

“ CONTEMPORARY OTHERWORLDLY GAZETTEERS ”



# THEME: **BELIEF**



PSYCHOGEOGRAPHIC SURVEY OF ELMET



## THEME: BELIEF

Our second theme is somewhat more tangible than the first. It became clear while conducting our survey that belief, specifically, religious belief, has a high level of psychogeographic relevance within the region of Elmet.

One of the most prominent and celebrated landmarks on the landscape is the Barwick-in-Elmet maypole. At 26 metres high, it is the second-tallest maypole in the United Kingdom, beaten only by the maypole in Nun Monkton, at 27 metres tall, 30 miles to the north. Many and varied explanations have been given over the years for the meaning and origins of maypoles within Britain. The general consensus does seem to suggest that they are some remnant from a pre-Christian religion. Maypoles and their associated practices began to face resistance with the rise of protestanism in England and were banned and condemned under Oliver Cromwell's Long Parliament in 1644. However, with the end of the Interregnum and the Restoration of the English monarchy in 1660, maypoles were set up across the country in celebration. Some historians have even suggested that maypole dancing and traditional folk practices became a form of resistance during the Interregnum, which would chime with certain traditions associated with maypoles, such as those in

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Early morning mist on Boggart Lane, between Ulleskelf and Ryther, named after a *genius loci*

Barwick-in-Elmet, occurring closer to Oak Apple Day, on May 29<sup>th</sup>, rather than the traditional May Day on the 1<sup>st</sup> of May. Oak Apple Day was a public holiday in England between 1660 and 1859 established by parliament as a celebration of the Restoration of the monarchy. The Late May bank holiday, held on the last Monday of May, is the closest modern equivalent and when the triennial Maypole Festival is held in Barwick-in-Elmet; the maypole is taken down, repainted, restored and then re-erected with a large festival and celebration. It is very possible that this practice has its origins with the celebration of the Restoration. If so, it shows some connection to themes mentioned earlier regarding resistance to ruling authorities, in this case being Oliver Cromwell's parliament.

Whatever the origins of the Maypole Festival, cancelled for the first time ever in 2020 due to the coronavirus pandemic, the presence of a 26-metre tall maypole cannot but evoke questions about the pagan past of the area and its survival in the present day. To a greater or lesser degree, it seems that something has survived in the presence of the maypole, albeit a dim echo not entirely understood. Other aspects of this system of beliefs have survived in the presence of a number of holy wells, some still apparently venerated, such as St Helen's Well in Walton, known for curing eye ailments, while others such as the well in Saxton, seem to have been forgotten entirely.

As shown previously, toponyms are also a source of information on Elmet's past, and also its Christian and folk beliefs. Names such as Church Fenton and Monk Fryston indicate their association with Christian religious buildings and orders, while the more sinisterly-titled 'Boggart Lane'



The 26-metre tall Barwick-in-Elmet maypole



A door bears a knocker with the face of the Green Man, a folk character associated with indigenous British pre-Christian paganism



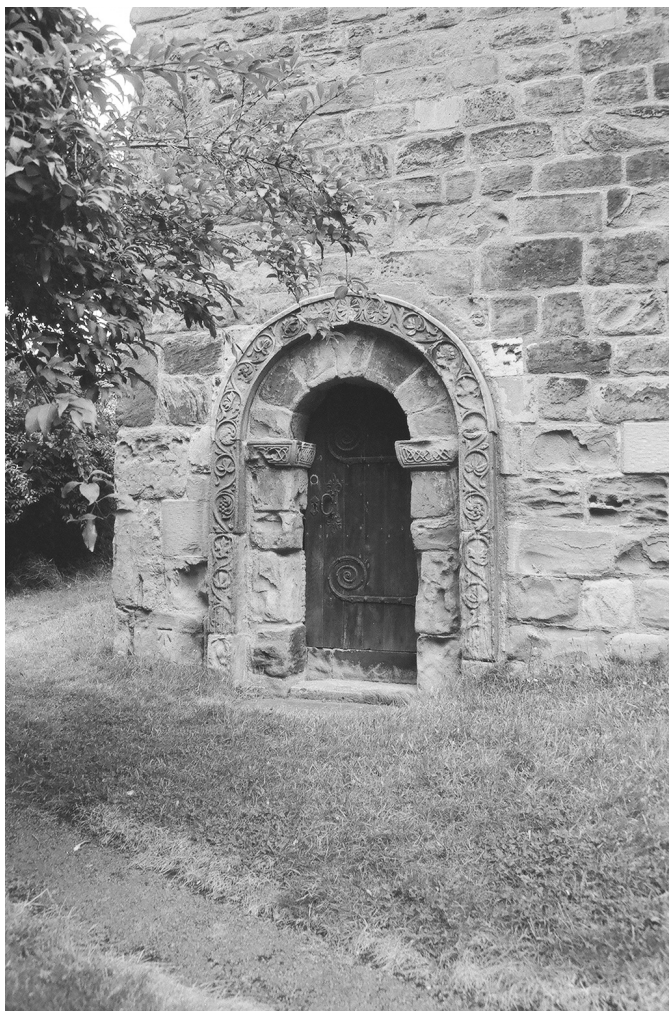
The well on Headwell Lane in Saxton, no longer venerated

