

Tripping the light fintastic

Whether maidens with a heart as golden as their tresses or vengeful princesses with crab-infested hair, mermaids have enchanted the British for centuries, as Carla Passino discovers

ON a peaceful summer's evening, a beautiful girl with long, golden hair floated in a rockpool near Cury in Cornwall, sobbing inconsolably. An old man drew near and, startled, she leapt, revealing a hint of fish tail. Keen to help a damsel in distress, however finned, the old man coaxed the mermaid into revealing what troubled her. The poor creature had been so enticed by the fragrant flowers festooning the shore that she hadn't noticed the ebbing tide and now found herself stranded. The old man carried her on his back all the way to the open sea. In return, the mermaid granted him three powers—healing the sick, breaking spells and catching thieves—and left him her comb as a souvenir.

The Cornish coast must have been heaving with merfolk, because they crop up in folklore everywhere from Lamorna, where a mermaid sang before shipwrecks and unwittingly lured besotted young men to their death, to Perranzabuloe, where one avenged an innocent girl by drawing deep into the ocean the dissolute young man who had taken advantage of her.

Perhaps the most famous Cornish mermaid appeared at Zennor. A lustrous young lady with a melodious voice began attending the Church of St Senara and became quite taken with the best singer in the parish (never underestimate the sex appeal of great vocals). After one service, he left with her and neither was seen again until a mermaid approached a ship off Pendower Cove and asked the captain to lift anchor, as it was blocking the door to her home and she needed to get her children ready for church. When the story reached the people of Zennor, they resolved that the mermaid must have been their mysterious visitor and that the missing parishioner had followed her under water and married her. 'To commemorate these somewhat unusual events,' wrote William Bottrell in the 1870 *Traditions and Hearthside Stories of West Cornwall*, 'they had the figure she bore—when in her ocean-home—carved in holy-oak.'

The carving still graces the side of a late-medieval chair in St Senara's and is one of dozens that adorn church roofs, bench ends and misericords across the country. Through these—and the many illustrations that lurk in illuminated manuscripts—the Church

proved an indefatigable, if surprising, peddler of mermaid myths. Indeed, Durham Castle's Norman Chapel houses one of Britain's earliest medieval mermaids, according to Sarah Peverley of the University of Liverpool, an expert in the cultural history of British merfolk.

Vaughn Scribner, author of *Merpeople: A human history*, even suggests that medieval clerics first forged the myth of the mermaid's irresistible beauty. Sea people with fishlike features have appeared in legends at least since the days of ancient Syria's Atargatis, a goddess who accidentally killed her human lover and, in her grief, launched herself into a lake, growing a fishtail that allowed her to move underwater. The Greeks and Romans had squamous nereids and mighty tritons, which reached England in the wake of Roman

‘Sea people with fishlike features have appeared in legends since ancient Syria’



Above: Seduced by a song: the Mermaid of Zennor, St Senara's, Cornwall. Right: The long, lustrous hair of Waterhouse's 1900 mermaid epitomises the romantic legend

galleys and graced the mosaics of many a villa. Yet, writes Mr Scribner, the Church, keen to warn people against the dangers of lust and feminine artifice, 'did not need scaly nereids. They needed sexualised sea nymphs'—and the mermaid as a seductive temptress was born.

Prof Peverley believes the picture is more complex, with the Church employing merfolk as symbols of both moral corruption and salvation: although mermaids often represented 'the deadly allure of sin', their 'hybrid body could also be used to explain the theology of Christ's incarnation. In a religious play performed in Cornwall, for example, the mermaid was a good visual aid for capturing Christ's dual nature (part man, part god)'.

The popular view of merfolk is similarly nuanced. Some are kind souls that save deserving people: at Llandrillo yn Rhos, Gwynedd, fisherman John Evans freed a mermaid tangled in his net, only to see her pop out of the waters sometime later, urging him (in flawless Welsh) to make for the shore. Although the sea was calm and the sun shone, he listened to her advice—and survived a freak storm. Other merfolk seduce men to their doom—not least the 'bonny maid' who, in *Child's Ballads*, a 19th-century folk-song anthology, bizarrely kills the hapless Clerk Collins with a headache.

Many sea nymphs exact devastating retribution for all kinds of slights. When Rhysyn, a handsome young fisherman from Tanggulan, Ceredigion, spurned pale Morwen, the sea princess with whom he had been flirting, because he was put out by the crabs that crawled in her red hair and wanted to marry the crustacean-free Lowri, a local farmer's daughter, instead, the mermaid had her father blow up a deadly storm. Water swept through the land, drowning Lowri, the wedding party and anyone else who was about that day, including blameless pigs, sheep, dogs and horses—all except Rhysyn, who was turned into a merman and forcibly married to Morwen of the crabby hair.

