairway inside the obelisk and felt "enormous male sexual energy all around me. I wondered what on Earth was happening until I remembered where I was ... **inside a male penis in effect**".² Good for him, eh. Whether this association of erections with erections is rooted in the monument or in 20th-century psychologies is something I could never decide.

Nonetheless, the 20th century was and remains very much with us at Stoodley Pike. Nearby Todmorden was claimed in the mid-1970s and beyond to be the hub of the so-called Pennine Triangle, a hot-spot of Unexplained Aerial Phenomena – UFOs for the traditionally minded – including a celebrated abduction scenario involving a policeman and a lot of giddy speculation³.

Stoodley Pike, inevitably, was like a beacon, pulling the unexplained things in, and in 2002 Todmorden Tourist Information Centre won a competition among the country's TICs for the oddest question staff had faced. The question – 'What time do the UFOs fly, where can we sit and watch them and would it be alright to take a picnic?'.⁴ If the staff had told the woman Stoodley Pike, no one would have raised an eyebrow.



Some scoffed at the idea of alien craft visiting the area, though there did seem to be an unusual frequency of **strange light reports** from upper Calderdale, especially in the 1970s, when a Todmorden policeman seemed to have been involved in a Close Encounter of the Third Kind. Some lights can be explained away, as a little to the south of the Pike, aircraft circling to land at Manchester Airport do a turn, and their powerful headlights will dazzle, dim and disappear in an often tantalising way.

But not every light can be explained away that easily, and a different explanation was offered for that hillside's strange light propensities. It's the local landscape's fault – or rather its faults, in the quartz-laden millstone grit of which the hills are composed. A fault can't rest easy, it gets pent up and then has to move, and then the stress in the quartz generates a piezo-electric effect, and bingo, you've got a light, not strange, not mysterious, but Scientific. An Earth Light. And they do exist, they're seen particularly at earthquakes, naturally enough; and a spate of reports of flaring red lights, many seeming to emerge from the land itself, were reported around Todmorden in April 1982 in the hours preceding a palpable and audible earth tremor centred between there and Hebden Bridge.⁵

Some people had their own idea of what was going on. An idea apparently going around in the Walsden area in 1981 was a theory to account for the strange lights that people were seeing – they were helicopters, “operated by the Ministry of Defence who had excavated huge underground caverns in the Pennines”, which would account as well for the flaring lights seeming to come from the ground.⁶ Though not for the absence of sound.

So maybe it wasn't a faerie realm intimated in that glow on foggy nights, but secret government tunnels.

Nowadays I know that all this was a reminder not to take things too simply. Their face value may be enough to be going on with. What you see is what you get, at first, that is until you look past it. So our story of Stoodley Pike begins now, with what we see.



Keystone, Stodley Pike

An obelisk built of sandstone, dark grey with age and weather and old soot from bygone manufactories, built in 1856. 120ft high, a square base leading up to a balcony 40ft off the ground, and above that a tapering needle 80ft tall. The balcony wide enough to walk around (and Gordon Sutcliffe, back in the days when they made their own amusements, even cycled around the parapet, and another man once jumped off to the ground, each surviving), accessed by an internal stairway climbing a squared spiral in almost-complete darkness. **You enter through a doorway** over which is an historically explanatory plaque⁷ and below this three engraved symbols – the compass and square of the freemasons, a six-pointed star, and below that, a pentagram. The six-point star's interlinked triangles bear various interpretations – it is

the Seal of Solomon, and signifies the interpenetration of matter and spirit and other binaries, such as male and female, or light and dark: the Hermetic maxim 'as above, so below'.

This is clearly, obviously, a Masonic monument. Even if the dark ascent wasn't intended as an overt masonic analogy, it'll suffice as one, underscored by the symbols above its portal. If you're aware, your entry to the obelisk becomes a ritual of initiation which you can take as seriously as you wish. However you take it, the experience is the same: you are venturing through darkness and implicit danger, the absence of vision; until you emerge into the light. **Look up from the balcony** – the tapering obelisk draws you towards heaven. But inevitably on your return you descend the stairs, into darkness again, emerging in the light of the everyday world, your feet on the earth.⁸

The obelisk is a favourite Masonic emblem, with a layered esoteric symbolism stretching back way before them. It is frequently associated with the sun, and the fructifying powers of that orb – though only when it touches earth, the world beneath the sun. So yes, it could be taken as a fertility symbol, the phallus that generates – though only if it connects with the other agent of generation, the earth itself. In which case it's pointing the wrong way. To construe it as a phallic demonstrative is plainly to miss at least half the message, wilfully so.

