

Mythical creatures in folklore and fable



This month's Mythical Creatures issue reminds us of our rich cultural heritage of myths and legends. This set depicts some of the curious creatures that inhabited the imagination of our distant ancestors, while previous issues have depicted several others.

THE TWO 1st class stamps show a dragon and a unicorn respectively. The dragon is now closely associated with Wales (Celebrating Wales miniature sheet of 2009, and the third stamp of The Queen's Beasts se-tenant strip, 1998), but in previous centuries it featured in the folklore of many other countries. In Britain, dragon traditions are thought to date from at least the time of the Saxons and Vikings – perhaps even from as far back as Celtic times or the Roman occupation. Early dragons were wingless and could not breathe fire, but their breath was said to be poisonous. They are often referred to as 'worms', from the Saxon word 'wyrn', and had snake-like bodies.

Medieval folk attributed many unexplained happenings to dragons. Strange sights in the sky were said to be dragons, and were thought to foretell misfortune. For example, the monks of Lindisfarne claimed to have seen flying dragons shortly before an invasion of the Vikings. And in several parts of the country there are tales of fierce dragons which terrorised the neighbourhood until they were banished by a priest or slain by a brave young knight. Some of these stories are thought to relate to real, but much more ordinary, beasts such as the Bistern Dragon of the New Forest which could be killed only by a knight coated in birdlime and ground glass. Some historians believe that this was actually a particularly ferocious wild boar.

The Unicorn also appear in the writings and legends of many countries, and in ancient times people firmly believed in their existence. As well as on one of the new 1st class stamps, a unicorn also appears on the fifth of The Queen's Beasts se-tenant strip of 1998. In early stories it was often depicted as a wild, beautiful creature, but more like a goat than a horse, which could only be tamed or captured by a pure young virgin. Should a unicorn come upon such a maiden sitting in a wood, it would trustingly lay its head in her lap like a child. Unfortunately, if hunters could persuade a virgin to attract a unicorn in this way, they could then kill it – the only way this could be done. Unicorns are mentioned in The Bible, although this is thought to be a mistranslation. As might be expected, this gave the tradition authenticity and confirmed people's belief in these lovely creatures.

Giants, mermaids and the little people One of the new 62p stamps depicts a giant. In years gone by, many giants were said to roam this country, and some must have been of colossal stature, given the feats they are claimed to have performed. In Cornwall a giant called Bolster could plant one foot on Carn Brea, a hill near Camborne, and the other on the cliffs at St Agnes six miles away. And in Northern Ireland, there is a legend that the Giant's Causeway (shown on several stamps) was built by the giant Finn Mac Cool so that he could walk to Scotland to fight his rival Benandonner.

The new special issue, by Rosemary Bennett



Pixies and fairies also figure prominently in our folklore, and are shown on the new 62p and 90p stamps. Pixies are said to be mischievous little creatures who love to play tricks on humans, although the Dartmoor pixies are supposed to be helpful to the local people. Pixies usually dress in green, are fond of music and dancing, and are often described as beautiful little creatures. Unlike fairies, they have no wings, and according to tradition are mainly found in Devon and Cornwall, although some people say that their name is derived from 'Picts', the ancient race which once inhabited Scotland. They are always ready to fight the fairies, and won a great battle against them at Buckland St Mary in Somerset.

Legends of fairies are more widespread, and their behaviour can vary between kindly and malignant. Such tales were very prevalent in the Isle of Man, where many still believe in them. On the island, the Elder is known as 'the tree of the fairies' who are supposed to play in it and swing from its branches; when these move in the wind, the 'little people' are said to be swinging. Other tales tell of humans who marry fairies. Often, the human behaves in some way which the fairy has forbidden, such as striking her or referring to her 'sisters', (the other fairies), and she disappears. However, in one Welsh folktale, although the fairy wife leaves her husband, her sons have inherited knowledge which enables them to become great physicians.

The other 90p stamp of the 2009 set shows a mermaid, and a belief in these strange creatures was also widespread in past centuries. From Cornwall comes the legend of Morveren, the mermaid of Zennor, which tells of a young man named Matthew Trewella, a wonderful singer, who fell in love with her. He went to live with her in the land of Llyr below the waves – where some people say he can be heard singing still. Another story comes from Marden, in Herefordshire, where a mermaid is reputed to have made off with the church bell and taken it to the bottom of the river. Many more mermaid tales can be found throughout our islands. In some the mermaids are benign – in others they are far from well-intentioned towards humans. In a few stories a merman figures rather than a mermaid. ►

Opposite page: the heraldic Scottish unicorn on a George V 5s of 1939; and the City of London's dragons on the 31p value in the 1984 College of Arms Quincentenary issue.

Above: the six new Mythical Creatures stamps, issued on 16 June.



Griffin, yale and phoenix Other mythical creatures which have appeared on stamps are the griffin, the yale (the first and third in The Queen's Beasts set-tenant strip of 1998), and the phoenix (the 37p in the Children's Fantasy Novels issue, 1998). The griffin was said to be half eagle and half lion, having the forequarters of the former and the hindquarters of the latter. It was reputed to be a very intelligent creature, and the female was supposed to lay her eggs in a mountain cave with a very narrow entrance. She would then stand guard over them to protect them from mountain lions. Folk must have once believed in the griffin for it is mentioned in the writings of St Hildegard of Bingen, a 12th century German nun.

From top left: a griffin, a yale and a dragon, on three of the 1998 Queen's Beasts stamps; a Welsh dragon and Scottish unicorn in the 2008 Country definitives anniversary sheet; a dragon and a phoenix from the Children's Stories issue, 1998; and a dragon from the Celebrating England sheet of 2007.

Below: the Welsh dragon for Regional definitives, redrawn by Jeffery Matthews; an earlier version was used from 1971. The pre-decimal Welsh issues had featured dragons by Reynolds Stone.

The yale is less well represented in mythology. It is usually depicted as an antelope or mountain goat type of creature, and was said to have large horns which could swivel in any direction. It makes an appearance on some heraldic devices, where it represents proud defence. The yale was included by Pliny the Elder in his *Natural History*, so at that time it must have been believed to exist.

Perhaps the best known of this trio is the phoenix, which occurs in the legends of many lands including Egypt and Greece, and is closely associated with fire. Always referred to as a beautiful bird, the phoenix is said to live for 500, or, in some legends, 1000 years. At the end of this period, it builds its own funeral pyre and is then reborn from the flames to begin its life-cycle all over again.

The 2009 Mythical Creatures stamps, and previous Royal Mail issues, illustrate some of the intriguing folklore of Britain. We are fortunate enough to have in these islands more of these fascinating stories than most other countries. It is therefore appropriate that our mythology should be portrayed on our stamps, adding yet another dimension to our rich and varied philatelic scene •

