

Alice's adventures in Yorkshire

Summer Strevens investigates the Yorkshire influences behind Alice in Wonderland



The inception of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* is generally taken as the day in early July, 1862, the “golden afternoon” of the 4th when the author Charles Lutwidge Dodgson – better known by his pen name Lewis Carroll – took a boat trip on the river Isis from Folly Bridge, Oxford to Godstow for a picnic outing. On that day he was accompanied by his friend the Reverend Robinson Duckworth, who rowed the boat, and ten-year-old Alice Pleasance Liddell, along with her sisters Edith, aged 8 and Lorina who was thirteen.

As the oars rhythmically dipped in and out of the water, on the little less than four-mile journey up river, Alice implored Carroll to entertain herself and her sisters with a story.

Happily obliging, Carroll regaled them with the fantastical tale of a girl, named Alice, and her adventures after she fell down a rabbit hole, the story he spun not unlike

those he'd made up to entertain his own family from an early age, he being one of eleven brothers and sisters, and often drawing inspiration from the surroundings of their home while living at the rectory in Croft-on-Tees in North Yorkshire.

Carroll's father came to the parish as rector of St Peter's in 1843, Carroll eleven years old at the time. It is said that much of *Alice in Wonderland* was inspired by settings in and around the rectory and church, fuelling the young author's fictional and fantastical imaginings, and that the character of the Cheshire

Left, Charles Dodgson (Lewis Carroll), who many have been inspired by the carved cat, right, to create the Cheshire Cat, inset

Cat may well have been drawn from the carved stone face of a cat or lion adorning the sedilla near the altar in the church (a seat for clergy built into the wall). When viewed while seated in a forward pew, the broad smile on the creature's face is clear, however on standing the cheesy grin seems to disappear, much as the vanishing Cheshire Cat's did.

The first verse of Carroll's famous nonsense poem "Jabberwocky" was also written at Croft, attributed by some to tales of the



*The 'White Rabbit'
at Beverley*

Sockburn Worm, a ferocious dragon like creature said in days of yore to have laid waste to the nearby village of Sockburn, where according to legend around the time of the Norman Conquest a huge man-eating dragon with poisonous breath, sometimes described as a wyrm, wyvern or flying serpent, was terrorising the village. Now

comprising of a ruined church, a farmhouse and a mansion called Sockburn Hall (built in 1834) all positioned within a loop in the River Tees known locally as the Sockburn Peninsula, the then lord of the manor Sir John Conyers took up the challenge to slay the beast. Successful in his quest, the Grey Stone standing in a field near the ruined church still marks the place of battle and burial spot of the fearsome Sockburn Worm.

Even though it is said that Carroll wrote the poem as a parody designed to show how not to write a poem, it is considered by many

to be one of the greatest nonsense poems written in the English language.

Clearly the young Charles Dodgson was susceptible to the impressionistic ecclesiastic environments of his upbringing, as it has also been suggested that further characters in the "Alice" stories may have been drawn from some of the decorative features in Ripon Cathedral where Carroll's father was a Canon from 1852-1868.

His supposed muse for the foul-tempered Queen of Hearts can be found among the lofty gilded corbels in the Cathedral's south transept, and a carving decorating one of the misericord seats found in the chancel choir stalls showing a griffin in hot pursuit of a rabbit down a hole possibly the inspiration for the eternally late White Rabbit.

There is however another, and it must be said, more obvious contender for Carroll's White Rabbit, or perhaps even his March Hare, to be found adorning the stone archway surrounding the sacristy door in St Mary's Church, Beverley. The carved figure of a rabbit or hare, stood up on its hind legs and carrying a messenger bag dates to the 1330s and may have been familiar to Carroll as a child as his family spent time in the Beverley area when visiting with his grandfather.

Another tantalising inspirational hypothesis, this time for the subterranean nature of Alice's adventures, has opened up, literally you might say, with the series of real life subsidence events occurring in the aforementioned Ripon, as recently as last year, as well as while Carroll was resident there.

Long troubled by the eroding consequences of 'gypsum dissolution', a geohazard characteristic of the underlying geology of the area, the latest casualty was the house in Magdalen Close, destroyed when a sinkhole opened up in early 2014.