The obelisk is a reflective symbol. The tip is typically pyramidal, and so it is at Stoodley Pike. This characterises the tapering pillar of the obelisk as a three-dimensional representation of a triangle – the upward triangle of the six-pointed star above the doorway. As above, so below, the implication to discern the downward triangle. **If the upward triangle**, the obelisk, represents the sun and heavens above our head, then the downward triangle represents the earth beneath our feet.

And the physical obelisk itself is an axis, a pole or fulcrum around which heaven and earth turn. And to which heaven is attracted. Energies from the upper realms are solicited and stored within, for appropriate distribution in the lower. So also an obelisk or tower on a hilltop is a fine conductor of fire from heaven, an energiser for the land.

When this monument was erected, it was no greenfield site. It was built on the ruins of a predecessor – or rather, just a few yards further from the edge of the cliff than its predecessor. This ancestor, though no contemporary image of it seems to survive⁹, was more cone than needle; a round tower on a square base, topped with a spire like a wizard's hat and rising to a height of just over 113ft – 1360 inches. Inside, 156 steps ascended in an unbanistered spiral, not to a balcony, but to a small room with windows and a fireplace. Cosy – few things are more settling than a warm seat by a fire in a hearth (where did they get the fuel from, on the open moor?). But vulnerable, the room and staircase suffering such severe depredation from vandals that the doorway was walled up. A sad fate for a peace monument.

For that was what it signified, why it was built in the second decade of the 19th century. Overtly, at least. Spasmodic wars with Napoleon's revolutionary France had been going on across Europe for over 20 years, at great cost to life.¹⁰ There was, however, some benefit to the makers of military uniforms, and local manufacturers were supplying these to all sides in the conflict – trade was king. And trust was a currency in business if not in politics. When Napoleon was sent to Elba in 1814, when Quaker industrialists initiated a subscription to erect a monument to the peace – not to war, or victory, just peace – then perhaps a few of those donating to the cause were salving their conscience a little? No matter, the peace was being declared in stone, and the stone said as much; an inscription over the door read '*This monument was erected by public subscription to commemorate the Peace. Anno Domini 1814*'. But it was only started in 1814,

and when Napoleon escaped from Elba in February 1815 and hostilities resumed, work on the Pike stopped until finally the Battle of Waterloo in June that year allowed for its completion.

It was less obeliskal than its successor, but still too inviting for the lightning that struck it in a storm late in the afternoon of February 8, 1854: "to the dismay and regret of the people who dwell near, it came down in the evening" noted the *Manchester Courier*,¹¹ adding rather unnecessarily for what was after all a stone-built monument, "with a dull rumbling sound like that of falling rocks". **Like the Tarot trump of The Tower**, which depicts just such an eventuality, and bodes chaos and crisis, the collapse was taken both popularly and in the press as an ominous sign. But as the *Manchester Courier* condescendingly noted of the locals, "The good people of Lanfield [*sic*] are expecting all sorts of disasters to follow this event ... we might expect them quaking with fear at the bugbears which apprehension in that secluded spot is sure to summon up". Did local belief, that if lightning were to strike Stoodley Pike then war was likely, emerge before the event or after?¹² That very afternoon, after months of tension in Crimea, the Russian ambassador had left London; the following month, the British and French declared war against Russia.¹³ The rationalists explained it away as being due to the effects of the weather on the pointing – the locals would have said, reasonably, 'aye, but why *just then*?'. The peace monument, as far as the good people were concerned, obviously took its obligations seriously.¹⁴

Though contributions towards a replacement started immediately, its successor was not in place until after the Crimean War ended in 1856 – just in case, perhaps. The association with peace has lingered; in July 1962 a CND 'ban the bomb' emblem, 5ft across, was painted on the tapering needle, and remains visible today, and 200 years on from the foundation of the first peace monument, a commemorative rally was held there on May 3 2014, the anniversary of the Great War, with a brass band and the release of 200 homing pigeons (standing in for white doves). Peace endures, symbolically at least – helped along perhaps by the slight lateral displacement from its predecessor and the lightning rod installed in 1889 to avert further Tarot-esque events or rouse local anxieties.

