

*This is the fifth of an occasional series of articles by David Stone about incidents in the history of Swanton Morley and its church*

### **CIRCLING THE CHURCH TO SEE THE DEVIL**

This may, perhaps, be a rather inappropriate article for a parish magazine, but I thought that it might nonetheless make a welcome change from history and architecture.

When searching for something else on the internet I came across a paper called *Circling as an entrance to the underworld* by Samuel Pyeatt Menefee, which mentioned Swanton Morley. This paper talked about the use of ‘circumambulation’, in other words walking or running around something special, usually in a particular direction and for a particular number of times, in order to achieve a specific objective. Such an objective might be something harmless like effecting a cure for an illness, or revealing a future spouse. More often, however, it was considered to be a means of ‘unscrewing’ the barrier between the natural and the supernatural. In particular it was aimed at things like being able to see fairies or to raise the devil. Usually the thing to be circled was something ancient, often with pagan connections, like Chanctonbury Ring, but naturally a church was considered to be a particularly potent thing to circle.

The above paper referred to the use of a keyhole during circumambulation to give a safe, but limited, view onto the ‘otherworld’. It gave several examples, including saying, “At Swanton Morley, in Norfolk, for example he who ran around the church at midnight struck and then whistled through the keyhole would see the Devil.” Out of idle interest I thought that I would see if I could discover anything more about this legend.

Unfortunately, the reference to Swanton Morley simply said, “Collected by L.V. Grinsell from C.H. Lewton-Braine, 1950. Notes of L.V. Grinsell.”

L.V. Grinsell seems to be an authority on folklore and a couple of his papers were cited, but there was no mention of any collection of his notes. However, the primary source would seem to be C.H. Lewton-Braine, and it sounds as though Grinsell spoke to Lewton-Braine in 1950.

Now, Lewton-Braine would appear to be a local name. In Kelly’s Directory for Cambridgeshire, Norfolk and Suffolk, 1883, the entry for Swanton Morley says: “*National School*, James Lewton-Brain, master; Mrs. Clara Lewton-Brain, mistress.”

I checked and found that, among the children that James and Clare (sic) Lewton-Brain had baptised at All Saints’ Swanton Morley, was Charles Henry, who was born on 28 December 1890 and baptised on 5<sup>th</sup> April 1891. So Charles Henry would have been aged about 60 when he was interviewed by Grinsell in 1950.

Now, the legend sounds like just the sort of thing that a schoolmaster would hear from his pupils and Charles could well have been repeating something that his father told him. Alternatively, of course, it might have been a story that was still well known in the village at this time. Presumably it was sufficiently well known in 1950 for Grinsell to get to hear of it.

I turned, as always, to Ted Peachment for information on what went on in the village in the past and he informed me that when he was a boy they would run round the church several times and then look into the grille which lights the old crypt. Again this was meant to be a way of seeing the devil. However, it sounds less scary than looking through the keyhole at midnight! Incidentally, Ann remembers that you were also meant to whistle.

Can anyone add anything to this?