

= James Murrell =

James Murrell (c . 1785 ? 16 December 1860) , also known as Cunning Murrell , was an English cunning man , or professional folk magician , who spent most of his life in the town of Hadleigh in the eastern English county of Essex . In this capacity , he reportedly employed magical means to aid in healing both humans and animals , exorcising malevolent spirits , countering witches , and restoring lost or stolen property to its owner .

Born in Rochford , Essex , Murrell grew up in the area before moving to Southwark in London , where he was married in 1812 . He had seventeen children with his wife , and the family later moved back to Essex , settling in Hadleigh , where Murrell gained work as a shoemaker . At some point he also began working as a cunning man , gaining fame for his work in this field on both sides of the Thames Estuary . Describing himself as " the Devil 's Master " , he cultivated an air of mystery about himself , also experimenting with the creation of iron witch bottles . On a number of occasions his magical activities gained the attention of the local press . Although many residents valued his services and viewed him as a good and benevolent individual , his activities proved controversial and divisive . Many educated figures criticised what they saw as his role in encouraging superstition among the local population ; his death certificate recorded his profession as that of a " quack doctor " .

Murrell 's fame greatly increased after his death when he was made the subject , albeit in a highly fictionalised form , of a 1900 novel by Arthur Morrison . Morrison also produced a more objective study of the cunning man , published in The Strand magazine . During the 1950s , the folklorist Eric Maple conducted further research on Murrell , finding much local folklore still surrounding him in the Hadleigh area , including the allegation that he had the ability to fly and to instantaneously transport himself vast distances . Murrell has continued to attract the attention of historians and folklorists studying English folk magic , and is referenced in works by scholars like Ronald Hutton , Owen Davies , and Ralph Merrifield .

= = Life and family = =

James Murrell was likely born in Rochford , Essex in 1785 , and then baptised on 9 October 1785 in the St. Mary the Virgin Church in Hawkwell , Essex . His parents were named Edward Murrell and Hannah Murrell , née Dockrell . According to the investigations of the journalist Arthur Morrison , Murrell was the seventh son of a seventh son . After completing school , Murrell entered into an apprenticeship with the surveyor G. Emans , who operated from Burnham , a town to which Murrell 's brother Edward had moved . There is evidence that Murrell subsequently moved to London , where he worked as a stillman at a chemist 's shop in the 1800s or early 1810s .

On 12 August 1812 , Murrell married Elizabeth Francis Button at St. Olave 's Church , Bermondsey in Southwark . Button was also from Essex , having been baptised in Hadleigh on 5 December 1790 . Between 1814 and 1834 , there are baptismal and burial records of the couple having seventeen children , many of whom did not survive infancy .

On 26 December 1820 , Murrell returned to Essex to attend the wedding of his sister Hannah at Hawkwell 's St. Mary the Virgin Church . She and her new husband Daniel Whitwell then proceeded to move to nearby Canewdon , with Murrell visiting them there on a regular basis thereafter . By the early 1840s , one of Murrell 's daughters , Louisa , had moved in with the childless Daniel and Hannah .

Elizabeth Murrell died in Hadleigh on 16 April 1839 , aged forty @-@ nine . The cause of death was cited as " inflammation of the chest " , and her body was buried on 21 April in Hadleigh 's St. James the Less Church . In the 1841 national census , Murrell was documented as a shoemaker living in Hadleigh with four of his children (Eliza , Matilda , Edward , and Eleanor) . However , in the June 1844 wedding documentation of Eliza , Murrell was listed as a labourer , and on the October 1844 marriage documentation of Matilda , he was listed as a herb doctor . By the 1851 national census , he again specified his profession as that of a shoemaker , and recorded that he was living in Hadleigh with his children Edward , Eleanor , and Louisa , as well as with his grandson William

Spendle .

No images of Murrell survive . Accounts describe him as a short man who walked with his hands behind his back and hummed as he went . He was also noted for wearing a hard hat , bobbed tail coat , and iron goggles , while carrying a whalebone umbrella and a basket into which he placed the herbs that he collected . His appearance reportedly scared local children , of whom he was nevertheless fond .

= = Cunning career = =

In south @-@ east Essex , Murrell was known as " The Devil 's Master " , a title that he himself used as a self @-@ description . He cultivated an air of mystery about himself by keeping himself largely apart from wider community life , speaking seldom , and traveling largely at night . His house was locally known as a " place to avoid " and those visiting him reportedly often waited for some time outside , plucking up the courage to enter . Within the cottage , Murrell had drying herbs hanging from his ceiling , and his devices were reported to include a crystal , a mirror , and a bowl of water . Other items that Murrell used in his magical practices were a copper charm with which he would allegedly distinguish whether an individual was lying or not , and a " trick " telescope that supposedly enabled him " to see through brick walls " . The latter device was examined by an acquaintance of Murrell 's , who deemed it to be " a clumsily home @-@ made arrangement of bits of looking @-@ glass , such as might once have been bought at a toy @-@ shop " . Murrell possessed a library of books , including works on astrology and astronomy , conjuration , and medical texts . He also wrote a number of personal notebooks containing information on such topics , the last of which survived into at least the 1950s .