Back to that ancestor. One writer has declared that the modern monument is predominantly a construction designed by local freemasons as a kind of temple to their creed, "hijacking" the peace message for their purposes.¹⁵ Yet the local masons were always present, if in the early days more public. The earlier Pike was built by rite, to stand by rite. In autumn 1814 a crowd of "nearly 10,000"¹⁶ gathered to witness the Masonic ritual of laying the foundation stone, and some of the more prominent personages were no doubt also looking forward to the whole sheep that was to be roasted later. Was it a touch of over-enthusiasm that caused a small child seated on his father's shoulder at the edge of the Masonic circle to lean forward into the path of the Tyler's sword, as he marked out the ceremonial space? It's said he had been warned to step back, but – the sword made contact with the young lad's head, and 'blood flowed freely' on the ground where the monument was to stand. There are people who believe this was no accident, though deliberate wounding of a child in public was surely too much for Freemasons, even in George III's reign. But, they point out, blood helps a building stand firm, and this new monument needed that, in its exposed location. "One therefore wonders why it has never been traditioned that Stoodley Pike was reared on bloody ground" mused the *Leeds Mercury* nearly a century later.^{16a}

Ah, but it *was* so 'traditioned', as we will see. And anyway, that monument fell down.

The 1814 Pike is usually referred to as the first monument, and as a peace memorial on the site it was. But was it the first? Herbert C Collins, of Heptonstall, reckoned "Stoodley Pike has always been associated with war" and goes on to say that the peace memorial was erected "on

this site where an obelisk used to stand commemorating Austin Stoodley, an officer under Fairfax at Marsden [*sic*] Moor".¹⁷ This is the only mention I have ever come across of another earlier monumental ancestor and it is likely that this is local hearsay. But on Carey's map of 1794-5, Stoodley Pike appears marked with a square with a cone on top, while on **Jeffreys' map of 1771**, the earliest mapped mention of Stoodley Pike that I've encountered, it is marked with a triangle; both markings imply an erection (and we're not talking David Icke's language now). So was there another monument there, commemorating a 17th-century individual with a name like a vintage car? Was he an officer in the East Lancashire Parliamentary battalions, from which the Heptonstall garrison was drawn? Stoodley Pike begins to leave us with no grounding.

Yet there certainly was architecture of a kind on this hilltop, that predated any of these – a cairn, now presumed to have been a Bronze Age mound, the likes of which were not graced with symbols on the old maps. The 'good people of Langfield' and surely beyond acknowledged this pile of stones in further twists to Stoodley Pike's ancestral narrative. Some said it marked the grave of an ancient chieftain; some that it held the bones of a murder victim. Perhaps in some way both attributions may be correct, though they tell us little. But bones there were supposed to be, and bones there were: when the workmen dug the foundations for the 1814 Pike they found some, deep in the ground – black and fragile, and probably human, but not, according to one of the workmen, definitely so.¹⁸

In our dogmatically sensible day, we'll interpret that as the bones of deer or sheep or some other beast, that died before the peat built up and blackened its bones; but **locals weren't so quick to such mundanity**. They knew from local tales that there had been times when stones of the cairn had been dislodged, and a fiery light or flame would spring out from the cairn – those UAPs again – and things would start to go wrong in the farms, butter wouldn't churn, cows would go funny, and so on. Nothing would go right till someone from Stoodley village went up and repaired the cairn, and seal off the world from a great cavern below where the Devil and his imps were at their business. So the cairn needed its caretakers for the sake of the local populace, and maybe some thought those unidentifiable black bones deep in the ground could be the bones of the Devil's subterranean minions, his dark imps.

In 2010 a chap I spoke to told me something that recalled those dark imps. He and his wife had been walking up to the Pike in an electrical storm, he told me, a dark and heavy atmosphere, and a couple of fellows coming down warned them to beware of the squirrels. And sure enough, when they got to the monument, they encountered three or four large grey squirrels, scampering about, besetting the monument and hanging from the stonework. These impish little beasts moreover were aggressive, running up to them, hissing, baring their teeth. Is the modern Devil reduced to squirrels now, or is there something we don't know about these rodents?

