

the Edinburgh Dungeon

Myth and Superstition

Background information

Scotland is a country steeped in myth and storytelling. The Edinburgh Dungeon brings some of these myths to life. Some, such as the story of Sawney Bean, date back many centuries – but lack any concrete evidence in reality. Others, such as the story of the ghost of Little Annie at Mary King's Close are more recent, though Edinburgh's closes have long been associated with ghostly presences. At the foot of the Royal Mile is Holyrood Abbey, founded, according to myth, after King David I encountered a spectral 'holy rood' or cross while out hunting. Throughout the centuries we see people in Edinburgh drawn to the unearthly or (to them) inexplicable – and then telling and embroidering stories.

In the past, folklore and superstition as well as religion held a tighter grip on Scottish society than it does today. Belief in herbal remedies was widespread in the absence of any other medicinal alternative. People visited 'healing wells' to drink or bathe in their waters, though this was outlawed after the Reformation. You can still visit St Bernard's Well, a more 'respectable' 19th century mineral well by the Water of Leith in Stockbridge (in Edinburgh's New Town).

Many Scots believed in the powers of witches and fairy folk to effect good or evil, and accepted that witches lived within their communities. However, in the 1590s Scotland saw its first great wave of persecution of women (mostly) on charges of witchcraft. James VI was personally involved, hearing witness statements himself and whipping up a frenzy of mass hysteria. Over the next century around 4,000 women – and some men - were accused of witchcraft, with around 70% of them subsequently executed.

Two popular myths from Scotland's past are dramatised in the Edinburgh Dungeon:

- ☞ Sawney Bean
- ☞ Street of Sorrows

Dungeon Links

Scotland's legends feature throughout the Dungeon tour.

Over 300 women were burnt alive on Edinburgh's Castlehill, often after being horribly tortured until they 'confessed'. Many others were drowned after being thrown or 'douked' in the Nor' Loch (where Princes St Gardens is today): if you floated, you were a witch; if you drowned, you were innocent. You can see a memorial to the women who died at the top of the Royal Mile, on the Castle Esplanade.

Even in our rational 21st century, there is still an appetite for the supernatural. Ghost tours attract thousands every year. Perhaps where we differ from previous generations is that we actively and curiously seek out such sites, rather than fleeing from them.

This theme explores certain Edinburgh myths, and encourages pupils to try and separate fact from fiction.



TEACHER NOTES

ANSWERS: The text above provides the answers to Pupil Worksheet 1, Myth and Superstition



Myth and Superstition



Classroom preparatory activities

Activity 1:

Carry out the first activity on the pupils' activity sheet. This is a light-hearted activity relating to superstition, reminding pupils that even today, many people believe in things which have no scientific basis. If you have pupils from other cultures in your class, invite them to share good luck and bad luck superstitions from their background.

Explain that when they visit the Edinburgh Dungeon, they'll experience some stories with an element of the supernatural, which people of the time believed to be true.

As you visit

As pupils go round the Dungeon, ask them to think 'Could that have really happened?' for each scene.

Follow up activities

Activity 2:

Continue with the activity sheet. If you wish you could divide your class into groups and give each group one story to discuss. They could then work on developing a dramatised version of the story to present to the rest of the class as part of their own 'Edinburgh Dungeon' experience.

All the stories have elements which may or may not be true. Often the distinction is in the interpretation. For example, in the story 'A suspicious death', a body could probably bleed after death, but this would not point to the fact that the person who touched it was

the murderer. Modern day tourists may well feel an eerie presence in the city's closes, but this does not necessarily mean that there is a ghost.

The Sawney Bean story, while not including any supernatural elements, is probably the only story for which there is no evidence. The first version of the story was told many years after the event was supposed to have taken place, and no contemporary court records of the event exist. But it could have happened! The Greyfriar's Bobby story does not include any supernatural element, but is included as a suggestion for a place to visit, and as a more benign myth.

Activity 3:

The third activity is designed to get pupils reading closely and unpicking a range of evidence sources to "unpick" the story of Mary King's Close; a very similar street to the one pupils see in Street of Sorrows. Many modern myths have arisen about the Close.

