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On-line presentation for Norwich Pagan Moot
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The Wild Hunt

Chris Wood

The image we have today of the Wild Hunt is of a spectral or otherworldly phenomenon that manifests on a stormy night in mid-winter, and sometimes at other, liminal times of year, as the seasons change and the veil between the worlds is at its thinnest.

Great hosts of ghostly or faery riders, with red-eyed or red-eared hell-hounds baying, sweep all those unfortunate to be in their path before them, never to be seen again. If you see the Hunt pass by, it may betoken death or disaster. For those brave enough, it is possible to ride with them, but this requires preparation and is not to be undertaken lightly. The Midwinter Wild Hunt can also be seen as the untamed forces of Nature bringing in the Cleansing Tide of the year, sweeping out all that is unwanted or undesirable, clearing the way to allow new life to spring forth after the Equinox, in the Growing Tide.

This fearful procession is led by various mythical or legendary personages: Arthur, Oðinn, Charles the Great, Herne the Hunter or Welsh psychopomp, Gwynn ap Nydd, or sometimes Hecate or Diana, gathering up souls to ride in their army of the dead. But some of these, it transpires, are very recent additions to the cast. Herne was introduced by William Harrison Ainsworth, in *Windsor Castle*, published as a novel in 1843, and Gwynn seems to have been inserted by Sir John Rhys in 1901. In fact, whilst there are reports of predatory ghosts, spectral hosts and phantom armies from Classical times, these were either day-time manifestations or tied to a place. The roving night-time host seems to be a much more recent development.

Herne
George Cruikshank, illustration for William Harrison Ainsworth's *Windsor Castle*, 1843

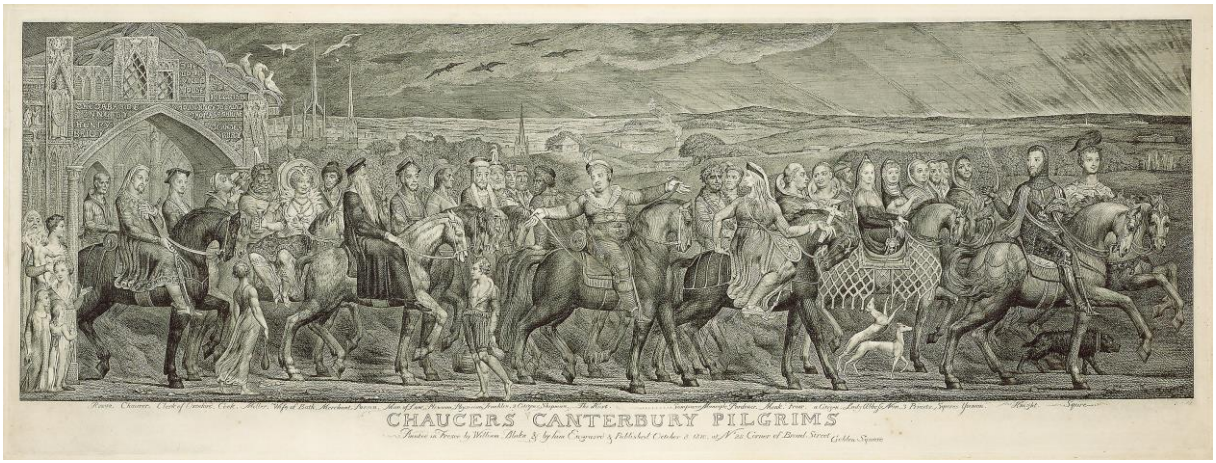
The origins of the Wild Hunt are far from the folklorically comfortable ancient survival often presented. In fact, it is more exciting than that, a dynamic phenomenon, recreating itself for each new generation in a web of myth and natural magic.

