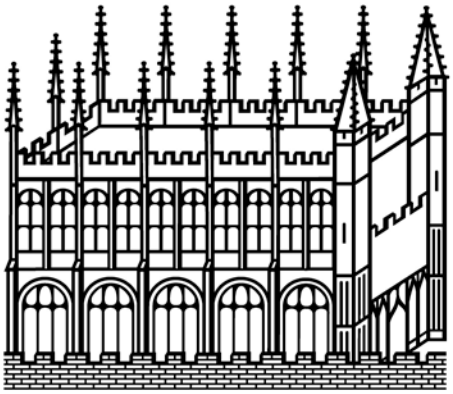


Bodleian Libraries

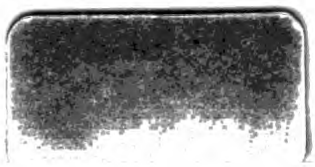
UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

This book is part of the collection held by the Bodleian Libraries and scanned by Google, Inc. for the Google Books Library Project.

For more information see:

http://www.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/dbooks

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 2.0 UK: England & Wales (CC BY-NC-SA 2.0) licence.



The Worme

of

Lambton.

Gough Add. Durham
4° 27.

The Worme* of Lambton.

THE young heir of Lambton led a dissolute and evil course of life, equally regardless of the obligations of his high estate, and the sacred duties of religion. According to his profane custom, he was fishing on a Sunday, and threw his line into the river to catch fish, at a time when all good men should have been engaged in the solemn observance of the day.

---

* This story, "full of plot and incident, certainly ranks amongst the most popular traditions of this country."

"*Orme*, or *Worme*, is, in the antient Norse, the generic name for Serpents;" and Mr Brockett, in his amusing and elaborate "Glossary of North Country words," describes a *worm* to be —"A serpent of great magnitude, and of terrific description—a hideous monster in the shape of a worm or dragon. The Italian poets* call the infernal serpent of old, 'Il gran *Verme*,' and Milton's Adam is made to reproach Eve with having lent an ear 'to that false *worm*.' Shakspeare, too, speaks of slander's tongue as outvenoming 'all the *worms* of Nile.' Popular tra-

* Dante—Inferno—cant. 6. 22.

"Quando ci scorse Cerbero *il gran verme*
Le bocche aperse, e mostrocci le sanne;
Cant. 34. 106—"*del vermo reo*
Ariosto Orlando Furioso—Cant. 46. 78.
———— "*gran vermo infernal.*"

"O Eve, in evil hour did'st thou give ear
To that false *worm*."———*Milton.*

And Cowper adopts the same figure in various passages.—*See Progress of Error, and the Task.*

———— "No foe to man
Lurks in the Serpent now; the mother sees,
And smiles to see, her infant's playful hand
Stretch'd forth to dally with the crested *worm*."

After having toiled in vain for some time, he vented his disappointment at his ill success, in curses "loud and deep," to the great scandal of all who heard him, on their way to Holy Mass, and to the manifest peril of his own soul.

---

dition has handed down to us, through successive generations, with very little variation, the most romantic details of the ravages committed by these all-devouring worms, and of the valour and chivalry displayed by their destroyers. Without attempting to account for the origin of such tales, or pretending in any manner to vouch for the matters of fact contained in them, it cannot be disguised, that many of the inhabitants of the County of Durham in particular still implicitly believe in these ancient superstitions. The *Worm of Lambton* is a family legend, the authenticity of which they will not allow to be questioned. Various adventures and supernatural incidents have been transmitted from father to son, illustrating the devastation occasioned, and the miseries inflicted by, the monster—and marking the self-devotion of the Knight of the Lambton family, through whose intrepidity the worm was eventually destroyed. But the lapse of centuries has so completely enveloped in obscurity the particular details, that it is impossible to give a narration which could in any degree be considered as complete."

The present history has been gleaned with much patient and laborious investigation, from the *viva voce* narrations of sundry of the elders of both sexes on the banks of the Wear, in the immediate neighbourhood of the scene of action; and it has been given faithfully both as to matter and manner.