Murrell claimed that he could exorcise malevolent spirits , destroy witches , and restore lost or stolen property to its owner , as well as providing services as an astrologer , herbalist , and animal healer . He charged a halfpenny for curing warts , and two shillings and six pence for breaking a witch 's spell . He was reputed to cure sick animals by passing his hands over their affected area , muttering a prayer , and then hanging an amulet about their neck , and was requested to use these powers at farms in Essex , Suffolk , and northern Kent . During his lifetime , Murrell was known on both sides of the Thames Estuary , although not apparently beyond that . He did however receive postal correspondence from a range of places , including from Essex girls who were working as maids in London .

Murrell used witch bottles as part of his magical practices , and , during the 1950s , the folklorist Eric Maple encountered claims that Murrell was able to summon anyone he wished using them , including individuals who had gone overseas . Murrell experimented with the use of a witch bottle constructed out of iron ; he had two such devices created by a local smith , Stephen Choppen , and had the plug at the mouth soldered up before the bottle was placed in a fire as part of an anti @-@ bewitchment spell . The idea behind this was that the bottle itself would not explode under the heat , and that thus it could be reused on other occasions . According to folklore collected by Maple , the smith 's attempts , which were initially unsuccessful , succeeded only after Murrell had recited a charm .

According to Maple 's research , various accounts of Murrell 's astrological activities continued to be told in the community after the latter 's death . One held that he was able to predict the death of a man to the " very day and hour " while another was that he also predicted the time of his own death to the very minute . It was claimed that on one occasion he was asked to provide the horoscope of a newborn child , but that he refused , stating that " Make the most of the child , you will not have it for long " , after which the child soon died , while when an old lady asked him to predict the future for her , he refused to do so for more than nine years ahead , with her dying in the eighth .

Morrison found that the locals whom he spoke to ? many of whom remembered Murrell from several decades before ? found the cunning man to be " a white and lawful wizard , who warred against the powers of darkness with all his might " ; they added that it was " no sin to employ the arts of a man like him " . Conversely , Maple noted that his research indicated that attitudes toward Murrell varied within the local community . Although many individuals , particularly among the poor ,

viewed him as a valuable member of the community , others ? particularly among the wealthier strata of society ? deemed him to be " a dangerous quack and disseminator of superstitious nonsense " . Maple found one woman , Mrs Petchey , who described him as " a smuggler and a bad man . He did things that wouldn 't be allowed today - them witchcrafts , I mean . Nowadays , people would say he 'd sold his soul to the Devil , wouldn 't they ? They 'd put him away for his witchcrafts . " Conversely , Maple noted that Mrs Murrell , who was a descendent of James , described the cunning man as " a good man and a regular churchgoer " . According to the folklore obtained by Maple , Murrell would often have debates about Christian theology with a local parson , the Reverend Thomas Espin ? who had been Professor of Pastoral Theology at Queen 's College , Birmingham ? and that Espin expressed the view that Murrell " knows his Bible better than I do ... He is either a very good man or a very bad one , and I can 't make up my mind which . "

= = = Documented cases = = =

Several accounts about Murrell 's activities have been preserved , either because they were reported on by the regional press or because they were passed down in oral tradition . One example focused around a rumour that had spread in nearby Canewdon which claimed that two prominent local women were malevolent witches . One of these individuals was Mary Ann Atkinson , the wife of the Reverend William Atkinson , the vicar of Canewdon . The other was Eliza Lodwick , a widow who took control of the 500 acre Lambourne Hall following the death of her husband in 1826 ; on two separate occasions labourers were convicted of stealing from her , while another died accidentally on her property . Locals concerned that these women were witches approached the vicar with their beliefs , but he dismissed them . They subsequently turned to Murrell , asking for his aid in exposing the women as witches . According to claims made in the 1950s by the @-@ then 94 @-@ year @-@ old local man Arthur Downes , the Canewdon villagers believed that Murrell could force all of the witches to assemble and dance about the churchyard against their will by whistling . However , the vicar intervened , with locals believing that he was doing so to protect his wife . The vicar himself died in March 1847 .