Origins and Development

The summary of the history of the Wild Hunt presented here is based on the work of two scholars, Ronald Hutton (2014; 2017; 2019) and Claude Lecouteux (1999), although the latter still assumes that there was once a unified phenomenon. The emphasis here is on the long-term direction of some of the elements, as well as origins. The Wild Hunt was first named by the German folklorist Jacob Grimm, in his *Deutsche Mythologie* of 1835. Grimm combined three diverse traditions: 1) processions of the wandering dead (either sinners or those killed in battle), 2) night-riding entourages of superhuman females (sometimes with three Ladies leading them), and 3) spectral hunts and huntsmen. The first and second of these appear already to have merged in popular belief, in varying degrees around the continent. In the wake of Grimm, literary and folkloric speculations developed the stories and their characters still further.

1. The wandering dead

This is a tradition that was being promulgated by Christian clergy as early as the 11th century, initially in the North of France, but becoming concentrated in German-speaking areas by the 16th century. These were souls who were doomed to roam the Earth as a penance for their sins, latterly in mid-winter or during the Ember Days (sets of three fasting days in Advent, Lent, late Spring and September). It seems likely that the image influenced later ones of groups of pilgrims visiting holy places as penance or to earn indulgences. These, along with the image of troops of Crusaders, riding to and from Jerusalem, in turns fed back into later Medieval forms of the legend of the roaming, penitent dead. This was a form of purgatory, prayers of the living could shorten the deceased's torment, and demons entered the story to provide the pain. Over time, the processions became increasingly demonised.



Chaucer's Canterbury Pilgrims, William Blake, engraving, 1810

Wodan's Wild Hunt
Friedrich Wilhelm Heine
from Wilhelm Wägner, *Nordisch-germanische Götter und Helden*, Otto Spamer, Leipzig & Berlin, 1882

Arlechino 1671 (Harlequin)
Maurice Sand
from *Masques et bouffons*, 1860

They were also frequently seen as an army and, by the 13th century, they had acquired a leader, most often Arthur or a figure called Herlechin or Hellequin, which was probably originally the name of the procession itself. Certainly the etymology of the name has not been agreed upon, with the first element suggested variously as being 'tumult' from the Old French *herle*, 'army' from Germanic *Heer*, or 'hell'. Similarly, the second element could be 'assembly' from Germanic and Scandinavian *Thing*, 'kin' from Anglo-Saxon *cynn*, 'of horses' from the Latin *equinus*, or even a reference to the Biblical Cain, condemned to wander the Earth for killing his brother Abel, amongst many other possibilities. As the tradition spread beyond the Rhine, it acquired the name *das wütende heer* ('the furious army'), which was turned into a leader called *Wutan* by the 14th century, making Wotan and therefore Oðinn natural derivatives. The name Herlechin/Hellequinn eventually became *Harlequin* and was used from the 16th century for the famous fool and dark trickster character in the *Commedia dell'Arte*.

Frau Holle
Otto von Reinsberg-Düringsfeld
from *Das festliche Jahr in Sitten Gebräuchen und Festen der germanischen Völker*, Leipzig, 1863

The Witches
Hans Baldung Grien
woodcut, 1510

2. Night rides with a superhuman female

This a tradition that spread from 9th-century origins in the Rhineland. It was characterised by companies of spirits riding wild animals, led by a Lady (sometimes three). They would feast at the homes of favoured people (and then replenish what they had consumed). The Lady could be Diana, Hecate, Herodias, Oriente, Satia, Abundia, Perchte, Holda, amongst others. The names Diana, Hecate and Herodias were regularly given to these Ladies by Churchmen recording the traditions, referring to, respectively, the best-known pagan goddesses (therefore, they believed, demons) and the most evil woman in the Gospels (Herodias got Salome to ask for the head of John the Baptist as the reward for her dance). Other names would seem to be personifications: Holda, the name of the procession (as with Herlechin); Perchte, the occasion of the ride, Twelfth Night; Oriente, the exotic East; Satia, satisfaction; and Abundia, abundance. These 'night rides' could include favoured humans on spirit journeys, often practitioners of folk magic. From the 14th century, they became conflated with accusations of demonic witchcraft and contributed to the idea of the witches' sabbath.

