

# MANX FOLK LORE

## BEEAL ARRISH VANNIN

### Manx Museum Gallery Factfile



*Hunting the Wren*

#### Folklore yesterday and today

Folklore is not all about witches and fairies. In a pre- scientific world before radio and television, people understood little of the causes of disease and death. They needed to feel that there was something they could do to protect themselves from the unknown.

Folklore is about hidden fears and old wives' tales, about rituals and customs which helped people make sense of an often frightening world. But people did believe that alongside the human, everyday world there was another, inhabited by spirits and creatures such as the "little people" [mooinjer veggy]. Sometimes people could become part of that world, yet return to their own unharmed.

*Phillip ffarcher, for Confessing that he himself he was in the companie of the ffairy Elves that night when they came to Knock Doony when the good Wiffe was strucken with the ffairyes.*

(Confession at the Church Courts, Kirk Andreas, 1665)



*The White Boys*

Even the concept of time was not as precise as it is today - some people could experience premonitions or "see" events in the future before they actually happened.



Some of the "little people" were helpful to people with their work or if they were sick, but others brought misfortune. It's easy to see why people hoped to keep on good terms with the fairies who might help them, and used charms and herbs against those who wished them harm.

Today, even with so much more scientific knowledge and security, how many people are superstitious about Friday the 13th, about breaking a mirror, or about avoiding walking under a ladder?

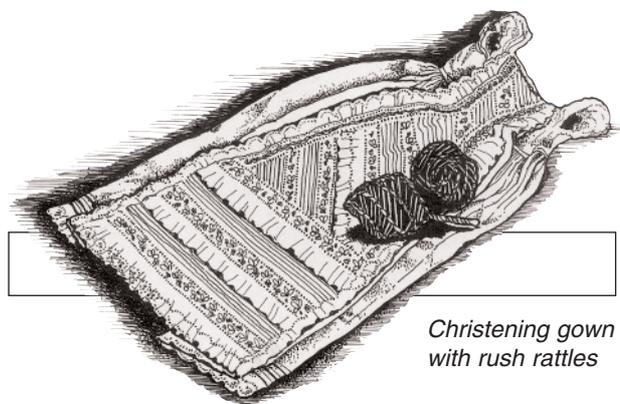
## Folklore surrounds the important times of birth, marriage and death.

### Birth

In times when many children suffered from childhood diseases which from lack of medical knowledge often proved to be fatal, and when death of mothers in childbirth was frequent, people tried in many ways to protect mother and child. The belief in fairies and their custom of stealing newborn infants, leaving changeling children in their place, caused real concern.

*"Her mother said they wouldn't go out of the house without putting the tongs cross the cradle that the fairies wouldn't come and take the child."*

(Anne Clague, Dalby)



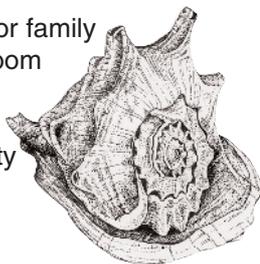
Christening gown with rush rattles

*"The christening robe must never be taken off until after the baby has been put to sleep in it...For the christening service always bread and cheese carried to church, given to the first man (met on the way to church) for a boy - woman for a girl."*

(Vera Quirk, Douglas)

### Marriage

Weddings were occasions for family rejoicing. Both bride and groom had their attendants and processed to church from home, the bridegroom's party going first to the bride's house.



Conch shell for announcing a wedding

*"The wedding day was the event of a lifetime. On the previous*

*evening, horn blowing and the firing of guns"*

(Mrs. Kinvig, Ronague)

*"When the parties left home to go to the church, if they were not stopped with ropes across the road they were supposed to have no luck, and they threw some silver coins to those who stopped them."*

(Mr. T Brew, Sulby)

After the wedding ceremony there was a feast with music and dancing. All the relatives helped to provide the food and drink.

### Death

Any death in a rural community was an occasion for mourning.

*"If there was a death the whole neighbourhood went into mourning, and no-one would be seen working in the fields until after the funeral."*

(William Moore, Begoade)

Omens of death were recognised and believed.

*"A picture falling from the wall  
A cock crowing in the night  
A dog howling in the night  
Going out to feel if the hens' feet were cold  
All these were signs of death."*

(Ethel Flanagan, Douglas)

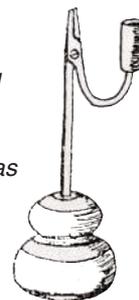
Traditional funerals began after the laying out of the corpse with earth and salt (a preservative), symbols of the mortality of the body and immortality of the soul, and the farrar (wake) when friends and relatives of the dead person came to the house to pay their last respects.

*"And I put the green sod under the bed where she was lying."*

*"After the laying out a plate with salt was put on the body."*

*"It was always the custom to put a light in the room with the dead"*

(Mrs. Lahmers, Bride)



The corpse would be carried by bearers along the local *raad ny merriu* (road of the dead) to the parish church for burial.

### Charms and Folk Medicine

**CHARMS** were thought to be effective, both against malicious people or fairies and against illness in humans and animals.

Certain materials were particularly effective, such as salt, iron or dust. Others were useful for a particular purpose. Some you could use yourself, for others you would go to the local wise woman or charmer.

*"If someone had passed the street who you thought didn't like you, you would go out and sweep the road and throw the dust over the cows to get sufficient or better butter"*

(Mrs. J. Stowell, Douglas)

**A charm to remove numbness or “sleep” in the feet.**

*Cadley-jiargan* in Manx

*Ping, ping, prash*

*Cur yn cadley-jiargan ass my chass*

(A W Moore “Folklore of the Isle of Man” 1891)

Charms were supposed to lose their effectiveness if they were told to others, or, in this case, if they were translated from the Manx.