In April 1849 , the Ipswich Express and Lloyd 's Weekly Newspaper reported on a case in a village near to Rayleigh in which a girl had been afflicted with fits . Her family believed that a witch was to blame , with Murrell being called in to free her of the perceived bewitchment . He commissioned the local blacksmith to create an iron witch bottle , into which he placed toe @-@ nail clippings and locks of hair belonging to the putative victim . The bottle was then placed into the hearth and heated until it exploded , with this supposedly defeating the witch 's machinations .

In February 1857 the Chelmsford Chronicle reported that £ 10 in silver had been stolen from Golding Spearman , keeper of the Tilbury Fort canteen . When the police were unable to identify the culprit , Spearman turned to Murrell , who asserted that he would place a spell on the thief which would result in the return of the money . Shortly after , a soldier discovered the stolen money and returned it to Spearman , who attributed its retrieval to Murrell .

In September 1858 , the Brazier family accused Mrs Mole , a labourer 's wife who lived in East Thorpe , Essex , of bewitching their daughter and livestock . Hoping to have the bewitchment removed , they consulted a local cunning @-@ man known as Burrell , who lived at nearby Copford . When Burrell was unable to help , they proceeded to consult Murrell , inviting him to come to East Thorpe to remove the curse . Murrell 's planned visit generated much anticipation in East Thorpe 's community , with the local rector attempting to calm the situation by requesting that the parish relieving officer move the allegedly bewitched girl to the union @-@ house , where she could be examined by the parish surgeon . Nevertheless , the officer of the poor refused to comply , asserting that Murrell 's arrival would correct the problem . Persisting , the rector applied to the local magistrate to ensure that police would be in the village on the day of Murrell 's arrival , to ensure that the crowd would be controlled . On the day itself , a crowd of two hundred had gathered , and proceeded to Mrs Mole 's house with the intention of carrying out folk justice ; concerned by this illegal behaviour , the rector stood outside of her door and forbade the crowd entry , prior to police arriving and dispersing the mob .

On 9 November 1858 , the Bury and Norwich Post recorded that earlier that month , a waistcoat , silk handkerchief , and £ 3 in gold were stolen from a labourer , Richard Butcher , who lived in Stanford @-@ le @-@ Hope . Butcher had gone to Murrell , asking him to use his skills to locate and retrieve his stolen property ; when Murrell failed to do so , Butcher turned to the police to apprehend the culprit . Other accounts were passed down in local folk accounts ; Maple interviewed an eighty @-@ six @-@ year @-@ old Mrs Petchey , who stated that " My mother lost a brooch , and Murrell told her who had stolen it . It was her own sister @-@ in @-@ law . He wouldn 't tell her , though , unless she promised not to tell anyone . The brooch was back in its old place a few days later . "

= = Death = =

Local records indicate that Murrell died in Hadleigh on 16 December 1860 . On his death certificate , his profession was listed as " Quack Doctor " , and his cause of death was attributed to " natural causes " . On 23 December his body was inhumed into the eastern side of the churchyard at St James the Less Church , near to where many of his deceased children had been buried . It was not marked by any tombstone .

His son later told Morrison that the cunning man had informed his own daughter of the exact time and date at which he would die prior to it actually happening . Another story reports that Murrell took to his death bed aware of his oncoming demise , informing his daughter to turn away the curate " For I be the devil 's master as be well knowed . Clergymen den 't bother me in the oad time , they shan 't now [sic] " . Conversely , Maple recorded a story that in his final hours , Murrell was visited by the local curate ; Murrell was frustrated by the latter 's attempts to administer religious consolation and eventually scared him off by shouting out " I am the Devil 's master " .

An alternate story spread that Murrell had been killed by a witch @-@ bottle that had been placed into a fire by an aggrieved local man who believed that Murrell had bewitched his donkey and thus caused its death . The archaeologist Ralph Merrifield concluded that this tale was " probably entirely apocryphal " . Another story given by Choppen was that Murrell 's son Edward ? or " Buck " as he was nicknamed ? had taken the cunning man 's final witch @-@ bottle . Placing the bottle in his household fire , it was there that the bottle exploded and destroyed a wall of Buck 's cottage .

Murrell left no will . His son Edward later claimed that Murrell 's landlord soon buried a wooden chest with the old man 's papers in the garden of the cottage , deeming their associations with magic to be dangerous . Edward claimed that he subsequently dug the chest up again . Murrell 's personal effects were treated as souvenirs , and several were treated as though they retained magical and supernatural associations for many years after his death . Murrell 's " trick " telescope was sold by his son for half @-@ a @-@ guinea ; the purchaser was allegedly found dead shortly after with half @-@ a @-@ guinea lodged in his throat , resulting in claims that the telescope itself brought bad luck onto anyone who possessed it . In 1960 , Maple commented that Murrell 's whalebone umbrella had been owned by a local undertaker until fairly recently , while he also noted that Murrell 's carved chest was in the possession of a woman who lived at Southend @-@ on @-@ Sea .

