

Magic in the Park

Marilyn Mason

A century and a half ago, when medical science was as likely to kill patients as cure them, and people still sometimes turned to magic and ritual for remedies, Richmond Park had its very own spiritual healing centre, a remarkable tree.

The Shrew Ash was a very ancient gnarled tree near Sheen Gate which, not uncommonly for ash trees, had a reputation for curing sick infants and animals. Mothers would bring children with whooping cough and other ailments to the tree to take part in a secret dawn ritual led by a "shrew mother", or "priestess", or "witch". The ritual involved passing the child over and under a "witch-bar", a wooden bar wedged into the tree, while the "shrew mother" muttered or sang verses, timing her recitation so that a particular word coincided with the first of the sun's rays. If the charm didn't work, it could be blamed on mistiming.

A part of the ash still survived, though damaged, in 1895, when Margaret Ffennell showed photographs of it to the Folklore Society and spoke in some detail to demonstrate that the ash that then existed was the original 300-year-old tree, not a "mere sucker", and that belief in its curative powers had persisted into the second half of the nineteenth century. A Professor Owen, who lived in Sheen Lodge and regularly walked in the Park before sunrise had, in the early 1850s, observed a mother accompanied by sick child and "old dame" heading for the tree, though they changed course when they saw him

and only returned to spend time at the tree when they thought he had gone. At other times he saw similar furtive groups or heard voices in unison near the tree, and always took care not to disturb them. Though he couldn't recall when he had last seen the Shrew Ash in use, a writer in the *Mid-Surrey Times* of 1874 claimed that it was still used and believed in then.

The remains of the ancient tree finally collapsed in the storm of 1987.

With thanks to member Ailie Harrison who sent me Margaret C Ffennell's paper "The Shrew Ash in Richmond Park" (Folklore, 1898) and to David McDowall's *Richmond Park: The Walker's Guide*.



Photo: The Shrew Ash in 1856, showing the "witch-bar" and, seated, a possible "shrew mother"

With thanks to the London Borough of Richmond upon Thames Local Studies Collection