



# Death of the Jagger

John Turner and the Mysterious Birth of Jenkin Chapel

Eli Lewis-Lycett

*The manner of John Turner's death and the creation of Jenkin Chapel are two of the most curious bookmarks in the history of Cheshire's peak border region. But by considering both events together with the darker history of the area, we may discover much of that curiosity is born from the old country superstitions that still held remarkable sway in local belief structure during the early part of the eighteenth century.*

## A Christmas Mystery

John Turner was likely considered something of a novelty amongst the people of Saltersford in the early eighteenth century. Beyond the occasional trip into the nearby town of Macclesfield, the vast majority of those living in the community would venture little further than the settlements that were dotted about the Pennine slopes around them. They would live, work and die within a few miles of the place they were born, finding love and all of life's trials within the locality. By comparison, Turner was an adventurer.

As a jagger, working the trade routes of Derbyshire and Cheshire with his team of packhorses, Turner would transport salt from one place to the next and provide a vital link to rural populations right across the countryside; his name known by more people outside of his community than within it. Naturally for those in his line of work, he was fit and rugged, and at 29 years old, already well versed in navigating all manner of terrain and weather in a landscape he had come to know intimately. Yet legend tells us how come Christmas Eve 1735, ultimately all of his experience and nous counted for nothing.

Upon returning from business in Northwich - an area of rich salt production since before the Roman conquest - and barely a mile from his home at Saltersford Hall Farm, he became lost amongst heavy snowfall.

The search party that set out on Christmas morning found his horses first. They were still alive, if in bad shape, strewn out along Erwin Lane. For John himself though, it was too late. The jagger was dead, frozen beneath the drifts...the print of a single woman's shoe pressed into the snow at his side.

It is easy to see why the tale of Turner's death has endured to capture the imagination of locals, historians, and novelists alike across the centuries since. It is something greatly helped no doubt by the fact that to this very day, a memorial stone survives at the spot of Turner's discovery in commemoration of the night he died; its inscription detailing both the snowstorm and the issue of the mystery footprint. The stone is a memorial to a tragedy laced with mystery that, looking back from the present day, could perhaps be viewed as an oddly fitting poetic end for someone in Turner's trade.

Jaggers tended to make for quite mysterious figures, their constant travel making them privy to information that the rest of those living in their communities were not. As such, the popular image of Turner would have very much been a two-sided coin, and whilst many would have felt a genuine appreciation for his ability to bring news and gossip

from further afield, there would always be a sense of suspicion around his traveling way of life.

The nature of his end, whilst a shocking moment for his local community, would likely have been just as powerful a source of rumour as it would be a point of sadness. Against this backdrop, it is understandable that an air of legend has risen locally regarding Turner's death.

From stories of how his boundary-striding ways had brought him into contact with bandits and highwaymen to his body apparently disappearing shortly after it was found, all manner of connotations have attached themselves to the events of that distant Christmas Day. Underneath it all though, irrespective of the myth-making, I believe there is a story of real curiosity present here, and one that speaks from the wider history of this bleakly beautiful corner of the Cheshire borderlands.

It is a place where the Devil, perhaps quite literally, is waiting to be found in the detail. Just two years before Turner's death, a country chapel had been hurriedly erected just a stone's throw from his home at the farm. Yet Turner would not be buried there. He couldn't, because the chapel had not been recognised by the church authorities. It was not consecrated, and nor would it be for another 60 years.

## **Strange Foundations**

There are spots located in every county of Britain that until relatively recently had remained untouched by modernity. These are the places where local traditions, customs, and beliefs have lingered on far longer than in the towns and larger villages; particularly where the auspices of industrialisation had seen fit to leave it comparatively late before arriving on the scene. The hamlet of Saltersford is one such place.

Taking its name from its location at the meeting point of several ancient salt routes, its setting amongst the Peak District foothills at the eastern edge of Rainow parish near Macclesfield serves to make it a relatively isolated settlement still today.

Even the most remote places have their lords and ladies however, and placed firmly at the centre of local life, Saltersford Hall had been built in 1593 by the esteemed Stopford family. They were the family that also built Macclesfield's reputedly haunted Bate Hall and whose name subsequently rose to further prominence during the English Civil War on account of James Stopford having been a captain in the Parliamentarian army of Oliver Cromwell.

