

## Dartmoor stories

### The Great Thunderstorm of 1638

The Great Thunderstorm of Widecombe-in-the-Moor took place on 21 October 1638, when the church (right) was apparently struck by ball lightning during a severe thunderstorm. An afternoon service was taking place at the time and the building was packed with worshippers. Four of them were killed, around 60 injured, and the building severely damaged.

Written accounts by eyewitnesses tell of a strange darkness, powerful thunder, and "a great ball of fire" ripping through a window and tearing part of the roof open. It is said to have rebounded through the church, killing some members of the congregation and burning many others.

The priest, George Lyde, was unhurt, but his wife "had her ruff and the linen next her body, and her body, burnt in a very pitiful manner". The local warrener Robert Mead struck a pillar so hard that it left an indentation. His skull was shattered and his brain hurled to the ground. A gentleman called Roger Hill was thrown violently against a wall and died instantly. His son, sitting next to him, was unhurt.



Some are said to have suffered burns to their bodies, but not their clothes. A dog is reported to have run out of the door, was hurled around as if by a mini tornado, and fell dead to the ground.

According to local legend it was the result of a visit by the devil, who had made a pact with a local card player and gambler called Jan Reynolds. The deal was that if the devil ever found him asleep in church, he could have his soul. Jan was said to have nodded off during the service that day, with his pack of cards in his hand.

The devil headed for Widecombe via the Tavistock Inn, in nearby Poundsgate, where he stopped for refreshment. The landlord reported a visit by a man in black, riding a jet black horse. The stranger ordered a mug of ale, and it hissed as it went down his throat. He finished his drink, put the mug down on the bar, where it left a scorch mark, and left some money. As they rode away, the landlord found that the coins had turned to dried leaves in his hand.

The devil tethered his horse to one of the pinnacles at Widecombe Church, captured the sleeping Jan Reynolds, and rode away into the storm. As they flew over nearby Birch Tor, the four aces fell to the ground, and today, if you stand at Warren House Inn, you can still see four ancient field enclosures, each shaped like the symbols from a pack of cards.

## Jay's Grave

Many years ago, possibly in the late eighteenth century, a young orphan girl, Mary (or Kitty) Jay was employed at a farm close to Manaton in Devon. She had lived there from about the age of five and, although befriended by the farmer's son Jamie, it is believed that she led a solitary existence. Her living conditions are reported to have been primitive, her work long and arduous and her life in general miserable, all of these facts being compounded by having no one to turn to in times of sorrow.

Whilst still in her teens, she became pregnant, reportedly after being raped by a youth whom she had fallen in love with during a summer hiring on the farm. As so often happened in those days poor Mary was left to carry the blame whilst the man appears to have escaped scot-free.

So great was her shame that she repaired to a barn on the farm where she committed suicide by hanging herself. Such was the stigma attached to this form of death that the three local parishes – Widecombe-in-the-Moor, North Bovey and Manaton – all refused to bury her body within consecrated ground, so she was buried at a crossroads, a traditional practice for suicide victims at the time.

In 1860, in order to investigate the site and confirm the various stories surrounding it, the area was dug over by a team of local worthies led by a Mr. Bryant. Human remains were found which were subsequently identified as those of a young girl. These were placed in a wooden coffin and reburied at the site, but this time the grave was marked with a rectangle of granite stones, which still stand to this day.

The grave still receives regular posies of yellow flowers, the same colour which legend relates that Mary and Jamie used to pick together in childhood. The placing of these flowers has itself spawned its own legends being attributed to local children, passing gypsies, pixies, or as the locals maintain, either the spirit of Jamie comforting his forlorn sweetheart, or her murderer seeking forgiveness.

Motorists, passing at night, claim to have glimpsed ghostly figures in their headlights which disappear without trace in full view., or to have seen a dark, hooded figure kneeling there.



### **Bowerman's Nose**

Bowerman's Nose is a large stack of weathered granite on the northern slopes of Hayne Down, about a mile from Hound Tor and close to the village of Manaton.

According to local legend, a huntsman called Bowerman lived on the moor around one thousand years ago. When chasing a hare he and his pack of dogs unwittingly ran into a coven of witches, overturned their cauldron and disrupted their ceremony.

They decided to punish him, and the next time he was hunting, one of the witches turned herself into a hare, and led both Bowerman and his hounds into a mire. As a final punishment, she turned them to stone - the dogs can be seen as a jagged chain of rocks on top of Hound Tor, while the huntsman himself became the rock formation now known as Bowerman's Nose. With a little imagination, it is possible to see something resembling a human face in the rocky outline.



### **The Legend of Childe's Tomb**

On a bleak height of Dartmoor near Fox Tor Mires are still to be found the stones of Childe's Tomb. Childe was Lord of the Manor of Plymstock. Lost and overcome by the snows of a blizzard, he slew his exhausted horse and, after using its blood to write on a granite slab: "The first that finds and brings me to my grave, The lands of Plymstock he shall have," he crept into the creature's body in a vain endeavour to save himself through its warmth. Tradition says that monks from Tavistock found him, and so gained the lands. It is thought, however, that the story has an earlier Saxon origin.

