



Country tales...

Herne the Hunter

The character of Herne is shrouded in woodland mystery, but one leafy local legend survives... By **Martin Maudsley**

Illustration: Pete Brewster

In the 14th century, during the reign of Richard the II, Herne was a keeper in the royal hunting grounds of Windsor Forest. He was a man who knew the paths through the trees as well as any anyone. Along with the other forest keepers, he managed the woodland for wild game, and as a skilled hunter he was often called upon to accompany the royal hunt as a guide, although this always caused jealous mutterings among other men.

One day the king's party were hunting a great stag with a magnificent head of antlers. The chase was long and thrilling, their quarry taking them deeper into the woods. Several times it eluded them in the dense forest, but thanks to Herne the trail was recovered again.

Eventually the deer tired and was cornered against a thicket of thorns. King Richard fixed an arrow against the string of his bow but, before he could let it fly, the

stag made a last desperate leap, lunging towards the monarch's horse. Fearlessly, Herne stepped in front of the king, taking the blow from the stag's antlers against his own chest. Man and beast rolled on the forest floor in a frenzied embrace, until Herne's hunting knife was plunged, deftly and fatally, into the deer's neck.

Woodland wizard

The king's life had been saved, but Herne's injuries from the stag's antlers were serious. He was bleeding heavily and lost consciousness; it seemed that he would die there in the forest. But then, from behind the trees, stepped an old man with a leaf-green cloak, grizzled beard and eyes that burned brightly. "I can save this man's life," said the stranger. "Not by medicine – but by magic of the old religion."

The king was taken aback by the claim, but was glad of any chance to save the man

who'd saved his own life. Under the old man's direction, a fire of oak wood was built and the dead deer's antlers were bound to Herne's head while the old man chanted over Herne's body. After the healing ritual was complete, Herne opened his eyes and was well enough to be placed back on his horse. The only payment the old man asked for was to be allowed to continue living in the forest unhindered.

The king rewarded Herne for his bravery and made him head keeper of Windsor Forest – but this created even more resentment among the other keepers. When they heard the story of the miraculous healing, they decided to visit the old man in the woods for themselves. The keepers falsely claimed that Herne had boasted of healing himself and that he was now planning to prevent anyone living in the forest, including the old man.

Their words dripped into the old man's ears like poison. His shamanic power couldn't take back Herne's life, but he cursed Herne so that he should lose his skills as a woodsman. The prophecy came to pass, and under Herne's management the forest soon began to deteriorate and the wild game dwindled. Eventually the king reluctantly revoked Herne's position. Herne was devastated, and a few days later his dead body was seen hanging from the branch of a great oak tree.

That night, a fierce storm raged through the forest and the corpse mysteriously disappeared. From that day on, Herne the Hunter began to haunt Windsor Forest, his fearsome spirit, with horned head, rode through the woods at night on a black steed. He appeared to King Richard, identifying the keepers who had brought about his demise, and the guilty men were hanged from the same oak as Herne. Soon afterwards the hauntings stopped, and the wild game began to return to the forest.

Herne's Oak continued to grow in Windsor Forest for hundreds of years until it eventually died around 1800. A replacement oak was later planted by Queen Victoria. As for Herne the Hunter himself, periodically he is still seen stalking the great oaks and keeping an eye on his ancient forest. It is said that he appears whenever trouble is abroad in the land.