between Ulleskelf and Ryther has been named after a malicious spirit which haunts the area. Quite literally, local religious beliefs have defined certain parts of the region.

While certain practices with pagan origins still influence Elmet today, it must be shown that the Christian heritage of the region is just as rich, if not richer. As already mentioned, the church in Ledsham is the oldest extant building in West Yorkshire today and may well have been referenced by the Venerable Bede himself. Although no other churches have preserved so much of their original structures, many others across the region have retained parts of their original Anglo-Saxon foundations and cores, including St John the Baptist in Kirkby Wharfe or St Oswald's in Collingham. St Oswald's in particular is interesting as it houses two stone crosses (sadly only in fragments), one carved in the Anglo-Saxon style and the other containing runes and elements of Norse mythology, most probably dating it to the 9<sup>th</sup> century.

It is likely though that even the oldest of these churches was built upon pre-existing places of Christian worship, remnants of the church that was established in Britain during the Roman occupation. Others may have been built upon pagan religious sites. Whatever the case, it appears clear that religious belief and practice has not only helped define the region, but been a central facet of its people through the life of Elmet over the centuries. While certain forms of pagan worship have slowly faded into shadowy aspects of folk traditions, it has not always been considered this way by all. In 1603, Mary Pannal, a cunning woman from Ledston was accused of witchcraft and burned at the stake. She reputedly still haunts a hill near Kippax which





The Anglo-Saxon doorway of the Church of All Saints, Ledsham

bears her name. Later, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a rector of Swillingham, Adolphus Frederick Alexander Woodford, rose to become the Grand Chaplain of the masonic United Grand Lodge of England. He became a masonic researcher and publisher, who, upon his death, passed over the famous ‘cipher documents’ to his friend William Wynn Westcott who went on to found the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, a major influence on Wicca, a modern pagan religion. While the village maypole might be considered quaint and benign by most, it is much more divisive, with some considering it an idol to be brought down and still others a part of its ancient and disparate religious sourcebook.

Religious belief is still active in Elmet today, with new churches built in the last century and congregations moving online during the 2020 ‘lockdown’. During the



A sign outside All Saints Church in Barwick-in-Elmet inviting members of the community to join them online



St Philip's Church in Scholes, built in 1966



coronavirus pandemic the Church of England has reported record numbers of people attending church, albeit not within a physical space. One can assume that these numbers do not exclude Elmet and that even through the strange times we now inhabit, belief is alive and well across the region.

In summary, perhaps the best analogue for the synthesis of beliefs within Elmet is indeed found in the celebrated maypole, but not solely in its murky, mystic origins, but its proximity to the war memorial, a short stone Celtic cross, at the centre of the village high street. Side by side they together offer not only the best illustration, but also a glimpse *into* the beliefs of the region. On the one hand their origins are lost, as are the names of those who died fighting abroad in the world wars of last century. On the other, their existence, celebration and place of honour indicate they are not mere representations of something lost to the past, but the foci of living beliefs which are rooted in it.