Here are the answers to the True/False activity:

- ✔ In 1645 the plague hit Edinburgh. One street, Mary King's Close was very badly affected. Nearly everybody in the close became ill. TRUE
- ✔ To stop the plague spreading, the street was blocked off. It was completely walled up and nobody was allowed in or out. FALSE
- ✔ In the end, everybody in the street died and the street was abandoned. FALSE
- ✔ In the 1990s, the underground street was rediscovered after more than 200 years. FALSE (it had been used in the 1940s).
- ✔ Today it is said to be haunted. TRUE (but who knows if ghosts are real?)

TEACHER NOTES

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Further activities

1. What myths are there in your local area? Pupils could research local myths and stories and choose a way of presenting the stories. This could be acted out, as in the Dungeon, or could be presented as an illustrated book, a digital animation or audio play. These could be presented to other classes or to parents, or shared on GLOW, the online community for Scottish schools.
2. Pupils may be interested in investigating the grim story of Scotland's persecution of 'witches'. There are many fascinating contemporary accounts of trials. A useful starting point is <http://bit.ly/13eBVEX> which provides a pupil-friendly overview and includes links to other sources. A contemporary illustrated pamphlet called 'Newes From Scotland' claims to give a true account of the North Berwick witches. Internet searching will provide images and transcripts.

T.C. Smout's *A History of the Scottish People, 1560-1830* (Fontana, 2011) has a good few pages exploring the issue.

Once pupils have carried out sufficient research, they could start discussing the following issues:

- ✔ How might it feel to know that people were being accused of witchcraft in your community?
- ✔ The role of torture in extracting 'confessions'



TEACHER NOTES

ANSWERS: The text above provides the answers to Pupil Worksheet 1, Myth and Superstition



thedungeons.com



1. Good luck – bad luck

Do you believe in good luck? Some of the things below are supposed to bring good luck, others bad luck.

Discuss them with a partner. Tick the ones which bring good luck, and put a cross beside the ones that bring bad luck.

	Good Luck	Bad Luck
A four-leafed clover		
Friday 13th		
A broken mirror		
A horseshoe outside your front door		
A black cat		
White heather		
Crossed fingers		
Walking under a ladder		

Which ones do you believe in – if any?

Today we think of superstitions like these as fun, but we don't take them very seriously. Long ago, before people knew as much science as we do, they believed all kinds of things which we would not believe in today.

2. Strange but true?

A lucky escape

King David I was hunting near Edinburgh when his horse was attacked by a white stag. The king was thrown off his horse and was about to be gored to death by the stag. He put up his hands to protect himself, and a golden cross appeared between the stag's antlers. As he reached for the cross, it faded away to nothing, and the stag calmed down and galloped off into the forest. To give thanks for his lucky escape, King David decided to build an abbey near the place where he met the stag. He called the abbey Holy Rood; rood is another word for a cross. The abbey is still there today.

Greyfriar's Bobby

In the 1850s a man called John Gray had a small dog, Bobby. Gray died in 1858 and was buried in Greyfriar's Kirkyard in the centre of Edinburgh. Every day for 14 years Bobby turned up and sat on John Gray's grave, because he missed him so much. Local people started giving him food and he became known as 'Greyfriar's Bobby'. When he died, a statue of Bobby was built outside the graveyard. You can still see it today.

A suspicious death

In the 1680s a man called James Stansfield was found drowned in a river. After he was buried, people became suspicious because it turned out that his family had bought the funeral clothes before he died. His body was dug up and there were strangling marks on his neck. Stansfield's son, Philip was the prime suspect - and when he touched the corpse it started to bleed. This proved that he was the murderer. He was tried and found guilty in Edinburgh and was executed. His body parts were placed around the city as a horrible warning.

The Sawney Beans

In the 1400s a man called Sawney Bean and his children and grandchildren lived in a cave by the sea in south west Scotland. They survived by attacking, robbing and murdering passers by – and then ate their bodies to hide the evidence. The entrance to their cave was only open for a few hours at low tide, so they lived for years without being found. Eventually a man managed to fight his way free, and returned with soldiers. The whole family was captured and taken to Edinburgh, where they were all executed.

