

Creating “Gathered Tales of Lancashire”

Jacqueline Harris

In creating the film, “Gathered Tales”, I wanted to bring together old and new stories of Lancashire to highlight the sense of a continuing oral tradition that has always been with us and is alive and kicking in the 21st century. It has been an interesting and shared journey with Graham Kay at “Fully Formed Films”.

A Living Tradition: ‘Folk’ telling tales

We might think that old Lancashire folk tales are only to be found in musty old books and are therefore ‘old fashioned’ but in fact the ‘folk’ of Lancashire had been telling each other local tales for many many years before some were ‘fixed’ in print; and of course they carried on being told afterwards as well. The printed versions are only part of the story. As the years pass, stories change and adapt; new ones come along that revisit old themes. People continue to tell old stories and new ones of their own that are then passed on. Everyone tells stories.

Reading the old stories and listening to the new, I discovered recurring themes springing from the Lancashire landscape. e.g. A ghostly woman leaping on the back of a horse behind the rider on a lonely woodland track becomes a ghost seen in the car mirror on the back seat of the car going over the moors near Darwen.

‘Shifters’ and Supernatural Black Dogs: Gathering the Stories

I've been overwhelmed by the kindness and generosity of the people I've met who were so willing and entertaining in their sharing of odd and strange stories, often close to home, and always rooted in Lancashire.

Graham Kay accompanied me on some of these days, others were alone with my digital recorder.

I spent many days out and about in Lancashire, setting out and seeing what would meet me half way; planning my time yet leaving space for for what turned out to be many unexpected encounters.

Standing in Lancaster Library in my brightest dress and some posters to attract attention, brought me Jenny Neafcy's stories of Black Dogs and ghostly revenants. A chance encounter with the sister of Simon Entwistle led to tales of haunted taxis and contemporary encounters with Peg O' Nell.

Telling stories myself at The Whitaker in Rawtenstall and encouraging people to reciprocate, I found Joanna with her father's wonderful story of time slips and ghostly pubs. Later, I discovered Melanie Warren through Twitter. A wonderful evening sharing stories led to her personal tale of three people's encounters with the ghostly Alice and the experience of Alice following her to her new home.

Heading into pubs with Graham and chatting to whoever was willing to share a tale resulted in Susan Curry and her tales of what she called 'The Shifters' - modern day mischievous boggarts who also reminded me of Mary Norton's 'Borrowers'!

An Unexpected Encounter

One memorable day, Graham and I went to film the area near the observatory on the Todmorden - Bacup Road, which was where Joanna's dad had had the experience of the ghostly pub, although she didn't know the name of it. As we poked around furtively, we realised we were being watched by a strong straight figure in a wide brimmed hat holding a very big stick standing on the hill. Deciding he might know something and thinking we should explain ourselves, we headed up to see him. When I told him Joanna's story his first reaction was "Ah, The Bay Horse!" He knew the name of the pub and had old photographs! In a few minutes we found ourselves hunkered down in his cosy cottage with steaming cups of tea. We spent the afternoon in John Keegan's wonderfully fascinating and stimulating company, discussing the stars (his late wife built the observatory), the landscape, ancient gods and Greek musical notation (John is an expert). It was a fabulous day, not least because it was all so wonderfully unexpected.

There have been many many others whose stories will hopefully be added digitally to the exhibition's database as it travels around.

Are they true?

I have no wish to prove or disprove the veracity of any of the stories, past or present, that's for each listener to decide for themselves. I've heard first hand stories where I am certain the teller believes them to be true and who am I to argue? I have also heard wonderful yarn spinners create fabulous imaginative narratives of their own. Sometimes the distinction is blurred but isn't that what's so fabulous about these stories: the incredible blending of our personal perceptions and projections, the human imagination and, maybe, realities that don't quite fit our current 21st century understanding of the world?

Pictures: In the Head or on the Screen?

When I discussed the visual elements of the film with Graham, I knew I didn't want to "illustrate" the stories. We do that best in our own heads. When we listen to a story, the storyteller is describing what she sees in her head and we see our versions of those pictures in our own heads, taking her words, intonation and gesture and bringing to it the raw material of our own lives. As storyteller Ben Haggarty has said, "Storytelling is 'The Theatre of the Imagination'". I didn't want to change that.

Lancashire: a Storied Landscape

I wanted the visual elements of the film to be the raw material of the stories: place and teller. In this case, it's the Lancashire landscape in which the stories have their home; images of place and moments in the landscape that resonate with the stories. Graham took this idea and brought his own skills and sensibilities to discover and record images that found reflections in the stories, suggesting connections rather than imposing them.

Where we Tell Stories

The contexts of the storytelling were important. I wanted to show the moments in the day when we share tales and stories. It turned out they were over a cup of tea on a sunny day outside the Whitaker with Joanna, in Simon's front room, in the local pub by a blazing fire, in the workplace, which in this case was with Jenny in Lancaster library, with the wonderful suggestion of thousands of other stories behind every book spine!

I wanted to highlight these passing points at places where people and stories meet in our everyday lives; always have and always will. I also wanted to highlight the tellers, who told their stories with verve, authenticity, authority, and a huge generosity. Again Graham ran with this and captured the spirit of everyone involved, also having the huge skill of putting people at ease in front of the camera.

What to do with the old stories?

Having gathered the new stories, three stood out as resonating directly with three of the old tales. I wanted to bring them together but wasn't sure how. I began by editing the new stories so that they were as punchy and 'clean' as possible, a distillation of pure storytelling. I considered recording myself 'telling' the old stories and putting them side by side, but that didn't feel right. I wanted to show how the stories resonated back and forwards across time.

The new stories were 'fixed' in the recordings of the tellings but the old stories were still mutable. I could play with them, write them, rewrite them tightly, and structure them in a way that echoed and underlined the new tales. Then I recorded myself reading them. Once I'd done this, the question was how to combine the rewritten versions of the old tales and the oral tellings of the new stories. I decided to weave them together, but retain the different styles so that rather than fighting each other, the old stories would hopefully create an undertow, to the high notes and contemporary kick of the new ones.

Working with Graham Kay

I'm not a film maker. Graham is. As a film maker it was his creativity and skills that I wanted to bring to bear particularly on the visual aspects of film. The film is what happened when Graham met my ideas with his own, the stories, the people and the landscape. That process is Graham's story.