

A Ghost Story

(This story, part legend, part history, tells of events in the village of Drakelowe in the years immediately following the 'Domesday' Survey of 1085-6. Dugdale in his Monasticon Anglicanum quotes the Chronica Abbatum de Burton (a manuscript believed to date from the sixteenth century) which refers to a common saying 'The Devill of Drakelowe', and which tells that it came from a story of two Stapenhill serfs who fled from the Abbot of Burton to Roger the Poitevin, and for their faithlessness brought down the vengeance of Modwenna the patron saint of Burton Abbey. The Chronicle also states that this was during the abbacy of Galfridus de Mala Terra, who was abbot in 1085-94, so these events probably took place during the period 1090-94, when Drakelowe was held by Roger for the second time. The only surviving account is the Tractatus de Miraculis of Gaufridus, who was Abbot of Burton 1114-51 and who may have witnessed what happened).

The Devil of Drakelowe

Two villeins who lived at Stapenhill under the jurisdiction of the abbot of Burton fled ad uillam proximam que Drachelawa dicitur, relinquentes inique dominos suos monachos et manere cupientes sub potestate Rogerii Comitis qui Pictauensis cognominabatur. ["to the nearby village called Drakelowe, unjustly forsaking their masters the monks and desiring to stay under the authority of Count Roger nicknamed the Poitevin"]

The abbey officers promptly impounded the corn ration of these delinquents. The runaways, meanwhile, told the Count so mendacious a story that he threatened the abbot, seized all the corn at Stapenhill, and sent soldiers to the abbey lands at Blakepol, where they challenged the abbot's soldiers to fight. The abbot rushed to St Modwenna's shrine, while his ten retainers, against orders, sallied forth and fought sixty of the Count's followers including the dapifer Comitis [the Count's steward or seneschal], with varying results. The following day the two runaways fell ill and died, and were buried the next morning at Stapenhill in wooden coffins.

Then followed a terrible scene. That same evening before sunset the dead men were seen bearing their coffins in fantastic fashion on their shoulders. Throughout the night they rushed about the paths and fields at Drakelowe, assuming the appearance of bears or hounds or other animals. Matters became even worse as the spectres began to bang their coffins against the walls of the houses, crying, "Forward, forward with haste, bestir yourselves and come." Every evening and every night this happened. And then, an epidemic broke out and nearly everybody in Drakelowe died, except for two rustics and Drogo the Count's bailiff.

*The Count went in penitence to the abbot, and made full restitution, but the Saint was not so easily pacified as her Abbot. The two rustics themselves fell ill, and some neighbours, still in deadly fright of the nocturnal visitants, exhumed the bodies of the two runaways, bore off their hearts *ad collem qui Dodefresford nuncupatur* [to the hill called Dodefresford], and burnt them there. Just as this was completed an evil spirit in the shape of a flying crow was seen to emerge from the flames. This was no doubt the Devil of Drakelowe, and his appearance sent every one into ecstasies of fright. Even the two sick rustics, as soon as they saw the smoke of the fire, suddenly found themselves quite well enough to rise from their beds and flee with wives and children, bag and baggage, *ad uillam proximam que Greseleia dicitur*. So Drakelowe was abandoned, and remained so for a long time, in fear of the wrath of St. Modwenna and wonder at the miracles wrought for her sake.*

So runs the legend. But did any of it really happen? We cannot be sure, but it is likely that there was a quarrel between Roger the Poitevin and the Abbot of Burton, and a fight between their retainers; shortly afterwards there was an outbreak of disease, possibly plague, which was popularly believed to be the vengeance of Burton Abbey's offended patron saint, and the whole surviving population, including their lord and his family, fled Drakelowe.