This seems a far cry from the fairy realms.... Or was it? **Thomas Shaw**, of Saddleworth, linked the monument with fairykind in an 1824 collection of poems: one bemoans how the fairy queen, Old Moss, had deserted Saddleworth and taken her troop "where Todmore's kingdom lay" and

*Espous'd Tod of the den
And they dwelt on the moor
Where Todmorden doth stand,
From hence 'tis plain
Derives that village name*

In case you should doubt this piece of lore, in a footnote to another poem concerning Stoodley Pike, he confirms it, to his own satisfaction at least: "There is a tradition in the country of this monument being of very ancient date: and that it was at first built to appease the ghost of a

certain necromancer: perhaps the giant Todmore, who dwelt there".¹⁹ So who is this Todmore, the imagined namer of the nearby town, supposed to be – fairy king, giant, wizard, daemon? Another poet of the 19th century, William Dearden, built a book-length poem, *The Star-Seer*, around a magician (or necromancer) who lived at 'Oswald Tower' (commonly supposed to be Horsehold, on the hillside between Stoodley Pike and Hebden Bridge). In madness he slays his wife on their nuptial night – a great storm arises, he is carried off, and Oswald Tower falls "**from its rocky height into a yawning chasm**" (this is even before its pre-Crimean collapse). The gulf immediately closes over the ruins "and becomes the dread, Dark sepulchre of living and of dead".²⁰

There is more than meets the eye in this hillside. We need to delve deeper. In Cornholme, there is an outcrop known as **Eagle's Crag**, associated with a magical tale of a shape-shifting witch courted by a nobleman, a courtship that traditionally repeats at Hallowe'en with a hunter, a white doe, and a hunting dog atop the Crag.²¹ But they aren't the only spectral visitants to the Crag – it is also on the route of the Gabriel Ratchets, an airborne squawking ominous horde who bode no good when they are heard, and one is advised to fling oneself face to the ground if you do. People say they're probably 'just' a passing flock of geese, honking as they fly over, but even passing geese can carry an unintended meaning. The Ratchets are often lumped together with a pan-European phenomenon of **the Wild Hunt**, an aerial pack of huntsman and hounds bearing similar ominous meaning, and they career away to the SE, towards the moorland heights of Langfield Common. Near Mankinholes, below the Pike, they fade or pass into the hillside.²²

While from the other direction flies an omen of Ted Hughes' childhood, prefiguring a tragedy that is not a million miles from *The Star-Seer*, either geographically or figuratively. The young Ted in the 1930s sees a vision, perhaps a dream – a gigantic swan "the size of a city", flying westwards from Halifax over Mytholmroyd lighting up the moors, and it becomes an angel of "smoking snow" – is this an angel, a blessing? But his mother's response "turned that beauty suddenly to terror". Did Hughes 'see' the Gabriel Ratchets (Gabriel the angel in the guise of a swan, or is it a goose?) flying in from the other direction? We do not need to guess where this omen earthed its message: "this immense omen, with wings rigid, Sank **out of my sight behind Stoodley, Under the moor**".²³ Ted Hughes' experience, early in a life we now know to have had both otherworldly vision and harsh tragedy, echoes the dread of liminal vision that comes uninvited, and helps locate its fulcrum on a particular stretch of moor.

And so local traditions constellate²⁴ – fairies in their realm, Todmore and Moss Oak, the Devil and his imps in their cavern, the obelisk focussing the light of the heavens into the earth, mystery helicopters serving giant MoD bunkers, Gabriel Ratchets, and a 'smoking swan' – beneath the point where the upper valley's most visible marker stands: a succession of narratives, making the same point, marking the same point, a fixed point that guards a gateway to what local traditions perceive as hollow hills...

1. *Folk Tales from Calderdale*, Northern Earth 2007
2. David Icke, *The Biggest Secret*. Bridge of Love Pub., 1999: 136.
3. Jenny Randles, *The Pennine UFO Mystery*, Granada 1983; 'Flappy valley', *Fortean Times* 325, 326, 327 & 328 (March, April, May & June 2015); and particularly the Internet for the giddiest ideas.
4. *Todmorden News*, 14 March 2003
5. Jenny Randles, *Supernatural Pennines*, Robert Hale 2002, p30-31, 76, 225-6.
6. Randles 1983, p141-143.
7. For inscription, see E.M Savage, *Stoodley Pike*, Todmorden Antiq. Soc. 1974, p.30.