Although there is little in their pre-Christian personae corresponding to leading these night rides, the tradition is one of the ways that the divine names of Diana and Hecate have been carried through the centuries (changing, naturally, as they went), to find a new reverence in the modern world. There could even be some pre-Christian origin to the night rides tradition, given its age and the widespread practice of parading statues of deities (perhaps especially goddesses) around the land. Furthermore, as a result of the folklore, Holda and Frau Perchte have become important divine figures in their own right (Hutton, 2018; 2020).

3. Spectral hunts

These seem to be a timeless tradition, but with three particular forms: a demon or the Devil chasing sinners, sometimes from the comfort of a coach; a human huntsman condemned to hunt without rest for eternity, as a punishment for some evil deed; or a wild man chasing livestock or otherworldly prey. The Huntsman could also be seen as Death himself, as in Gustave Doré's *The Vision of Death*.

The Vision of Death
Gustave Doré
from *Revelation* in
La Grande Bible de Tours, 1866

Syncretising diversity

Lecouteux (1999) makes the point that there is very little in common between the various traditions: "the Wild Hunt is a band of the dead whose passage over the earth at certain times of the year is accompanied by diverse phenomena. Beyond these elements, all else varies…" (p. 2). Myths, legends and folklore change over time and with the retelling of stories, especially if there's religious bias involved. It is easy to see how the Devil could emerge from a demonic huntsman or frenzied leader of a furious army, replace the benign female leader of the night rides and become the focus of the sabbath to which witches ride. It then only took a modern desire to find a pre-Christian golden age, and the modern idea of the Wild Hunt as the survival of an ancient tradition was born.

Åsgårdsreien (Ásgarðr's Ride), Peter Nicolai Arbo, oil, 1872

The Wild Hunt in the Landscape

Of the three categories of phenomena outlined above, the most important in the British Isles seems to be the spectral hunts. It is not surprising that rampaging hunts should capture the imagination. The propensity of the elite for hunting with hounds, riding rough-shod over crops and livestock, and arrogating land to be devoted to their 'sport', has been a bone of contention for a very long time. The Norman forest laws are a fundamental element of the Robin Hood legends after all. But more important still are hunts without a huntsman: packs of spectral Hell, Yell, Whisht or Gabriel Hounds rampaging across the sky foretelling doom for anyone hearing them or chasing unshriven souls (Hutton, 2019). Such phenomena are recorded elsewhere in Europe, but take on a particular significance here.

These hunts are a viscerally naturalistic phenomenon, perhaps evoking a primal fear of baying wolves or other predators, triggered by the flight of geese across winter skies over benighted mudflats. A personal memory fits this pattern. Back in the early 1980s, I agreed to fill a gap in the rota for staying at the Essex Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament's Peace Camp outside RAF Wethersfield, in the north of the county. The 'camp' consisted of a caravan parked on a wide grass verge, out of sight of houses, or the base gates come to that. I was there on my own and all was fine until, late in the evening, I heard a car stop outside. A possibly inebriated voice shouted abuse and I heard posters being pulled from the outside of the caravan. My light was already out and I felt confrontation was probably best avoided. It went quiet. Except I kept thinking I could hear heavy breathing outside. I didn't get much sleep. With the light of day, I realised that the 'heavy breathing' I could still hear was in fact the sound of guard dogs over on the base.

The Black Dog
Rev. Abraham Fleming
from his pamphlet,
A Straunge and terrible Wonder wrought in the parish Church of Bungay, 1577

With such sounds of nature playing on ancient fight or flight reactions, the field opens up to encompass other mythic and folkloric ideas as well. First, there are solitary beasts that prowl the night. Most famously in East Anglia there is Black Shuck, scourge of the coast. He is presumed to be the same Black Dog which, in 1577, wrought havoc in Bungay church, in the midst of a dread storm, before running to Blythburgh church, where his claw marks are still pointed out on the door (although these seem more likely to be apotropaic taper burns). Shuck is just one of many spectral hounds and other beasts known from around the country (Hoffman, 2018).

Then there all the folk happenings, civic and guild processions, carnival cavalcades, guisings and mummings, that come and go in a dynamic, inter-dependent, protean confusion through the centuries. There is a subtle cultural pattern linking manifestations of both pageant and misrule.

