

FABLES THAT FOOLED.

By Louis B Hugh.

Since time began there have been stories, legends and fables handed down father to son, mother to daughter.

As some were factual some fictitious they were traditionally told in order to foster a connection with the past.

Storytellers around ancient campfires inspired many a would-be warrior to become brave and fearless just as their ancestors had been before them.

Stories have the ability to install such reactions as Fear, hate, affection and respect. To be bold in facing the unknown is another feeling aroused and much sought after by any orator worth his salt.

Through the ages Cornwall has always had its fair share of tall and mysterious tales.

Knockers down the tin mines, A Cornish Giant, Pixies, The Mermaid of Zennor and the King Arthur legends being the more widely known ones.

But there are many more scattered across the county, so beware: many a trap has been set for the unwary.

The following short story will tell you just how far one such tall tale can sometimes unexpectedly take you.

FABLES THAT FOOLED.

Treacle Mines and a Harbour.

As children most of us in Cornwall during the 1940s, grew up in small towns and communities dotted around the county and were subjected to the usual old wives tales together with any folklore connected with that particular area.

Being impressionable and innocently naive five to six year olds, one story amongst many that held a lot of fascination for us during those early years was the one about the famous Talskiddy Treacle Mines.

Listening to the description of this wonderful place, and coming from a trusted and plausible source conjured up vivid and colourful mouth watering images to a sweet rationed, sugar starved, immediate post World War Two, young generation.

This mouth watering elixir was hauled up from deep down in the depths of the earth in large iron buckets and so it was told: had been formed over millions of years by the compression of plants and vegetation from the dense jungles that once covered the earth.

Over the centuries this had caused it to be formed into a sweet syrupy liquid just waiting to be scooped up by the hardy little band of Talskiddy Treacle Miners. As if to add a touch of the exotic to the tale we were then informed that once enough barrels had been filled they were then taken by horse drawn wagons to the harbour and loaded into the holds of waiting ships. Once filled a ship would then set sail and carry its cargo far across the world to places which to our young ears, had bewildering and strange sounding names.

I well remember the names Timbuctoo and Kalamazoo being frequently used as some of the many destinations.

Well, like all of those fanciful stories that we innocently believed in at the time, as we all now know in the course of growing up comes knowledge and once gained it soon dispelled our beliefs in most of those old fables. Tall tales traditionally handed down and mingled with true facts, was not done unkindly: but when intently listened to by young minds eager to learn

more about their surroundings; they certainly kindled the flames of our young and wild imaginations.

But here's the rub for me, as I had never before, ever been to this quaint little hamlet with its strange sounding name, I had actually grown up believing that like many other Cornish coastal ports; there really was some sort of harbour there.

Over the intermediate years the treacle mine myth like many others had faded, but there was at times still a reference during a few overheard conversations to a Talskiddy Harbour.

If I had at such times taken the trouble to look at a map of that particular area in Cornwall, I would have realized that far from having a harbour the little hamlet being situated a few miles inland was certainly; not even by any river, accessible to the open sea.

But then if I had gained this knowledge I would never have experienced one of those life's little tricks that even now I still amusingly reminisce about and in relaying it to you now, I am reminded of that old proverbial saying, "There is one born every minute," certainly applied to me at the time.

So there I was all grown up and having left the county to spend several years steaming around the world in the Merchant Navy I had by 1963 come to a turning point in my life, and decided to return home to Cornwall, marry my Cornish rose and settle down to raise a family. This I did, but found that the price for freely roaming the planet for several years meant the wanderlust in my blood was very hard to shake off.

After a succession of jobs which included using my maritime experience as a ships cook to become a chef in the hotel trade, a position I soon gave up because of the long hours and poor pay. A trial run working as a spot welder in a little eight by twelve shed which soon had me arriving home each evening with blinding arc eyes, also didn't last too long.

Driving buses for a national omnibus company helped slow down the nagging wanderlust by constantly keeping me on the move. Finally after a short but stabilizing spell in the china clay industry, I eventually ended in the early 1970s with my feet firmly planted on terra firma by working for a well known family run furnishing business operating from the busy village of St Dennis.