"The Lambton Worm," says Mr. Surtees, "belongs to that class of household tales, the genuine appendages of ancient families, long occupying the same ground and station; and perhaps no other certain deduction can be drawn from such legends, excepting that the families to which they relate are of ancient popular reputation, against whose gentle condition 'the memory of man runneth not to the contrary.'" "To this class belong the worm of Sockburn, the brawn of Pollard's Dene, the boar of Kentmere, and the brawn of Brancepath, whom Roger de Ferry slew treacherously in a pit fall at Cleves Cross." And also that "hydeous monster in the forme of a worme," slain by one of the Somervilles *(Memorie of the Somervilles, vol. 1. p. 38.)*

"The wode laird of Laristone
Slew the worme of Worme's glen,
And wan all Linton parochine."

Which *worm* "(but in effect a serpent, or some such other creature)" is described as being in "lenth three Scots yards, and somewhat bigger than an ordinary man's leg, with a head more

At length he felt something extraordinary "tugging" at his line, and in the hope of catching a large fish, he drew it up with the utmost skill and care: yet it required all his strength to bring the expected fish to land.

But what was his surprise and mortification, when, instead of a fish, he found that he had only caught a worm, of most unseemly and disgusting appearance, and he hastily tore it from his hook and threw it into a well hard by.*

---

proportionable to its lenth then greatness, its forme and cullour (like) to our common muir edders."

It would certainly be a very difficult matter at this time of day, to offer any plausible or satisfactory account of the origin of the Legend of the Worm of Lambton, with its wonderful powers of reuniting.

The story has been preserved and repeated almost without variation for centuries; and whilst so many facts of higher importance and national interest have been suffered to fall into doubt and obscurity, this legend with all its thrilling terrors has survived the wreck of ages. No doubt it envelopes some allusion which is for ever concealed in the obscurity of family legend; yet if a conjecture might be hazarded, it may have arisen from the circumstance of an invasion from a foreign foe, some successful Chieftain, with well-disciplined bands arrayed in the bright colours of their leader, destroying and laying waste with fire and sword, and levying contributions on the ancient gentry. The advance in line of a well-marshalled legion over unequal ground would convey to the fears of the peasantry the appearance of a rolling serpent; and the power of re-uniting is readily accounted for by the ordinary evolutions of military tactics. The invaders would naturally encamp on a hill for better security.

That the Knight should have destroyed this legion by his single arm, however, is hardly to be received without qualification. He was, no doubt, the "head and chief" in the on-slaught, (the severed part might imply the cutting off a division from the main body), and by the happy union of valour and discretion, a decisive victory was obtained, and the invaders overthrown.

* Known at this day by the name of the Worm Well—it had formerly a cover and an iron ladle. "Half a century ago, it was in repute as a *wishing well*, and was one of the scenes dedicated to the usual festivities and superstitions of Midsummer Eve. A crooked pin (the usual tribute of the 'wishers') may sometimes be still discovered, sparkling amongst the clear gravel at the bottom of its basin."

He again threw in his line, and continued to fish : when a stranger, of venerable appearance, passing by, asked him "what sport?" To which he replied, "I think I've catched the Devil," and directed the enquirer to look into the well.

The stranger saw the worm, and remarked that he had never seen "the like of it" before—that it was like an eft, but that it had nine holes on each side of its mouth, and "tokened no good."

The worm remained neglected in the well, but soon grew so large that it became necessary to seek another abode. It usually lay in the day-time "coiled" round a rock in the middle of the river, and at night frequented a neighbouring hill, "twining" itself around the base, and it continued to increase in length until it could "lap" itself three times round the hill.*

It now became the terror of the neighbourhood, devouring lambs, "sucking" the cows' milk, and committing every species of injury on the cattle of the affrighted peasantry.

The immediate neighbourhood was soon laid waste, and the worm, finding no further support on the north side of the river, crossed the stream towards Lambton Hall, where the old Lord was then living in grief and sorrow : the young heir of Lambton having repented him of his former sins, and "gone to the wars in a far distant land."†

---

* The Worm Hill, near Fatfield, is a considerable oval-shaped hill, 345 yards in circumference, and 52 feet in height, on the north bank of the river, and about a mile and a half from *old* Lambton Hall. The Worm Well lies betwixt the hill and the Wear ; from the hill to the well is about 26 yards, and from the well to the river about forty-eight.

