

# Plumpton: Myths and Legends

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Although supernatural occurrences are quite common in British tradition - especially from the Victorian age when reason and science had largely replaced folklore - Plumpton does seem to have more than its fair share. This article will explore whether it is possible that the area's industrial past may be the reason for this relative abundance of apparitions and appearances.

Let's start with the Ghost of Jane Benson, who wanders the canal towpath. There are several versions of Jane's story, particularly in terms of dates, but this from an article by Helen J. Brown sums up the known details quite well;

*One of the most remarkable entries in the Parish Church Register is the following in the list of Burials:*

*"Nov 27th, 1717 Jane Benson of Ulverston, died excommunicate".*

*The sentence of excommunication was rarely pronounced by the Established Church, and one wonders who pronounced the sentence; probably the Rev. Edmund Atkinson who was the first minister appointed by the Braddylls. Beginning his duties in 1714 he died in 1765, having held office for 51 years. We further wonder what offence Jane Benson had committed. I do not think it would be a sin against moral law, but venture think that she was known as a 'scold'.*

*As a 'scold' she would be fitted with a branks bridle (a metal headpiece which included a barbed iron bar which fitted into the wearer's mouth to prevent talking. This instrument was securely locked into position and not removed, day or night until the justices thought the wearer had mended their ways, this may have been weeks or even months). Jane Benson would probably have to endure the rigours of the ducking stool too. The Church even denied her the right to be buried on their ground, so she was buried, probably at the dead of night on the side of the little knoll not far from the place where Lund Hall is now. You might think this was the end of the story, but it is only the beginning. Whether the spirit of Jane Benson had missed its way I know not, but it troubled Ulverston folks for nigh on a hundred years and eventually, Rev. Father McHugh visited the scene of her burial and there exorcised the ghost. Many people witnessed this ceremony. They were requested to stand in a circle, and it was said that the priest had to repeat the words so quickly that the shade of Jane Benson had not time to get three times round the circle before he had finished. I cannot give the exact words, but she was adjured to trouble mortals nevermore.*

*"While grass should grow*

*Or waters flow".*

*No more was heard of Jane Benson until the railway line was constructed near the spot where she was buried in 1856, here there was some subsidence and some of the old folks said that Miss Jane Benson was 'at it again'. Since then, no more has been heard of her.*

The current, six-arch railway bridge began construction in 1854 and the builders blamed poor Jane for their difficulties in finding firm foundations.

Moving a little further into Plumpton we then encounter The Plumpton Dobby. This seems to be mostly associated with the area around Plumpton junction, as demonstrated by the following recollection from railwayman Philip Campbell Johnstone;

*'When I was a loco fireman on the railway at Barrow and later a driver there if I was on the Whip or the night goods, I used to look up at the Tin bridge at Plumpton to see if the Dobbie was there. Plumpton was a strange eerie place and signalmen would talk of hearing footsteps coming up the box steps at night but nobody appearing. One signalman who was posted there only lasted a month then packed the job in . He could not stand the night shift. One of the regular signalmen whom I knew well he was an Ulverston man who told me one morning when I was on the early bank engine that as he drove down the lanes to Plumpton to open the box at 04.00 on that Monday morning he saw the misty Dobbie on the bridge and just drove through him. As far as he was concerned it was just a normal occurrence. There are other tales I was told over the years too, a born and bred Ulverston lad I spent many hours roaming around Plumpton but can't say that I ever saw anything unusual.'*

Whether the Dobbie moved around or it was simply that his reputation spread further afield Patricia Eyre recalls that;

*My grandmother, mother & aunt lived on Hill Fall. Gran was woken by horses going down the road. Thought it was Dan Lowther bringing horses back from Ireland. When mentioned next day to the family she was told it wasn't him - you have heard the Dobby.*

With perhaps 500 years of history it is probably not surprising that Plumpton Hall acts as an anchor point for a few local legends. One of the better-known ones concerns a lantern described here by Furness Hidden Heritage;

*Another interesting tale from Plumpton is that the hall possesses a haunted brass lamp which will always find its way home should it be removed from the building. The brass lamp was said to have washed up on shore from the wreck of a ship from the Spanish Armada (although experts have now said that it is much more recent in date). For many a year the lantern has hung in the hall and often lit to help guide travellers across the sands. It has also been the centre of some mystical behaviour and if ever it is removed from the hall it always finds its way home and is discovered hanging back in its rightful place, even when extreme lengths are gone to remove it; like the time it was sealed inside a barrel and thrown out to sea. Who knows what is going on with the lamp and why it is so determined to remain in the hall! Is it paranormal or is it just a fanciful tale? I'll let you be the judge of that.*