As the premises of this business was a mere stone throw away from my home you could say that all I had to do each morning,(to coin a phrase) Was fall out of bed and be on its doorstep.

During its long association with tin mining and in particular the clay industry, St Dennis village being almost in the centre of Cornwall has always been a hive of activity. Coupled with a strong sense of community and with the added bonus of finding my Cornish rose there had made it a very desirable place for me to plant my roots.

At the time, with a church, two chapels, its own choir, a nationally famous brass band, post office, two doctors surgeries and several independent shops, which by the way; included three fish and chip shops, certainly made it a hive of industry.

Employed as a general assistant which eventually led to my becoming general manager, my duties in those early days included unloading deliveries of new furniture and displaying it around the stores showrooms. Being in the centre of the village and adjacent to the road that passed through its heart these showrooms held a very prominent position and could easily be seen by all passing travellers. Although loyally patronised by the local population, rarely a day would go by without finding several new faces wandering around the interiors of the newly built showrooms, each filled to capacity with household floorings and furnishings

Meeting and greeting potential customers and whenever possible making a successful sale, was also an exciting and rewarding challenge for me.

The Best Part, is a term that can be defined as success at the culmination of a series of events, and the best for me after successfully completing most of the terms of my employment and one that I really looked forward to performing, was the extra duty of loading up the firm's lorry with a customer's purchases and personally delivering it to their door.

By doing this I soon found that it fostered good customer relations and by giving good service it guaranteed a continuity of business from them. If a monetary sign of gratitude was in the offering for providing this service, and for being helpful and courteous, it was always gratefully received.

Because this family oriented concern had gained a high reputation for being very competitive in its pricing, customers came from far and wide across the

two counties of Devon and Cornwall to gain not only a bargain but also the extra advantage of free deliveries. This was not only of benefit to them but it gave me the chance to get to know and explore the two lovely counties

The law of averages being what it is meant it was inevitable, that one morning on reporting to work I would find on my schedule for the day, an item or items to be delivered to that fascinating place I had only ever heard about, the fabled Talskiddy!!!

When that moment came and I saw that magical name staring back at me from the page I found it hard to contain my excitement and turning to my Employer who had prepared the daily delivery list, I exclaimed, "At last! Now I'm going to see the famous harbour"!!!

Later upon reflection, I had noticed a rather impish smile forming on his face, as with a slightly amused and inquiring tone he responded by asking, "You've not seen the lovely harbour then?" shaking my head from side to side in confirmation I quite innocently replied, "No never."

Silly I know now, but the way he had said it made me feel as if I was probably the only person in the whole world, who had never seen this legendary place!

Then with what I thought at the time, was a rather over exaggerated and expressive sigh he continued, "Well! - That will!- certainly be a nice experience for you today" further adding "while you are there, by all means take the time to have a good look around."

Realizing much later that he had then caught me hook, line and sinker, with the request that if the local fishermen were landing any fresh mackerel on the quay, to purchase half a dozen for him.

Agreeing whole heartedly to attend to this matter and with the help of my young driver's mate who informed me that he too, had never seen this elusive haven, with only one destination feverishly in mind; together we loaded up the day's deliveries and set off in eager anticipation to the journey ahead.

Following the directions I had been given (no Sat Nav's back then) we arrived at the old market town of St Columb. Rebuilt during medieval times through the importance of being a main trading centre for the Cornish wool trade it still maintains much of its old world appearance

After passing through its quaint narrow streets and with a lingering look at its imposing 14th century church, upon leaving its intimate precincts and by taking a left fork in the road, we were soon heading in a northerly direction towards the coast.

After climbing a rather steep hill up a typically narrow Cornish country road less than half a mile outside of the town we arrived at a junction where surprisingly, an old finger pointing sign that had certainly seen better days suddenly informed us to make a right turn for Talskiddy, which did confuse me slightly as it meant turning inland again. Surprised also that we had come upon this sign so quickly, I increasingly wondered if we had fallen prey to some sign switching shenanigans.