† Or according to some copies, "to wage war against the Infidels."

——— "In glorious Christian field,
Streaming the ensign of the Christian Cross
Against black Pagans, Turks, and Saracens."—*Rich. II.*

The terrified household assembled in council, and it was proposed by the Steward, a man "far advanced in years, and of great experience," that the large trough which stood in the court-yard should be filled with milk. The monster approached, and eagerly drinking the milk, returned, without inflicting further injury, to repose around its favourite hill.

The worm returned the next morning, crossing the stream at the same hour, and directing its way to the hall. The quantity of milk to be provided was soon found to be the produce of "nine kye;" and if any portion short of this quantity was neglected or forgotten, the worm shewed the most violent signs of rage, by "lashing" its tail round the trees in the Park, and tearing them up by the roots.

Many a gallant Knight, of undoubted fame and prowess, had sought to slay this monster, which was "the terror of the whole country side;" and it is related, that in these mortal combats, although the worm had been frequently cut asunder, yet the severed parts had immediately reunited, and the valiant assailant never escaped without the loss of life or limb,* so that, after many fruitless and fatal attempts to destroy the worm, it remained, at length, in tranquil possession of its favourite hill—all men fearing to encounter so deadly an enemy.

At length, after seven long years, the gallant heir of Lambton returned from the wars of Christendom, and found the broad lands of his ancestors laid waste and desolate. He heard the wailings of the people; for their hearts were filled with terror and alarm. He hastened to the hall of his

---

* "Many a man he had shent,
"And many a horse he had rent."
Romance of Syr Dygore.

ancestors, and received the embraces of his aged father, worn out with sorrow and grief, both for the absence of his son, whom he had considered dead, and for the dreadful waste inflicted on his fair domain by the devastations of the worm.

"He took no rest" until he crossed the river to examine the worm, as it lay "coiled" around the base of the hill; and being a Knight* of tried valour and sound discretion, and hearing the fate of all those who had fallen in the deadly strife, he consulted a Sibyl† on the best means to be pursued to slay the monster.

He was told that he himself had been the cause of all the misery which had been "brought upon the country," which increased his grief, and strengthened his resolution; that he must have his best suit of mail studded with spear blades,‡ and taking his stand on the rock in the middle of the river, commend himself to Providence and to the might of his sword, first making a solemn vow, if successful, to slay the first living thing he met, or

---

* A curious entry in an old MS. pedigree, lately in the possession of the family of Middleton, of Offerton :—"John Lambeton that slewe y^e^ worme, was Knight of Rhodes & Lord of Lambeton & Wod Apilton, after the dethe of fower brothers, *sans esshew malle.*"

† So in the Romance of St. George and the Dragon,—

Then "they their wise men did entreat,
To shew their cunning out of hand,
What way they might this fiend destroy,
That did their country sore annoy."

‡ Something similar is mentioned of the armour of King Richard, in the Romance of Rychard Cuer de Lyon :— "He was covered wondersley wele,
All with *splentes* of good stele."

At Lambton Castle, there are preserved two stone figures, the dates of which are not known, but evidently of considerable antiquity, and of tolerable workmanship. A Knight, armed cap-

if he failed to do so, *the Lords of Lambton for nine generations would never die in their beds.*

---

a-pee, his vizor raised, and the back part of his coat of mail closely inlaid with spear blades; with his left hand he holds the head of the worm, and with his right he appears to be drawing his sword out of its throat. The worm is not represented as a reptile, but has ears, legs,

and wings, resembling in many respects, the dragon in "Sir Dygore," which Romance was written in the early part of the fourteenth century:—

——— "was a Dragon great and grymme,
Full of fyre, and also of venymme;
With a wide throte and tuskes grete,
Uppon that Knight fast gan he bete;

He made the solemn vow in the chapel of his forefathers,* and had his coat studded with the blades of the sharpest spears. He took his stand on the rock in the middle of the river, and unsheathing his trusty sword, which had never failed him in time of need, he commended himself to the will of Providence.