The Croasdale Family History expands further on the subject;

*Various other stories exist about Plumpton Hall and its surroundings. Several sightings have been reported of an old crone who appears in the woods and around the precipitous slopes of the quarry. There is a ghostly horseman who gallops across the sands before disappearing and occasional mention of bloodstained footprints. And there is a sailor who was shipwrecked with his wife and child. They became separated and the wife and child were given shelter in the Hall. When the sailor later reached the hall and looked through the window, he thought his wife and*

*child were ghosts and his hair turned white. He returns, white haired each year on October 29th to gaze through the window at his loved ones by the fireside.*

'Furnessian', writing in The Masonic Magazine in 1882 also has an interest in the paranormal activity in the vicinity of the hall;

*My attention having been drawn to an article on the above, in the Christmas number of the Freemason, I think it incumbent on me to state really and truly what I know concerning Plumpton Hall.*

*As the writer of the article has observed, Plumpton has long been associated with weird stories and legends. It is an antiquated building, very strongly built in different styles of architecture and situated near to the sea. It is a place which one would naturally imagine to be the resort of ghosts, if it be true that these denizens of the unseen world ever favour us with their visits. What I am about to relate in connection therewith can easily be verified.*

*My aunt, who though upwards of seventy years, is still in full possession of her mental faculties says:*

*Mrs White, then the occupant of the hall, informed me thirty year ago that there resounded throughout the house, at all hours of both the day and night most unearthly sounds, as though of some persons in pain. Sometimes the sounds took the form of deadly conflict, at other times they would sink into piteous cries. Mrs. White was unable to account for this in any way whatsoever. The house had been searched from top to bottom, and still nothing could be made of it. At last Mrs. White relieved herself by quitting the scene of so much unpleasantness."*

*Coming to a later date, say within the last ten years, Mrs. James Croasdale detailed to two Ulverstonians the following experiences:*

*One night, soon after they had taken up their abode at Plumpton, not believing in the ghost, at all, they were startled by a low moaning wind which seemed to fill the house, immediately followed by a pattering round the bed, more like the pattering of flock of sheep than anything else she could name.*

*Second. When in bed and asleep one night they were awakened by a sound as of some heavily falling weight, which resounded through the house. It seemed be like the falling of a fifty-six-pound weight from the ceiling to the floor of the hall, and startled them exceedingly.*

*Third. As they were seated in the parlour opening out of the hall one calm day, in the broad light, there came most chilling wind, which made itself felt round the room. The handles of the doors, cupboards, presses, and all that was in the room were also shaken round most violently, as though some unseen agency was endeavouring to open them.*

*Mrs. Croasdale was firmly persuaded of the truth of all she related, and she told these things calmly and dispassionately, without any tincture' of exaggeration.*

*A relative informed me, that when a boy he was walking through the fields leading from Plumpton Hall to Next Ness, when they were covered with snow. When about half way across,*

*he was struck with the print of figure indented in the snow which was exactly the shape of a man's body. Over it were sprinkled drops of blood, by it was a smaller figure, evidently that of a dog. The most singular part of it all was there were no footsteps near excepting his own and not being able to solve the problem on his own, he brought his father and brother to look at it.*

*Now these things are authenticated by credible and reliable witnesses. The social positions of those who relate these marvellous facts are, an old lady, enjoying the esteem and confidence of the inhabitants of the village in which she lives, the confidential clerk to one of the most influential merchants in the district, and a matter of fact young man, of average intelligence, not likely to be scared by any hobgoblin stories or fancies.*

*Laugh as we may, we cannot deny the fact that there are many so-called haunted houses in England, which possess mysteries of their own impenetrable to anybody.*

*Plumpton Hall Dobby is one of the incapables of solution, and as such it will possibly remain till the day when psychological laws come to be better understood among us.*

So there we have it; Jane Benson walking the canal towpath, the Dobby in the vicinity of Plumpton's busy railway junction, the 'old crone' who wanders the precipitous slopes of the old quarries and the mysterious – headless by some accounts – horseman who thunders in from the rapid tides and quicksands of Plumpton Bay. Is it possible that the connection between all of these apparitions is that they manifest themselves at the most dangerous places in the area? Could the purpose of these myths simply be to keep children away from the railway, the canal and the abandoned mines and quarries which are found everywhere in Plumpton?

#### **References and sources**

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The Masonic Magazine, Feb 1, 1882, p.34.

Croasdale Family History and Genealogy.

Philip Campbell Johnstone, personal recollection.

Patricia Eyre, personal recollection.

Industrial History of Cumbria, internet resource.

Postlethwaite, A. Ulverston Canal - 'Shortest, widest and deepest.'