Back from the dead

In 1728 a woman called Maggie Dickson was hanged. After being declared dead, her body was taken to the graveyard to be buried. But on the way there, she sat up and began talking! The council decided that as she had already been declared dead, she could not be executed again. She lived happily for another thirty years, working in an ale house, and was known as 'half-hangit Maggie' – half-hanged Maggie. There's still a pub in Edinburgh's Grassmarket named after her.

The ghost of little Annie

Edinburgh was hit by the plague in the 1640's and many streets, like the one recreated in Street of Sorrows, were badly affected. One such example of these streets was Mary King's Close. The story goes that the council decided to block off the street to stop the disease spreading. No one was allowed in or out. In the end everyone in the street died, some of the plague and the others of starvation. Since the 1990s, when the street was opened up again, many tourists have claimed to see or sense the ghost of a child called Annie, who is lonely after all her family have died.

Witchcraft!

In 1590 King James VI was sailing back from Denmark with his new wife. There were terrible storms and the ship was nearly wrecked. James was convinced it must be witchcraft. About 100 men and women in the town of North Berwick were accused of being witches. Many were tortured and then confessed to meeting the Devil to plot against the king. They were strangled and then burnt.

It's your turn create a new show for the Edinburgh Dungeon. Choose one of the stories, and discuss how you could present it. Create a design for the show – a drawing, or a model. What sound effects would people hear? How many actors would you need? What would the audience do? You could create a script for your show, and act it out.

Did you know?

In the 1500s and 1600s more than 4,000 women – and some men - were accused of being a witch. Over 300 women were burnt alive on Edinburgh's Castlehill, often after being horribly tortured. Many others were drowned after being thrown or 'douted' in the water: if you floated, you were a witch; if you drowned, you were innocent. You can see a memorial to the witches at the top of the Royal Mile, on the Castle Esplanade.





3. What really happened to Mary King's Close?

There are lots of unusual stories about streets in Old Edinburgh upon which Street of Sorrows is based. One of the most famous streets is Mary King's Close and it has many interesting stories. Here is the most popular:

- In 1645 the plague hit Edinburgh. One street, Mary King's Close was very badly affected. Nearly everybody in the close became ill. True False
- To stop the plague spreading, the street was blocked off. It was completely walled up and nobody was allowed in or out. True False
- In the end, everybody in the street died and the street was abandoned. True False
- In the 1990s, the underground street was rediscovered after more than 200 years. True False
- Today it is Edinburgh's 'most haunted street'. True False

But what is the real story of Mary King's Close? On the right there are different pieces of evidence. Look at each one and see if you can work out what really happened to the street.

Then mark the sentences in the story above as True or False.

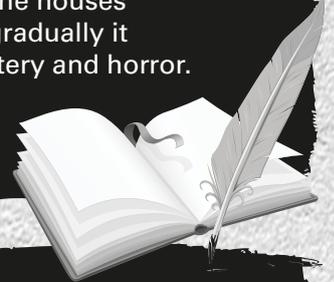
1 The north part of Mary King's Close is roofless and ruined, with weeds, wall-flowers, grass and even little trees, flourishing among the falling walls.

- History book, 1845



2 For some generations after the plague, in which most of the inhabitants died, the houses remained closed, and gradually it became a place of mystery and horror.

- History book, 1845



3 An old gentleman has often described his visits to Mary King's Close when he was a schoolboy with his friends. The bravest of them would approach these dreaded houses of mystery, and after shouting through the keyhole or broken window shutter, they would run off with beating hearts, believing that if these long-deserted homes were opened, the deadly plague imprisoned there would once more burst out.

- History book, 1880

4 Part of Mary King's Close was used as an air raid shelter during World War II.

- Edinburgh City Library website



5 In 1753 a grand new building for businessmen was built in Edinburgh, called the Royal Exchange. The south end of Mary King's Close was demolished to make way for it. The top four storeys of the close were knocked down, and the remaining floors became the underground foundations for the new building.

- A website about the history of Edinburgh



Now write a few sentences which tell the true story of the Close.

Discuss why you think the myths about the Close have come about.