Following the Civil War, the family found serious fortune in Ireland courtesy of

Cromwell's bitter campaign of conquest across the country, but they were still the primary landowners in Saltersford come the time of John Turner in the 1730s, when word reached them of a strange new structure that had been erected on their land by a group of local farmers.

Initial thoughts on the building that had appeared at the site known as *Jenkyncross* were somewhat confused. To all intent and purpose, the building looked an awful lot like someone had simply turned up and decided to build themselves a farmhouse. After all, with its saddleback roof and chimney stack, it had much in keeping with the look of the other farm dwellings dotted about the local landscape. Yet as inquiries were made, the true nature of the structure became clear.

Led by John Slack, a yeoman of nearby Kettlethulme, locals had chosen the site as the spot on which they wished to build their very own chapel. Assuming the plot to be common land, they had assembled, organised their tasks, and worked to get the job done. The issue of ownership was as much news to them as it was the Stopford family, and a brief legal dispute duly followed but was resolved without too much difficulty on the condition that the land was retrospectively purchased by the locals for the sum of ten shillings. John Slack himself provided the bulk of the payment, but his fellow builders naturally contributed what they could. This was to be a chapel for all of their families, and all were keen to ensure that none of them were left out of its affairs.

The design of the place, although unusual, was simply a reflection on the kind of structures that those who built it were used to maintaining, but whilst they may have lacked a tower (one would be added twenty years later), once inside the building, it was clear this was a serious project. The nave was complemented by two rows of windows on either side, whilst an octagonal pulpit, traditional box pews, and wooden boards - which were hung from the wall of the chancel displaying inscriptions of the Lord's Prayer and the Ten Commandments - gave the place a distinctly religious air.

It is at this point that we should frame the creation of the chapel against the realities of life in the early 1700s. To decide to co-ordinate such an endeavour, let alone pay for its building and fulfilment themselves, there must have been a real source of motivation in play amongst the local community. A need, no less, for such a place of refuge to be created in the local landscape. The question, of course, is why? The needs of the locals had been tended to by the parish of Prestbury for hundreds of years, and whilst not an ideal location for religious service, local benefactors and the increasing growth of Macclesfield provided ample support in ecclesiastical matters.

Perhaps the creation of Jenkin Chapel could be seen as nothing more than an attempt

to bring God closer to the community, yet the lack of consecration, which is unlikely to have been mere oversight given the dedication of the builders, is somewhat perplexing. More perplexing still, however, is the thoroughly unholy choice of its location.

## Crossroads Confusion

Crossroads have long been known to be places that find themselves becoming bastions of supernatural connotations and this was something to which the locals of Saltersford would have been acutely attuned. Suicides, homicides, and suspected witches, were all often buried at such spots in line with the ancient belief that those who were likely to return from the dead and haunt the living would become confused by the splintered nature of the crossroads, and subsequently find themselves led away from the community they were once a part of.

At first, this might raise a few eyebrows as we comprehend a belief in the living dead from here in the twenty-first century, but the risks associated with the undead rising from their graves were a very real concern throughout medieval England; and for those living in isolated communities such as 1700s Saltersford, those kind of beliefs were far from antiquated.

Tales of the revenant - a word taken from the French verb *revenir* meaning 'to return' - were once relatively common throughout the country, with one comparatively local story from Stapenhill in Staffordshire providing a keen insight into their nature; and making it easy to understand why most folks were keen to avoid such occurrences.

Geoffrey of Burton, incumbent Abbot of Burton during the first half of the twelfth century, included a tale of local revenants in his work *The Life and Miracles of St. Modwenna*; the saint whose relics were held at the Abbey. He relates how two villagers from Stapenhill had transferred their labours from the lands of the Abbey to that of Roger the Poitevin, an Anglo-Norman lord with substantial holdings in the area. A dispute broke out around ownership of the crops that the two villagers had been tending previously, and the pair were soon reported to have died in mysterious circumstances.

Buried in the churchyard at Stapenhill, the first report of their return came that very evening, when they were sighted in the nearby village of Drakelow with their coffins carried atop their shoulders. They would then appear repeatedly on the nights that followed, walking around the village, shape-shifting into bears and dogs and banging on the walls of houses; and as they did, the family at each house they visited would fall gravely ill.

The village soon found itself in chaos, living in fear of the nightly terror and so by way of intervention, the Bishop of Lichfield granted permission to open the graves of the two men to investigate. When the coffins were prised open, the two men were found to look very much alive, the cloths that covered their faces, soaked in blood.