**FOLK MEDICINE.** The use of plants for medicines was the only way for people to remedy common ailments, until the growth of towns led to the opening of chemists’ shops which sold patent medicines. “Home made” herbal cures remained common in country areas.

*“Tramman (elder) was reckoned very good for healing and there was virtue in both the leaves and the flowers”*

(Mrs. Kinvig, Ronague)

*“Wild raspberry leaves - used as a drug to ease pain. Dandelion roots, dock roots, sage leaves and nettles - a good tonic.”*

(Vera Quirk, Douglas)

## Seasonal Festivals

Seasonal festivals often combine Christian beliefs with much older customs from pagan times. Early Christians took over the times of pagan festivals for their own celebrations, finding that it was the easiest method of gaining acceptance among people reluctant to entirely give up their old ideas. Some festival dates relate to the Celtic year which began in November rather than January.

## Easter [*Y Chaisht*]

*“On the Thursday before it, the poker and the tongs, all the fire-irons and the fender were put out in the outhouse and locked away. The fire was cleared out with a bit of wood and a piece of cardboard, no fire-irons used.”*



*“Hop Tu Naa night - the 31st October - they went round with lanterns and sang Hop Tu Naa for a penny at peoples’ doors.”*

(Albert Taylor, Ramsey)

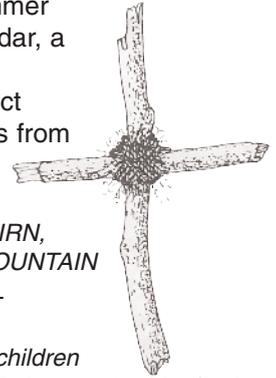
Left: “The Flitter Dance”, danced on Good Friday

*“His mother used to get all the aprons in the house and fold them and put them in a drawer and lock it in the night before - this was because the women brought the nails for the crucifixion in their aprons, so his mother and grandmother never wore aprons on Good Friday. Then at three o’clock on Good Friday afternoon everything was brought back and could be used again.”*

(Leighton Stowell, Castletown)

## May Day [*Laa Boaldyn*]

Mayday was the start of summer according to the Celtic calendar, a time surrounded by folklore, particularly the need to protect households and their animals from supernatural powers.



*THE CROSK KEIRN,  
MADE FROM MOUNTAIN  
ASH AND WOOL*

*“On the eve of May Day the children hurried from school to go to Raby to get a bit of cuirn (rowan twigs) to make a cross for every door, and to gather primroses to strew over the step”*

(Mrs J. Stowell, Douglas)

## Harvest- Home [*Y Meailley*]

Anglo - Manx: Mheillea

*“I have seen the last sheaf and a bit taken out of it and taken into the house... The idea of doing it was that it procured a blessing on the corn and made sure it would be got in safely - by putting the one sheaf in the barn the rest would be got in.”*

(Thomas Qualtrough, Port St Mary)

## Hallowe’en [*Oie Houney*]

Oie Houney was the last night of the Celtic year when people believed in the effectiveness of light and fire against the supernatural. It was a time too when people believed that you could see something of the future.

## Christmas [Y Nolllick]

Celebrations included the mummers' play performed by the White Boys [Ny Guillyn Baney].

*"The boys were all in white with coloured ribbons dangling down - the sash over the right shoulder and a helmet of cardboard - gold, silver or crimson. The doctor was all dressed in black - hat, a frock coat, trousers and shoes. Saw a religious significance in the White Boys - death and the resurrection of Christ - the Ascension also."*

(Leighton Stowell, Castletown)

Other groups like the Wren Boys and the Mollag Band would go round with music and dance.

*"The Hunt the Wren boys used to go round too. They would be carrying a long pole with cheese hoops round the top and one hoop through at right angles. They would have the wren inside. It was a real wren ... whole thing was decorated with coloured papers."*

(Mr. R W McKneale, Ramsey)

## New Year [Y Vlein Noa]

The New Year was heralded by bells ringing. It was lucky if the first person to visit the house (the *Qualtagh*) after midnight was a dark haired man whereas a red haired woman was most definitely unlucky! The *Qualtagh* brought gifts of coal and silver which should ensure plenty of warmth and wealth for the household in the coming year.

## Creatures

As well as fairies there were believed to be other creatures with whom people could come in contact.

Some were harmful and people did not want to disturb them if they could avoid it.

*"When the Buggane was heard it meant that there was going to be an awful storm. The Bugganes were awful."*

(Mrs. Kinvig, Ronague)

Others, like the Phynnodderree could be helpful - if they wanted to be!

*"The story was that he was a good fairy [the Phynnodderree] - he came round one stormy night and called to the farmer - "you can lie to, I've got all your sheep in, they're all safe, but there was one li'l loghtan, I had to chase her three times round Barrule before I got her in" and in the morning when the man went out, he had a hare in with the sheep - that was the one he had to chase round the mountain".*

(Mrs. Cormish, Grenaby)

## And what became of the fairies?

*"...they all went up over the Block Eary, and they were dressed in red and blue, red coats and blue breeches, or the other way round, and all had Glen Garry caps with a streamer at the back. They crossed over into Laxey, and went down to Laxey beach, and the tide washed them all away."*

(Mrs. Sarah Christian, Sulby Glen)

## Further Reading

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Reprinted 1942.

Morrison, Sophia

**Manx Fairy Tales. 1911**

Reprinted 1991, Manx National Heritage, reprinted 2002

This is a small selection of titles.

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