= = Legacy = =

Maple ultimately described Murrell as " the greatest and certainly the most influential of all the Cunning Men of the Essex marshlands " , and elsewhere he termed him " perhaps the last of the great Cunning Men " , noting that upon his death Murrell " became part of the great heritage of English witch mythology " . Having studied the cunning man 's legacy during the late 1950s , Maple believed that Murrell " succeeded in agitating the old fear of witchcraft into something like a mania " among the local community , and that " in doing so he unwittingly preserved the old traditions and folktales for a generation beyond their normal span , and in this respect folklorists are in his debt " . The historian Ronald Hutton has characterised Murrell as the " most celebrated cunning man in the whole of nineteenth @-@ century southern England " .

= = = Local folklore = = =

Murrell continued to remain the subject of local discussion after his death . Maple believed that the legacy created within these communities was a combination of both fact and myth , with " Murrell the man " being supplanted by " Murrell the myth " , around which a " vast wealth of lore " accrued . Maple noted that many of the attributes associated with witches in British folklore came to be associated with the cunning man . For instance , he highlighted the existence of local stories that credited Murrell with the ability to fly , and that he was once observed flying over the River Crouch on a broomstick . Another story held that Murrell had been talking to a group of old men in Canvey Island before suddenly vanishing and reappearing in his own village , which was several miles away .

One young boy reported having observed the ghost of Murrell collecting herbs at some point after this death ; he passed this story on to his daughter , who told it to Maple . Hadleigh also had other ghost lore traditions , surrounding figures known as the White Lady and the Black Man , the latter being a prince and the former a woman who would allegedly invite passers by to join her in a waltz through the ruins of Hadleigh Castle .

In a 2014 article published in the British occult magazine *The Cauldron* , Richard Ward suggested that the folk stories surrounding Murrell were later transposed to another local figure , George Pickingill of Canewdon , who would also come to be regarded as a cunning man in local folklore by the 1950s . He noted in particular that Pickingill was accredited with the ability to command the witches of Canewdon to reveal themselves , a trait that Downes had previously attributed to Murrell . Hutton accepted this as a possibility yet lamented that the claim seemed to be " incapable of solid proof " .

In 2011 , Robert Hallman , a local Hadleigh resident , suggested that the community should memorialise Murrell in some way , either by naming a local street after him or erecting a statue in the centre of the town .

= = = Investigations = = =

Three decades after Murrell 's death , in the late 19th century , Morrison visited Hadleigh on a holiday , expressing the view that the area was " still in the eighteenth century as regards aspect , costume , habits , and mode of thought " . He learned about Murrell , and decided " to write a story about him " , believing that " some might find it hard to believe that such a man , practicing such arts and wielding such influence , could have lived so recently within so short a distance from London " . The landlord of the Castle Inn , a local pub , showed Morrison to the house in which Murrell had once lived , and the journalist was also able to meet with Choppen , the smith who had made Murrell 's witch bottles . Morrison found that Choppen was living in a small house on the outskirts of Hadleigh ; the craftsman revealed that while he had none of the bottles left , he was in possession of Murrell 's spectacles . Morrison subsequently met with Murrell 's son Edward ? " a short , sturdy old fellow , with ashock head of loose , white hair " ? who was then living in Thundersley . Morrison subsequently authored *Cunning Murrell* , a fictitious account of Murrell 's life , as well as a more objective account , the latter for *The Strand* magazine . It was Morrison 's novel that turned Murrell into a national figure and " inflated the name of the old Essex wizard above all others of his craft " .

At the turn of the century between the 19th and 20th , the Reverend King , an antiquarian who worked as the vicar of Leigh , began to examine Murrell 's life , believing it to have had some significance , although never completed his research .

Murrell 's correspondences and papers ? then contained in the wooden chest owned by his son ? were examined by Morrison during the course of his research . These texts survived until 1956 , at which point they were burned by someone who did not believe them to be of any importance . Many of Murrell 's handwritten books were also lost , although his scrapbook of astrological data had survived until at least the late 1950s , when it was in the collection of a local man who also possessed Murrell 's iron churchwarden pipe .

Maple published a 1960 paper on Murrell in the *Folklore Society 's journal* , *Folklore* , which was

based both on the earlier textual sources and on oral traditions that he had obtained from elderly residents of the district . These included one of his descendants , a Mrs Murrell of Westcliff @-@ on @-@ Sea . Troubled by the mixed reception that Murrell had , she expressed the view that he was a good man . She also commented that that Murrell 's power to control mechanical objects had remained within the family , characterising them as " natural mechanics " .