Norwich has always had processions, from the pomp of Norwich's medieval St. George's Day, its 18th-century Woolcombers' Jubilee Pageant of Bishop Blaize and the Golden Fleece, or its modern Lord Mayor's Procession, still led by the Snap Dragon, to events with greater political immediacy, such as Pride.

Ancient Bacchic revels echo in the *Commedia dell'Arte* and unruly market town fairs. The polarity of common purpose and fear evoked by advancing armies hitting swords against shields is little different to the emotions inspired in, on the one hand, village hot-heads and, on the other, social miscreants by rural traditions of 'rough music'. And the frisson from the Padstow 'Obby 'Oss (or Norwich' Kett's Horse), the Welsh *Mari Lwyd* knocking at your door, or, indeed, Norwich's own Ickeny 'oss stalking around the Twelfth Night circle on Mousehold Heath, is a primal, wild energy, as is the power of the Abbot's Bromley Horn Dance, with its ancient reindeer antlers weaving their magic around the streets of the Staffordshire village.

From top to bottom:

A retired Norwich Snap
in the former display at
Norwich Castle Museum, 2018

The Ickeny prepares for Twelfth Night
Picture: Szara Crowe, 2020

The Horn Dance
Abbot's Bromley, 2017

Tors Strid med Jättarna
(Thor's Fight with the Giants)
Mårten Eskil Winge
oil, 1872

But surely, towering above all of these, like a looming black cloud bank, are the experience, imagery and mythologies of the storm, of the Thunder God, particularly Thor, riding his thunder-wagon across the sky, throwing His hammer to subdue the giant forces of nature. Thor is, of course, a much more appropriate deity to be in the midst of a wild, stormy tumult than Oðinn. Despite His associations with war, an eight-legged horse, wolves and the Valkyries (who choose the slain on the battlefield), Oðinn is essentially a loner. Thor on the other hand rides with Loki and Thialfi in His wagon, and goes out to meet friend and foe alike, looking for trouble rather than observing (and perhaps causing it) from afar. Thor's wagon is also drawn by goats, mirroring the horned cumulo-nimbus clouds of the approaching storm.

The image of the doom-laden storm has appeared in the landscape of recent memory, both in frightening reality and popular culture. Stormtroopers were Germany's deadly assault troops in the First World War and took on a politically darker hue in the Second, in which *Blitzkrieg* was employed. The Western allies' offensive in the 1991 Gulf War was called Operation Desert Storm, alluding perhaps to Yahweh's origins as a storm god. Stormtroopers are an iconic element of imperial power in the *Star Wars* series of films and 'The Oncoming Storm' is a name used especially by arch-enemies the Daleks of the Doctor in the TV series, *Doctor Who*. On the other hand, without delving into the full history of the figure, a return to the beneficent night rides could be seen in another Thor-like personage: Santa Claus!

In the wake of Grimm there has also been a contribution from English-language literature and music to the evolution of the Wild Hunt and related imagery. As well as William Harrison Ainsworth's *Windsor Castle* (1843), highlights have included Alan Garner's *Moon Over Gomrath* (1963) and Susan Cooper's *The Dark is Rising* (1973). Michael Moorcock's conception of a chaos-forged sword called Stormbringer (in a number of novels, first in 1961) appears to have inspired David Coverdale's song of the same name for Deep Purple (1974; see Stewart, 1974), which was the title track of an album featuring a winged horse crossing a sky streaked with blood-red lightning and a whirlwind. Earlier songs, born of the tradition as it was taken to and then evolved in North America, include Stan Jones' *Ghost Riders in the Sky* (1949) and The Doors' *Riders on the Storm* (1971).

An East Anglian Example: "the Blennerhassett Curse"

Amongst several spectral carriages from Norfolk is this example that manifests especially in Norwich (Tolhurst, 2018). In the 16th century, the Blennerhassett family, originally from Cumbria, acquired land from the Church after the Dissolution of the Monasteries and established itself either at Frenze, near Diss, or at Barsham, near Beccles (Dutt, 1903), according to different versions of the tale. One of the family went down in legend as "Old Hassett" or "Old Blunderhazard", as the, presumably dangerous, driver of a spectral coach which heads for Norwich every Christmas Eve.