At the accustomed hour, the worm uncoiled its lengthened folds, and

---

And as a Lionn then was his fete,†
His tayle was long and ful unmete;
Between his hede and his tayle
Was xxii fote withouten fayle;
His body was like a wine tonne,
He shone full bright ageynst the sunne;
His eyes were bright as any glasse,
His scales were hard as any brasse."

The other figure is that of a female, who wears an ancient coronet, much mutilated. It is singular that the upper part of her dress is carefully preserved, yet the lower part of her robe appears to be either unfinished, or perhaps agitated by the wind; and a part of her right foot is visible, without shoe or sandal. Tradition has not connected her name with the story, except, indeed, that she may be intended to represent the Sibyl.

* The Chapel of Bridgeford, within the Manor, of which "the Lambtons (Surtees, p. 170, vol. 2) were patrons from a very early period: sometimes from its situation called the Chapel of Brugeford (Bridgeford). The shell of this little oratory lately stood near the New-bridge on the left of the road, immediately within the entrance of Lambton Park."

When Hutchinson wrote his second volume of the History of Durham (1785), Lambton Chapel was still in existence, near the New-Bridge. "At a farm-house leading to Lamb-

† So in the celebrated Legend of "Guy of Warwick," the Northumberland Dragon had

—— "Paws as a Lion."

* * * * *

"Great wings he hath to flight,
There is no man that bear him might."

This Legend is considered by Sir William Dugdale as not wholly apocryphal, though the Monks have sounded his praises too hyperbolically; and in particular he gives the duel fought with the Danish Champion, as a real historical truth, and fixes the date in 926.—*Percy's Ballads.—Dugdale's Warwick.*

leaving the hill, took its usual course towards Lambton Hall, and approached the rock where it sometimes reposed. The Knight, nothing dismayed thereat, struck the monster on the head with all his "might and main," but without producing any other visible effect, than by irritating and "vexing" the worm, which, closing on the Knight, clasped its frightful "coils" around him, and endeavoured to strangle him in its poisonous embrace.*

But the Knight was provided against this expected extremity, for the more closely he was pressed by the worm, the more deadly were the wounds in-

---

ton, are the remains of a Chapel, the stone work of the eastern window yet perfect: and in the front of the house, in a circle, is the figure of a man to the waist in relief, with elevated hands,—the inscription defaced." The subjoined sketch was taken in 1800.

" The Lambtons were amongst the first families of the north who embraced the reformed religion, and this Chapel of the bridge was probably disused after the dissolution of chantries. The endowment is totally lost; popular tradition, however, connects both the endowment of the Chapel, and the figure sculptured on the wall, with the romance of the *Worm of Lambton.*"

* " The worm shot down the middle stream
Like a flash of living light,
And the waters kindled around his path
In rainbow colours bright.

But when he saw the armed Knight
He gathered all his pride,
And coil'd in many a radiant spire,
Rode buoyant o'er the tide.

flicted by his coat of spear blades, until the river ran with a crimson "gore of blood."

The strength of the worm diminished as its efforts increased to destroy the Knight, who, seizing a favourable opportunity, made such good use of his sword that he cut the monster in two:—the severed part was immediately carried away by the force of the current, and the worm being thus unable to reunite itself, was, after a long and desperate conflict, finally destroyed by the gallantry and courage of the Knight of Lambton.

The afflicted household were devoutly engaged in prayer during the combat; but on the fortunate issue, the Knight, according to promise, blew a blast on his bugle, to assure his father of his safety, and that he might let loose his favourite hound, which was destined to be the sacrifice. The aged parent, forgetting every thing but his parental feelings, rushed forward to embrace his son.

When the Knight beheld his father, he was overwhelmed with grief; he could not raise his arm against his parent, yet, hoping that his vow might be accomplished, and the curse averted, by destroying the next living thing he met, he blew another blast on his bugle: his favourite hound broke loose, and bounded to receive his caresses; when the gallant Knight, with "grief

---

When he darted at length his Dragon strength,
An earthquake shook the rock;
And the fire flakes bright fell around the Knight,
As unmov'd he met the shock.