But within a few hundred yards was quite relieved when yet another antiquated sign pointing slightly downwards towards a left turning once again read Talskiddy. "Ah hah" I thought "left again" and with a smile confidently informed my companion, "north again mate, which is bringing us back on an even keel" (An old shipboard term) reminiscent of my own sea going days, meaning that we were certainly heading in the right direction.

With excitement building the hill we were ascending was very reminiscent of a lot of the hills leading down to the little harbours and ports scattered all around the beautiful wild and rugged Cornish coast.

All the time thinking that soon such a familiar sight would soon appear before us. In eager anticipation we peered forward and downward as trees and hedgerows passed perilously close by, expecting that at any moment as we descended farther and farther down; that we would soon be greeted by what we assumed, would be a granite walled safe refuge from the open sea.

Slowing up and gently stopping beside a small grass covered triangle which created a meeting of two roads at the base of the hill I had noticed an elderly gentleman standing just in from its muddy tractor tyre impression edges. Leaning on his old crooked and knobbly walking stick his appearance reminded me of a country scene from one of those old Victorian paintings that you still see around today, he just fitted in so naturally with his rural surroundings

I surmised that he had obviously heard us coming and had stopped at what he regarded was a safe spot to let our vehicle pass.

Winding down my window I courteously inquired of him where a certain female customer's house was situated, quickly following it up by also eagerly asking if it happened to be near the harbour.

Casting a glance over our vehicle he obviously noted its owners name and where it had come from, then looking towards us with a broad smile covering his friendly weather beaten face, began to inform us in that typically familiar, warm and homely Cornish accent, " Well bouy's you'm face'in the right drekshun, jus' carry on down'roun' the ben' an' the 'arbours on yer right an ers is the 'ouse overlookin' it, an' she's always 'ome on a Monday so you cent go'rong!" then as if to inquire that I had understood his directions added, "orite me'ansome?"

Nodding my appreciation I barely had time to thank him when chuckling to himself; which to me at the time seemed as if he was very pleased with himself to have been of help. He then with a hearty wave turned and trundled at a jaunty pace up a little winding stony lane, pausing after a few paces to turn and happily wave us on with his ancient old cane again.

Now feeling quite relaxed and satisfied that we were now nearing our destination, my companion and I both commented on the light hearted and friendly way he had given us the information we had requested.

Spurred on we continued down the road as directed and upon rounding the corner were startled and somewhat amazed to be confronted by an old rustic cottage standing beside something that I could only describe as a rather large square shaped and murky water filled old duck pond!

Pulling up alongside its cloudy depths and alighting to stand at its feather strewn banks I shook my head in disbelief with the dawning realization that for all the years I had believed there really was a harbour in Talskiddy, it transpired that it now had only been a figment of my fable fuelled imagination.

In that instant it also dawned upon my still somewhat naivety that the joke was on me and had to begrudgingly admit to myself: that I had fallen prey to that age old tantalising trap, "a fable that fooled".

As regards fishermen and mackerel even a minnow would have had a struggle to survive in the brackish water of that little harbour.

It later transpired that my employer had phoned one of his well known and valued customers living in Talskiddy and asked him to be on the lookout for the firms lorry being driven by a person, who as he put it, had never, ever, seen “The harbour”. He also informed him that I was always very prone to stopping and asking directions. Armed with this information it was certainly no coincidence: that a particularly helpful gentleman happened to be waiting at that particular spot: on that particular morning.

Talskiddy.

The name of this pretty little hamlet hidden in a valley just two miles north from the old market town of St Columb Major is derived from the Cornish Talskeudy, meaning (Brow of a shady hill)

Although at the time of my visit it did have a fordable stream running through its lower end and an old run down cob walled chapel where a faded sign hanging from one of its crumbling sides, informed any passerby that a famous evangelist had once preached there.

It also had a duck pond which has always been affectionately known by the residents of this secluded countryside gem as: “The harbour”

In recounting this short story the only literary glory I have sought, was its completion and of course, the pleasure taken by anyone reading it.

Louis B. Hugh