The specific destination is Hassett's Hall in Pockthorpe, in the angle of Barrack Street and Gurney Road, immediately north-east of the city centre. The Hall had been associated with the Cathedral Priory and formed part of the Church property this speculative family had acquired. (It was demolished in 1792 to make way for, interestingly, *cavalry* barracks, that in turn became a housing estate and open space in 1963.)

Old Blunderhazard's coach is pulled by headless horses. Despite this, they still somehow manage to have fire flashing from their nostrils! The cavalcade is traditionally seen crossing Bishop Bridge, once the main route out of the city to the east, and heading north to the Hall, or onto Mousehold Heath (which is still an extensive green space in the city).

Sometimes the coach flies through the air, with flashes of fire coming from the coachman's whip sufficient to illuminate the whole city. The image of a carriage riding across the sky with fiery flashes reinforces the parallel to the Thunder God riding His wagon at the head of the storm, followed by the dark hosts of clouds, striking bolts of lightning and creating thunder with its wheels, an image never far away from people's minds, even in Christian society.

A Vibrant Modern Myth

The Norwich example shows how stories tend to mingle with each other, where they have things in common. Grimm believed that modern folklore was automatically a survival of ancient traditions and back-projected what he saw in that folklore to create a homogenous ancient fiction, although by so doing, he may simply have accelerated the mingling of popular traditions that was occurring anyway.

To challenge the idea of an *ancient* Wild Hunt, together with other popular beliefs, such as a universal ancient Mother Goddess or that early-modern witches were following a pre-Christian, pagan religion, can be uncomfortable. More importantly, however, to assume that traditions and folklore are but fragments of an ancient Golden Age is to be blind to the dynamic mythic creativity of people in all ages, today included.

Of Horses and Dragons

Åsgårdsreien
(Ásgarðr's Ride)
detail
Peter Nicolai Arbo
oil, 1872

Just as we can see the Wild Hunt as a dynamic, modern phenomenon, tracing its history allows us to understand both the diversity of stories related to it and its spiritual nature. As stated at the beginning, the Midwinter Wild Hunt can be seen as the untamed forces of Nature bringing in the Cleansing Tide. This is an essential energy, but one that we need to keep away from us and from the places where we live, because it is dangerous. It is not *evil*, just, like the power of the gale, the fire, the tides or the Earth itself, it is impersonal and much, much bigger than us.

We need that energy in our lives, in our homes, workplaces, towns and cities, but in a controlled form. That is why we drive out the dark forces at Midwinter, letting them howl around the heaths and wild places, but welcome them in the Spring and Summer. They are like the storms and the sea surges, the wild winds and wild fires, the dragons and wolves of the imagination, which all come together in the horse.

Saint George and the Dragon
on the 1912 gold sovereign
design by Benedetto Pistrucci, 1816

Why after all, is Saint George usually pictured on horseback, pinning the dragon down (rather than triumphantly standing over its dead body like Saint Michael)? The dragon in Western myths is associated with wild and powerful nature: rivers, the sea or deserts. Perhaps the horse represents the tamed dragon?

It is not without reason that Saint George, for all his military pomp, is also *Green* George, who brings agricultural prosperity across Eastern Europe, and linked to the Islamic 'Green Knight', *al-Khiḍr*, who becomes an immortal saint, trickster and initiator through contact with the Water of Life. Green George rides between the worlds of civilization and wild nature, in touch with the exhilarating power of the source, but reining in its destructiveness.

The horse is a powerful being that has been tied to humanity for millennia, for better or worse: raw energy literally bridled in. It is no surprise that the Wild Hunt should feature wild spectral horses. But what happened to the heads of the horses pulling Old Blunderhazard's coach?

To Mousehold with the 'Oss's Head...