8. Unfortunately for this symbolism, during repairs to the monument in 1889, a grill was placed above the stairway, allowing a modicum of light to guide the pedestrian. An early case of 'health and safety gone mad'? A lightning conductor was also installed at the same time, deflecting heavenly energy away from the structure itself.
 9. Even Abraham Newell, writing in 1918, could only say "No pictorial representation or exact description of the edifice erected in the years 1814 and 1815 is in existence, so far as I know". 'Stoodley in Langfield and its associations', *Halifax Antiquarian Society Transactions* 1918, p73. Dennis O'Neill offered impressions in Savage, *op. cit.*
 10. Estimated at between 3.5 and 5 million dead, around 400,000 of those from British forces.
 11. Bradford Observer, 16 Feb. 1854, from *Manchester Courier*.
 12. A similar prognosis attached to the well at Horsehold, above Hebden Bridge, should that ever dry up. Nick Wilding, 'Happy Birthday Stoodley Pike', presentation to Hebden Bridge Local History Society, 10 Dec. 2014.
 13. An inscription above the masonic emblems offers a précis of its history, reprod. Savage p30.
 14. It's not the only local war-related monument to have an ominous inclination; the bayonet of the soldier's rifle at Ripponden war memorial snapped and fell to the ground at the outbreak of World War II. *Ripponden History Guide*, p7.
 15. "Although there is little direct evidence that the Freemasons of Todmorden, led by Samuel Fielden, hijacked the rebuilding of the Stoodley Pike monument for their own secret purpose, everything points to that conclusion... Yes, the second building was a peace monument, but as in the long tradition of obelisks, it was also held by the Freemasons to commemorate the peace to the greater glory of God the Architect". J A Heginbottom, 'The Stoodley Pike obelisk: a commemorative monument 1793-1889', *Halifax Antiquarian Society Transactions* 1994, p122.
 16. "The foundation stone of a pillar, in commemoration of the peace, has been laid on the summit of a hill called Stoodley Pike... There were nearly 10,000 persons present", *Morning Post* (London), 15 Oct. 1814; *Hull Packet & Original Weekly Advertiser* 1 Nov. 1814; and other newspapers reprinted the same around that time.
 - 16a. *Leeds Mercury* -Local Notes & Queries June 3 1899.
 17. H C Collins, *Rambles Around Rochdale*, Rochdale Observer 1947, p27-28. He meant, of course, *Marston Moor*, not Marsden.
 18. *Todmorden & Hebden Bridge Historical Almanac* 1890, pp33-47. Newell 1918, p72.
 19. Thomas Shaw, 'The Narrative of Shantooe Jest (alias) Old Mr Robert Dillrume' and 'A Question in Arithmetic'. In *Recent Poems on Rural and other miscellaneous subjects*, Priv. Pub., Huddersfield, 1824, p123-135 and p172 respectively.
 20. William Dearden, *The Star-Seer*. Longman, 1837, pxiii-xiv, 120. Shaw and Dearden had obviously heard the same story.
 21. John Billingsley, *Folk Tales from Calderdale*. Northern Earth 2007, p10-18.
 22. James Walton, 'Legends & Customs of Our District 6'. *Halifax Courier & Guardian*, 6 August 1938. A member of Southowram Tuesday Club (VB) told me, 14-7-15, that several years before she'd been with friends visiting Stoodley Pike, and near the top of the stairwell she'd seen a big black dog – which strangely enough none of her companions saw.
 23. This vision is expressed in two poems: 'Ballad from a Fairy Tale' (*Wodwo*, 1967) and 'The Angel' (*Remains of Elmet*, 1979).
 24. And how much else might the 'guid grannies', as John Travis described them, have gossiped about? In 1890 Travis wrote "The collector of oral tradition might meet with sufficient matter for a goodly volume respecting this spot and its spiritual visitors. I, however, shall forebear mentioning any of the gambols of the *De'il*, or the tricks of the mountain sprite". One regrets Travis' reluctance, and even more that no one took up his suggestion. (*Round about Todmorden and its Hills and Dales*, priv., Todmorden p13).
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