Tho' his heart was stout, it quiver'd no doubt,
His very life blood ran cold,
As around, around, the wild worm wound,
In many a grappling fold."

Fragment of an Old Ballad.

and reluctance," once more drew his sword, still reeking with the gore of the monster, and plunged it into the heart of his faithful companion.* But in vain :—the prediction was fulfilled, and the Sibyl's curse pressed heavily on the house of Lambton "*for nine generations.*"†

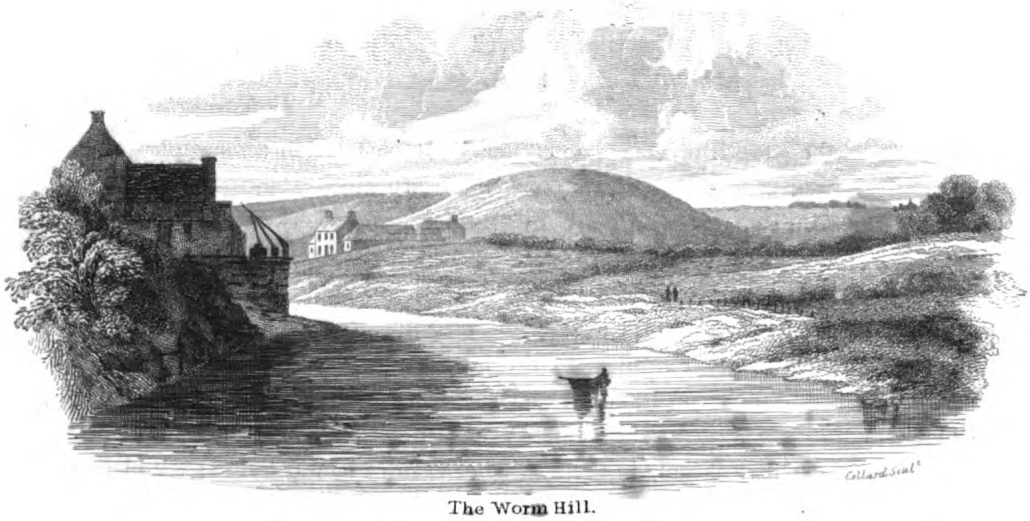
---

* " And to the hilt his vengeful sword
He plung'd in Gelert's side.
His suppliant looks, as prone he fell,
No pity cou'd impart ;
Yet still his Gelert's dying yell
Pass'd heavy o'er his heart."

Beth Gelert.

† " The precise date of the story is of course uncertain." It is stated in some copies, that the heir of Lambton had gone to the Holy Wars ; and there are circumstances preserved in the narrative difficult to reconcile, and which are evidently interpolations of modern times. Popular tradition, though in general true in the main, is seldom correct in details, and the precise time when the event happened which gave birth to the Legend, must be dated much earlier than the period assigned. Be this as it may, nine ascending generations from Henry Lambton, of Lambton, Esq. M.P. (elder brother to the late General Lambton) would exactly reach to Sir John Lambton, Knight of Rhodes—and the popular tradition holds, that none of the Lords of Lambton during the period of the " curse" ever died in their beds. Sir Wm Lambton, who was Colonel of a regiment of foot, in the service of Charles I., was slain at the bloody battle of Marston Moor, and his son William (his eldest son by his second wife) inheriting the patriotism and gallantry of his father, " received his death's wound at Wakefield," at the head of a troop of dragoons, in 1643. The fulfilment of the curse was inherent in the ninth of descent, as above stated, and great anxiety prevailed during his life-time, amongst the hereditary depositaries of the traditions of the county, to know if the curse would " hold good to the end." He died in his chariot, crossing the New Bridge—thus giving the last connecting link to the chain of circumstantial tradition connected with the history of the Worme of Lambton.

Finis.



The Worm Hill.

1900.—PRINTED BY F. HUMBLE.—(30 *Copies only.*)