They cut off the men's heads first. Then took out their hearts and burned them at a nearby crossroads. Almost instantly, those villagers which had fallen ill in the wake of the night-callers suddenly found their health restored in an act of miraculous recovery attributed, naturally, to the invocation of St Modwenna.

Its instances like this, whatever the reality of the panic, where bodies were examined after death only to be found in a perceived state of second life, that would go on to help build our more obvious vampiric traditions across Europe. The classic 'wooden stake through the heart' solution of popular retellings itself is an attempt to fix the body to the earth beneath it.

The idea of the undead roaming the village was not a particularly desired outcome for those who suffered a mysterious or strange end to their time on earth, and the solution of a crossroads burial quickly gathered credence in the centuries that followed examples such as that at Stapenhill. And so, the significance of Jenkyncross in such matters would be crystal clear in the consciousness of the local population.

Yet such an unholy site would make much more sense if the chapel was an attempt to tackle something far more troublesome than the issue of inconvenient worship. It is a view that would be understandable too, given the faith-threatening events that the community had lived through less than eighty years before.

## **Black Magic Memories**

Life in seventeenth century Saltersford was inextricably connected with that of the neighbouring settlements that lay within the parish of Rainow; the village of the same name lying just under three miles to the west. And it is in the nature of the events which took place in 1650s Rainow that provide the real context to our tale of the mysterious Jenkin Chapel.

Throughout Europe, the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries saw the process of identifying those that were believed to be practitioners of witchcraft transform into a dark art itself. With both religious fervour and the possibilities of political favour fuelling an expansive appetite for the matter across all levels of society, the hunt for witches was as much a stake of authority as it was a genuine concern of the Church.

Such were the levels of interest in the subject that in 1599, King James IV of Scotland - he would become King James I of England in 1603 - published his own study on Witchcraft entitled *Daemonologie*. It was a move directly inspired by his own deeply held beliefs regarding the topic. James had personally presided over the North Berwick witch trials of 1590, believing a curse to have been responsible for the storm that prevented his new bride, Anne of Denmark, sailing to Scotland in 1589.

By the seventeenth century, witch-hysteria had long since become established as a national obsession, with more than 500 people being formally tried for acts relating to witchcraft across England since 1560. 112 of those would be hanged as a result. So it would have been quite the story if two of that number were to have come from the same tiny, rural Cheshire settlement.

Sadly, for Rainow women Ellen Beech and Anne Osbaldeston that was precisely the case. The following accounts of their actions are taken from the records of the Chester Michaelmas Assizes of September 1656, a session at which they were both tried and convicted before subsequently being hanged on October 8th;

*Ellen, wife of John Beech, late of Rainow, in Cheshire, Collier, on the 12th of September 1651, and on diverse other days as well before as after, at Rainow, did exercise and practice the invocation and conjuration of evil and wicked spirits with which she consulted, entertained and rewarded. On the said 12th September the said Ellen Beech did exercise certain witchcrafts upon Elizabeth Conper, late of Rainow, spinster, whereby she, from the 12th day to the 20th of September, did languish and upon the 20th day died.*

Regarding Anne Osbalderton, Ellen's neighbour, the account states a considerable number of charges relating to her alleged involvement with witchcraft;

*Anne Osbalderton on that same 12th September practiced certain wicked and devilish acts upon John Steenson, husbandman, which caused his death on the 20th of September. On the 30th of November 1651, Anne used enchantments upon Anthony Booth of*

*Macclesfield, gentleman, causing his death on the 1st  
April following.*

Two more entries are mentioned for Anne; that a Barbara Pott was cursed on the 20th November 1651, dying on the 20th January the following year and that four years later, on the 17th July 1655, she practiced 'sorceries' on John Pott, a yeoman of Rainow, who too died less than a month after.

It is often stated that those accused of witchcraft were little more than the folk of a community most considered to be odd and as such, tailor-made scapegoats for any ills that may befall others around them. This may well have been true, but for the people of Rainow and Saltersford, such a formal acknowledgement of witchcraft being an active force in their community would have been viewed in very literal terms.

It would be the defining moment of their religious lives. Memories would have lingered, casting their shadows long into the time of Slack and his fellow builders; something illustrated particularly well by the fact that chapel trustee Edmund Pott was a direct descendant of the aforementioned Barbara Pott, victim of the hanged Anne Osbaldeston.