Merfolk, explains Prof Peverley, encapsulate the pleasures and perils associated with our waters, bringing bounty, foretelling the future or becoming the culprits for treacherous sandbanks. Their changeable nature—'good, bad, alluring, dangerous'—is partly why they have such a strong hold on our imagination, permeating everything from popular culture →



to politics: in the 1600s, they were employed to belittle Mary Queen of Scots (portrayed as a finned seductress), but celebrate Elizabeth I (a mermaid in the 'Armada' portrait sanctions her status as undefeated Queen of the Seas).

Literature, music and art have all turned to sea nymphs for inspiration. They feature in the works of composers (Franz Joseph Haydn's *The Mermaid's Song*); artists such as Evelyn de Morgan (*The Sea Maidens*) and John William Waterhouse (*A Mermaid*); countless children's authors (E. Nesbit's *Wet Magic*, J. M. Barrie's *Peter Pan*); and writers from Shakespeare (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *The Tempest*) to Oscar Wilde (*The Fisherman and His Soul*), T. S. Eliot (*The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*) and Alfred, Lord Tennyson, who—together with Hans Christian Andersen and Disney—perhaps most influenced the modern perception of the pretty, flirty 'mermaid fair', complete with flowing tresses, pearl comb and underwater throne.

By the time Tennyson's *The Mermaid* was published, Britain had long been in the grip of mermaid fever. Reported sightings ranged from Ralph of Coggeshall's *Chronicon Anglicanum* (1187–1224), which mentioned a naked, hairy merman with a pointed beard found among wriggling fish by horrified Suffolk fishermen, to a diary entry by explorer Henry Hudson, who, in June 1608, described a mermaid spotted by his crew: 'From the Navill upward, her backe and breasts were like a woman's... in her going downe, they saw her tayle, which was like the tayle of a Porposse.'

In the mid 18th century, father of taxonomy Carl Linnaeus not only believed merfolk existed, but was keen to capture one. However, notes Prof Peverley, as the approach to

natural history became more rigorous, scientists did begin to question whether creatures such as mermaids (and even unicorns) were real. Amateur scholars pitched into the debate, often as proponents of the mermaid's existence: one such was Elizabeth Mackay, the daughter of a Caithness clergyman, who, on January 12, 1809, saw an 'exceedingly round' head break through the waves, her hair thick and green around a plump, pink face, her arms long and smooth as they shooed off curious sea birds. Mentioning the 'spectacle' in a letter, Mackay was adamant she had seen a mermaid, not another 'inhabitant of the deep', and clearly: 'it was distant from us a few yards only'.

'A mermaid in the "Armada" portrait sanctions Elizabeth I as Queen of the Seas'

Capitalising on this interest, purveyors of 'mermaid mummies'—Japan-made marvels in which the preserved remains of monkeys were sewn together with those of a fish—did a roaring trade. Perhaps the most famous mummy belonged to Samuel Eades, a Boston sea captain, 'who sold a ship that he had no right to sell to raise the funds to buy a mermaid,' says Prof Peverley. 'He exhibited it in Cape Town and London, hoping to make his fortune. People flocked to see it until it was discredited by the scientific community and he was sued for losses by the ship owner.'

Conmen notwithstanding, did the mermaid spotters of the past hallucinate or make up

Land ahoy: mermaids of the countryside

Merfolk do not confine their presence to the British shoreline. There are mermaids from Shropshire to Cheshire and local lore puts not one, but two in the Peak District: at Black Mere Pool, near Leek, Staffordshire, and at Mermaid's Pool, on Kinder Scout, Derbyshire. The latter—as shy as she is generous—only appears at midnight on Easter Sunday and, if she fancies it, may bestow immortality upon those who spot her. Victorian journalist Louis John Jennings tried in 1880, but it was the wrong day and all he found by the pool were lekking grouse.

their report? Scientists have suggested that, primed by centuries of folklore, some of us may have mistaken sea mammals for merfolk. A 1604 pamphlet chronicling a mer-sighting in the waters off Pendine, Carmarthenshire, is potentially consistent with the description of a large seal: what looked like 'a lively Woman from her waist upwards' appeared, as the tide turned, 'in cullour gray, with eares like a Hound, but somewhat greater and shorter... her tayle... two fothomes in length'.

It's a shame to lose the romance of mermaid legend to the cold logic of science. There is more than a grain of truth in the words of Robert Hunt, who, relating the story of The Old Man of Cury in his 1865 *Popular Romances of the West of England*, wrote: 'Some people are unbelieving enough to say the [mermaid's] comb is only a part of a shark's jaw. Sceptical people are never loveable people.' 🐉



Come into our world: what red-blooded sailor or fisherman could resist *The Sea Maidens* (1886), painted by Evelyn de Morgan?

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