

**THE MYTH OF THE
PENT CUCKOO: A
STUDY IN FOLKLORE**

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The myth of the pent cuckoo: a study in folklore by John Edward Field

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JOHN EDWARD FIELD

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THE SWYNCOMBE CUCKOO PEN
FROM THE NORTH.

THE MYTH OF THE PENT CUCKOO

A STUDY IN FOLKLORE

BY

JOHN EDWARD FIELD, M.A.

VICAR OF BENSON

" Listen to these wild traditions,

* * *

Ye who love a nation's legends,
Love the ballads of a people,
That like voices from afar off
Call to us to pause and listen.

LONGFELLOW

LONDON: ELLIOT STOCK
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PREFACE

THE first purpose of this work includes a scientific enquiry into the meaning and value of the widespread story of the men who pent, or hedged in, the Cuckoo, which appears in the old "*Tales of the Wise Men of Gotham*" and is also familiar in several parts of the country at the present day.

Its further purpose is to give an account of a series of sites bearing the traditional name of "Cuckoo Pens" along the southern part of the Chiltern Hills and in the neighbouring districts. Fifteen such sites are known to me, and although I have made frequent enquiries I have not been able to hear of another; but probably there are several more. A description of each of the fifteen is given with more or less detail. In the majority of cases this is done from personal inspection. In the other cases it is from accounts contributed by friends, and to these I desire to offer an expression of thanks. As far as I have had opportunity of observing, the Cuckoo Pens do not appear in Tithe Awards or Enclosure Awards, but the designation survives only in popular parlance. Sometimes it has passed out of the knowledge of the villagers generally and is only handed down by those

who are connected with the particular spot of ground. In one instance, where it was well known a quarter of a century ago, it is difficult to trace any recollection of it now. But in two instances I have seen it noted in the prospectus of a sale of land.

Mr. G. D. Leslie, R.A., in his *Riverside Letters* (ix. p. 68) describes the downs which jut out like promontories from the flanks of the Chilterns into the plains below.

The tops of these jutting spurs are more or less devoid of wood, though most of them are dotted about with juniper bushes, and some have on their summits isolated clumps of trees which are in this part of the country called "Cuckoo Pens." I suppose pen means a hill or peak, but how cuckoo comes in I know not.

And Mr. A. D. Godley, in *Oxford Country*, referring to this passage, suggests that the name must be identical with that of a prominent hill on the Berkshire ridge surmounted by a lofty mound and known as Cuckhamslow (Cwichelms-hlæw) or Scutchamfly Knob. It suffices to reply that Cwichelm the son of Cynegils was under-king in Berkshire and would not be likely to leave his name on several spots in Oxfordshire. But the Cuckoo Pens, like Cuckhamslow, are marked in most cases by some object of antiquarian interest which will merit particular notice.

Of all the tales which the folklore of our country has handed down, the Cuckoo myth is certainly one of the most curious and interesting. And the district

of the Cuckoo Pens is full of associations which have an attractive charm to the tourist and the holiday-maker, as well as abundant interest to the historian and the antiquary. It is hoped, therefore, that both the general reader and the student may find in this work something that deserves attention. The subject would have been worthy of a technical treatise for the study of antiquarian readers; but it has seemed desirable to treat it in a popular way, and to introduce historical notes and a variety of illustrative matter, in the hope that this may commend it to the wider circle of readers who care for the old tales and legends of our land and for objects of general interest in its antiquities.

Books from which materials have been drawn are named as occasion requires. But special mention must be made here of two works to which I am largely indebted. One of these is *All about the Merry Tales of Gotham*, by Mr. Alfred Stapleton of Nottingham, where some of my conclusions were anticipated. The other is the Rev. Edmund McClure's *British Place-Names in their Historical Setting*.

The substance of my account of the Medlers Bank at Benson has appeared in the *Berks, Bucks and Oxon Archæological Journal*, ii. 45-50 (1896).

J. E. F.

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