## **Ancient Roots**

Memories of the Rainow witches and their alleged acts would have naturally given rise to the spectre of devilry each and every time the difficulties of life made themselves apparent in the local community, but the idea that supernatural forces were present in their lives was nothing new for the people of Saltersford. It is entirely probable that the scattering of families living on the peak slopes of east Cheshire at the time of the chapel's construction had been working the same land for hundreds of years, and it is from the history of their forbearers that we can see connections to earlier, more elemental terrors associated with the local landscape.

It is in the details of the earliest recorded dwelling of these families, first appearing on record in 1384, that we find our key to a far deeper understanding of the area as a whole; the house with a particularly unusual name, known as 'Thursbitch'.

First noted by the Professor Ralph Elliott of the Australian National University, when in conversation with the author Alan Garner in the early 1970s, the Professor proposed that the eventuality of such an unusual name was in fact due to its conversion from old English. *þyrs*, he stated, is a word that most closely translates in modern English to

*monster* or *demon. bach*, meanwhile, is a word for *dwelling*. Thursbitch, therefore, translates quite literally to the 'dwelling of the demon'.

The folklore attached to the area ranges from talk of cannibalism to those unearthly creatures roaming the trackways that were once claimed to have taken the body of John Turner, and many of these now obscure loric-fragments would have been an altogether stronger collection of record during the mid-1600s.

It is something that primarily reflects on the area historically when we place the noted translation of the place name into old English and then reappraise the surrounding landscape once more. Less than two miles from the site of Jenkin Chapel is a rocky outcrop that has fuelled local legend for hundreds of years. Popular today with hikers and photographers, Pym Chair is often said to have been so named due to its use as the lookout point for a highwayman called Pym.

Yet the name seems to cast that association away when compared with similar features elsewhere in the country. Such formations are much more commonly associated with the supernatural; the Devils Chair at Stiperstones in Shropshire is one such example, as is a similarly named feature down in Wiltshire. This observation, together with the absence of any actual record of a highwayman named Pym - and one would think this record would be far from obscure given that the era of the highwayman took place within the timeframe of the printing press - offers the suggestion that Pym Chair gets its name from a different, more ancient source. Surely *pyrs chair* - the chair of the demon - would be much more in keeping?

Here we have a long-standing rural settlement, the very origins of which seems to be bound together with issues of the supernatural and the idea of 'other'. Add into the mix the fact that from these ancient roots we have not just the matter the Rainow witches in the century leading up to the building of the chapel, but also that the surrounding region was then pressed beneath the breaking wheel of the plague of the 1660s, and it all adds up to quite the time of it for those folks surviving in Saltersford.

The reasoning of its people seeking the establishment of their own religious house to comfort them, therefore, could well have been felt to be a long-overdue necessity. It is a theory that perhaps finds further credence still when we then consider the specifics of the chapel's details.

## **Religious Conversion**

Upon its completion in 1733, Jenkin Chapel was proclaimed in dedication to St John

the Baptist, as noted in the stone above its entrance and something that, in light of the connotations regarding the history of the area, feels particularly poignant. The figure of John the Baptist is believed by biblical scholars to have likely belonged to a pre-Christian Jewish sect, he was the man who baptised Jesus himself, and was known to operate out in the wilderness.

Not only would a chapel in his honour feel fitting when placed into the idea of a community effectively looking to be reborn in a world free from the workings of the darker matters that seemed to surround them, but there are a number of other relevant associations built into the creation of the chapel itself.

The inscription above the door dates its completion to the 24th June 1733, the actual day of the feast of John the Baptist, and inside, although sparsely adorned, there is to be found a carving of an acorn on the rise that leads to the pulpit. As John the Baptist is often seen in association with the Green Man, a figure widely found to be used to connect the ancient pagan woodland world with that of newly converted Christians, it feels a little too deliberate to not be part of some wider meaning.

Perhaps most revealing of all however, is that as mentioned earlier, following its completion, the chapel had to wait another sixty years before formal church consecration was granted - and yet its first burials are recorded well inside this period. It is something that leads to the unavoidable disquiet of an observable fact.