The horse has always been important in Britain and is celebrated on 'Celtic' coins and in the great Uffington White Horse. It appears in many folk customs and processions. The tourney-style hobby horse is perhaps most widespread, and seems to blur the boundaries between horse and dragon. (As a comparison of Salisbury's Saint George's Day processional horse, Hob-Nob, and Norwich's dragon, Snap, bears out; see Shortt, Hugh (2007); Wood (2018).) Sometimes it can be quite stylized, as with the Padstow 'Obby 'Oss (and the other Norwich 'oss, Kett's Horse).

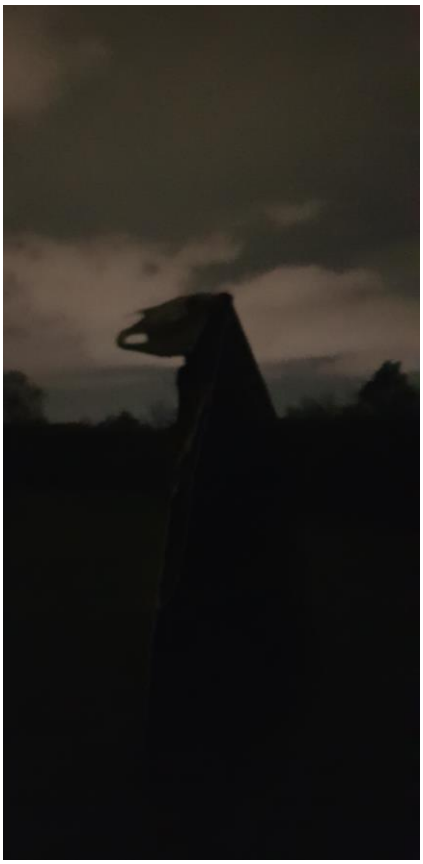
Hob Nob
in Salisbury Museum
2018

But there is also a darker 'Oss: a tall, mysterious figure with a horse's skull (carried on a pole or mast), most famous from the Welsh *Mari Lwyd* traditions and the Montol Festival in Penzance.

In Norwich, we have borrowed the idea of the 'Oss from our friends in Cornwall. Our 'Oss, the Ickeny, is named after the Norfolk dialect word for anything unruly, but particularly difficult horses. The name may in turn derive from the name, Iceni, of the people who lived here 2000 years ago. He may look scary, but He is a focus for the image of those untamed forces of Nature that we need to keep at bay. So He enters the circle we form on Mousehold Heath at Twelfth Night and our Champion drives Him out to gallop across the heath safely, leaving just enough of His energy for us to set about our tasks for the year (Thomas, 2019).

The Ickeny
Twelfth Night 2021 on Mousehold Heath (picture: Annette Dewgarde)

The Ickeny's story



It was after the Harvest Moon 2015 conference that some of the speakers and organisers gathered at Matthew Fox's house and Gemma Gary from Cornwall talked to us about the Montol Festival and its 'oss. Inspired by this, Harvest Moon purchased a horse skull and various people contributed to the construction and dressing of an 'oss for Norwich and Norfolk, which was named 'The Ickeny', as above.

The following winter saw the first public Twelfth Night Wild Hunt Ritual (January 2016) on Mousehold Heath, beginning with a procession from St. James' Hill, led by the Ickeny and a Whiffler (see Thomas, 2019). Subsequently, the Ickeny passed into the care of the Moot and the Twelfth Night Ritual has taken place on the closest Saturday to Twelfth Night on the Heath, every year since (except 2019, when all the key personnel were ill!). Even 2021 saw the Ickeny venture onto the Heath, in the company of His support bubble.

The Ickeny

Above: Twelfth Night 2021 on Mousehold Heath (picture: Annette Dewgarde)

Left: in His Summer garb, 2019

The Wild Hunt in Theory and Practice

The Wild Hunt is a window onto a wilder world, challenging our comfortable existence with its at once frightening and at the same time energising power. Whether we are watching a storm battering our windows from a centrally heated living room or gazing at an evolving landscape of mythic potency as it unfurls from closer inspection of folkloric back-projection, we are witnessing a dynamic, magical force that can shatter our illusions, foretells the death of out-worn ideas and structures, and leaves the ground clear for the new shoots of mundane and spiritual growth to take root.

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