

“FAIR FLORA”

By Alan Jacques.

She stands alone in the wood named after her, at the top on an avenue of sycamore and silver birch, a garland of stone flowers clasped in her hand. Marked on the 1:10 000 Ordnance Survey map simply as “Statue”, this lonely figure of Flora, the Greek Goddess of flowers has an enigmatic past, as shrouded in mystery today as she was over a century ago, when many of the legends about her were spawned.

Overlooking the village of Grindleford to the southwest is the hamlet of Stoke. Recorded in Domesday as ”Stoche” the name is derived from the old English “Stoc” which means a secondary place or settlement, often an outlying farm. It was once part of the larger parish of Hope, becoming a civil Parish in 1892. Never being large enough to have Parish Council, the Parish meetings met very infrequently up until the last recorded one in March 1958, which was held in the offices of Stoke Hall Quarry, and the parish was subsequently combined with Eyam Woodlands, Nether and Upper Padley to form the Parish Council of Grindleford in 1987.

The best-known feature of the hamlet is Stoke Hall, an impressive stately home in miniature, built in 1757 in local stone from nearby Stoke Hall Quarry by William Booth of Stoney Middleton for Rev. John Simpson. The estate came from the Lord Grey of Codnor to Robert Barlow by sale in 1473. It was sold to Bess of Hardwick in 1581 from whom it descended to William Cavendish, Earl of Newcastle. Jacinth Sacheveril bought it in 1676 whence it was inherited by the father of the builder of the present house. By the late 18th Century the 5th Earl of Bradford, Henry Bridgman, owned it. In more recent times it has been a Country House Hotel before reverting once again to a private residence.

Until restoration by the Parish Council in 1984, the statue of Fair Flora was a very sad sight, decapitated by vandals about 30 years previously. Only the foresight of a sympathetic local resident, who rescued the severed head and kept it safely hidden in his garden shed, saved her from further damage and disfigurement. The statue was once in the grounds of Stoke Hall and probably originated from Chatsworth, where there is Flora’s Temple, as a gift to Mrs. Taylor, a member of the Bridgeman family who were resident at Stoke.

It was alleged that the arrival of Flora seemed to bring misfortune with it to the Hall and its occupants. Just where fact and fiction begin and end is impossible to say, as stories connected with the statue grew ever more lurid with their telling. The presence of the figure on the dusky lawn in the evenings, sometimes shrouded in autumnal mist or caught by moonlight silvering the grounds adding to the ghostly aspect of the statue, was said to be causing Mrs Taylor increasing distress, playing on her imagination in her declining years. It was eventually decided to remove Flora from the grounds to a remote spot on the estate where her increasingly malevolent influence on her owner would be diminished.

Then the over active imagination of the local populace took over, claiming amongst other theories, that the statue had been erected in memory of a local girl who was drowned in the flooding river Derwent whilst crossing the stepping stones above Leadmill Bridge as she eloped with her lover. Another version was that it was a

memorial to a girl abducted and murdered by gypsies in Stoke Wood. Flora was also reputedly erected in memory of a young maiden brutally murdered by her swain at the old bathing-house, which is fed by a warm spring, in nearby Home Wood.

Yet another tale has it that a daughter of a former owner of the Hall fell in love with a youth of a lower social class and she was prevented from furthering the relationship by being locked up in an attic room at Stoke; with her lover as an accomplice she escaped and was fleeing from the Hall with him when they were pursued into Stoke Wood, where the poor girl was shot dead, either by accident or design, depending on the story-teller! Thus had the statue been erected on the spot where she fell.

Probably the most implausible story of them all is that the model for the statue was that of a comely mistress of a former owner of the Hall, whose wife, upon discovering his indiscretions, took great exception to the presence of the shapely statue on the lawns in front of the home and had poor Flora banished to the woods!

All these stories are pure speculation and there is no evidence to prove or disprove any of them, as they are the very stuff of folktales. As a small child I used to be terrified by Flora, as I was told by older children that if you looked back at her when walking down the woodland path, she would come alive, jump down off her plinth and chase after you!

What we can be sure of is that every year, those "Fair Maids of February", the snowdrops, will gather to pay homage around the feet of the Goddess of the Flowers, soon to be followed by the yellow celandine, then the azure bluebells in Spring and the dainty daisy and pink willow herb during the Summer. Most poignant of all are the offerings made by successive generations of local girls, who place chains of daises around the slender neck of Grindleford's unique flower goddess – Fair Flora.

Footnote; would anyone wishing to visit the statue of Fair Flora please note that it is on private land and there is no public right of way. Stoke Hall Quarries, the landowner, normally allow access at reasonable times so long as visitors respect the statue and the woodland around it.

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