There are three grave slabs forming the chancel floor, and one in the nave, all of which belong to the Turners of Saltersford Hall Farm, the family incumbent at the time of the chapel's creation, and the family to which John Turner was returning on the night of his death. John's father, Richard Turner was the first body to be buried in the chapel with his burial beneath the altar, commemorated by the following inscription;

*Here lieth the body of Richard Turner of Saltersford Hall  
who died Feb. 15th 1749 Aged 60 years. He was the first  
corpse that was buried at this Chapel.*

It would appear to be a burial made quite happily, and knowingly, in unconsecrated ground.

Yet whatever the reality of the strange history of the region, we know that in the year 1794 Jenkin Chapel finally got its official consecration, but only it seems, with a condition attached. There would be no more reference to John the Baptist. Instead, Jenkin Chapel would be known as St John the Evangelist, in dedication to the man so

named because he was determined to spread the word of Jesus to the heathen peoples of the world.

## A Sacred Place

This otherworldly patch of earth beneath the looming foothills of the Peak District is a place that has long seemed to exist in gentle resistance to convention and formality alike. The truth of its history and the secrets within it are, I suspect, never likely to be fully revealed, but we can, through continuing research, continue to creep closer. One particular point that I feel I can clarify is that regarding the date of John Turner's death. It is something often contested due to the stone on Erwin Lane that memorialises his death in the snow giving a date of 1755, whilst all local legend places it at 1735.

During my research for this piece, I came across details of a fascinating local man by the name of James Mellor. Born in 1796, he went on to become a stonemason and then ultimately the master of Hough Hay Mill. Success in the burgeoning cotton trade afforded him an early retirement, upon which he appears to have undertaken several projects for the good of his community. Various local masonry inscriptions are attributed to Mellor, as is the memorial stone dedicated to Turner; his inscription being placed upon a replacement stone at the site in the 1850s. The date of 1755 then, I strongly suggest, was included in error; the likelihood being that the weathering of the original stone had considerably obscured the original 1735 date.

Incidentally, it is from the great-nephew of James Mellor - a Mr. W.A.Mellor - that we get our most well-connected account of John Turner's death, as he relayed his great uncle's tale to *Manchester City News* in 1922. Given that it is the closest we will get to a source for the story, I think it worthwhile including it here;

*John Turner who ran a pack horse team was making for his home at Saltersford Hall on Christmas Eve. His last stopping place was at Bollington and notwithstanding all entreaties to stay the night, as a terrible snow storm was raging, he insisted on pushing on, remarking that his folks would be waiting and he had never failed to get through. He set his face to the hills and that was the last seen of him alive. Next morning, a search party went out from his home and a little more than half a mile the leading horse was*

*discovered under the snow on the sheltered side of the road. The remainder were strung out at various intervals, all alive. A little further and they found their owner dead.*

The bells belonging to Turner's horses were apparently taken into Mellor's ownership during the nineteenth century, bar that belonging to the lead horse, which was taken to Harrop House Farm in Rainow, and reportedly used for the purpose of calling the workers to lunch for many years.

The name of the chapel itself finds much speculation too, with theories ranging from Jenkin being the name of a local family, to that of it being a reference to a Welsh preacher. Given the crossroads appears to have been known as Jenkyncross for some time, the name being attributed to a person, be they a preacher or a trader, is likely the true origin. Nonetheless, with a landscape steeped in legend, quite removed from the world around it, a picture is painted of a community that remained tethered to the old traditions for longer than most - and one to which the matter of good and evil would be ever-present in their perception of the world around them. As we have seen, it is those things to which the Devil was believed to be intrinsically bound that made for the key events in the timeline of the area in the lead up to the creation of the chapel.

To people of the time, and even more so in the more remote parts of the landscape, the work of the Devil was considered as real a contention as feeding their families each day. It is not without strong standing therefore that perhaps John Slack and his fellow farmers took the issue of protection into their own hands.

With the creation of a sanctuary in Jenkin Chapel, the safety of their souls was one step closer, and ultimately their best defence against the wicked forces which had seemed so intent on entering their lives.

Eli Lewis-Lycett 2022

This essay is included in *Mythstoric Origins: Exploring the Extraordinary Local Histories Behind the Legends and Folklore of East Cheshire, Peak District Derbyshire and the Staffordshire Moorlands* which is available worldwide via Amazon.

Contact: [thelocalmythstorian@yahoo.com](mailto:thelocalmythstorian@yahoo.com)

Twitter: @TLMythstorian

Visit: [thelocalmythstorian.com](http://thelocalmythstorian.com)