Acquaintances of the author, the Maisters, lived in Littlethorpe near Ripon, where a major collapse had occurred in 1796, and



A scene from the 2010 Tim Burton version of the story showing Alice (Mia Wasikowska) peering into the rabbit hole – could it have been inspired by Ripon’s sinkholes?

subsidence was also evident in the gardens of Ure Lodge, the home of Canon Badcock, a contemporary of Carroll’s father while Canon of Ripon. In the surrounding fields, to the north east of Ure Lodge, near the then railway station, the opening of a sixty-five foot shaft nearly forty feet in diameter which exposed the surrounding solid rock in 1834 was in all probability a curiosity Carroll would have visited. Yet the collapse witnessed by the Reverend Dunwell of Ripon in 1860 while walking with some school children along the banks of the River Ure must have proved even more dramatic, as before their eyes the ground fell away leaving a crater spanning twenty feet across and about forty feet in depth; certainly an event that may well have prompted Alice’s later literary exclamation “I wonder if I shall fall right through the earth!”

Though the *Wonderland* story was not unlike many others that Carroll had enchanted the Liddell sisters with before, it was Alice’s insistence that Carroll write this particular one down for her that assured the story’s eventual publication; in the sphere of chil-

dren’s literature it was unlike anything written before. While Carroll kept his promise to Alice, it was some months before he got around to the task, though he eventually presented her with a manuscript entitled *Alice’s Adventures Under Ground* as a Christmas present in 1864.

In the meantime, Carroll had decided to rewrite the story as a possible commercial venture. Probably with a view to canvassing his opinion, Carroll had sent the manuscript of *Under Ground* to a friend, the author George MacDonald, in the spring of 1863. The MacDonald children read the story and loved it, and this response probably persuaded Carroll to seek a publisher. Alice’s *Adventures in Wonderland*, with illustrations by John Tenniel, was published by Macmillan on 4th July 1865, the third anniversary of possibly the most famous boat trip in literary history, and a second book about the character Alice, *Through the Looking-Glass & What Alice Found There*, followed in 1871. Later, in 1886, a facsimile of *Alice’s Adventures Under Ground*, the original manuscript that Carroll had given Alice Liddell, was also published.



A photograph of Alice Liddell, aged seven, taken by Charles Dodgson (Lewis Carroll) in 1860. The image was later published as a miniature on the last page of the original

Carroll however remained circumspect about his literary identity, shunning all notion of fame or celebrity.

As for Alice Liddell being the author's inspiration for Alice, while Carroll himself claimed in later years that his Alice was entirely imaginary and not based upon any real child at all, there are at least three direct links to Alice Liddell in the books. Firstly Carroll sets the stories on 4 May, (Alice Liddell's birthday) and 4 November (her 'half-birthday'), and in *Through the Looking-Glass* the fictional Alice declares that her age is "seven-and-a-half exactly", the same age as Alice Liddell on that date. Secondly, Carroll dedicated both works "to Alice Pleasance Liddell", and thirdly, the acrostic poem at the end of *Through the Looking-Glass*, if read downward, taking the first letter of each line, spells out Alice Liddell's full name. The poem has no title in *Through the Looking-Glass*, but is usu-

ally referred to by its first line, A Boat Beneath a Sunny Sky. Incidentally, that July afternoon on the river the Reverend Duckworth had also rowed his way into the story, as he was later to be represented by the Duck in Carroll's written version.

While the gulf between Victorian morality and contemporary values is yawning to say the least, we cannot close our eyes to the fact that Carroll's relationship with Alice Liddell has been laid open to question, and the source of much controversy. (Many biographers have supposed that Carroll had a paedophilic attraction to Alice, and the recent discovery of some questionable photography attributed to Carroll has re-opened the argument amongst Carroll experts.) Certainly the author, who remained a confirmed bachelor, enjoyed the company and friendship of children, and though his apparent fascination with childhood innocence seems dubious to modern eyes, perhaps imposing 21st century sensibilities on to the Victorian era, it is likely that Carroll merely had a platonic affection for the girl. At the time of her birth, Alice Liddell's father was the headmaster of Westminster School but was soon after appointed to the Deanery of Christ Church, Oxford, where Carroll was a maths don. The Liddell family had moved to Oxford in 1856, and it was soon after that Alice first met Carroll, an avid photographer, who encountered the family while he was photographing the cathedral on 25 April of that year.

The author became a close friend of the Liddell family, paying almost daily visits to the Deanery, and while doubtless it was Carroll's special friendship with Alice Liddell that resulted in one of the greatest children's books ever written, nevertheless the vivid childhood memories of Yorkshire that Carroll carried with him were a fundamental element in the creation of his fantastical world which has captivated children and adults alike for a century and a half. ■