

**The Centre for Contemporary Legend (CCL): Inaugural  
symposium/conference report**

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### **The Centre for Contemporary Legend (CCL): Inaugural symposium/conference report.**

The city of Sheffield has an international reputation as a centre for folklore and legend scholarship that began in 1964 when the Sheffield Survey of Language and Literature was founded by John Widdowson at the University of Sheffield. The academic study of Contemporary Legends also began in steel city, in 1982, with a series of conferences and publications in the Perspectives on Contemporary Legend series. By that time the Sheffield survey had become part of the Centre for English Cultural Tradition and Language (CECTAL). The centre incorporated a teaching centre, library, archives and Traditional Heritage Museum. CECTAL became NATCECT in 1998 to reflect its national status as the only centre dedicated to the study of folklore and language in England. Sadly, despite the popularity of its undergraduate and postgraduate teaching, changes in the university's corporate priorities in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century led to its closure.

Since that time, a number of former students who graduated with Masters or PhDs in folklore from NATCECT kept the folklore flame burning. They were obliged to conduct research and teach in a wide range of other disciplines. More recently, new friends and colleagues have migrated to folklore as a natural home as a result of their specific research interests in film and media and journalism, sociology, para-psychology and archaeology, to name just a few.

It was through a mutual desire to provide a focal point for these scholars, both from within established academic institutions and outside, that a small research group was established within Sheffield Hallam University's Cultural, Communication and Computing Research Institute (C3Ri) in 2018. The group includes **Dr David Clarke**, Reader in Journalism, whose PhD in folklore was completed at NATCECT; **Diane Rodgers**, senior lecturer in Media, who is conducting PhD research on folklore in 1970s television and **Andrew Robinson**, senior lecturer in Photography who has undertaken unpublished research on English Calendar Customs.

The group's initial aims are to build upon the foundation stones laid down by CECTAL and, working with friends and partners, reinvigorate and promote folklore and legend studies both within Higher Education and to the wider public drawing upon our professional communication skills. To that end the CCL put out a call for papers to include in our inaugural symposium. This was held at SHU's Collegiate Crescent Campus on Thursday 15 November 2018. The CCL team were surprised and overwhelmed by the encouraging response we received. More than 50 individuals registered for the event and we received abstracts from both established and early career scholars. These included papers from two of the original founders of CECTAL, Emeritus Professors John Widdowson and Paul Smith, who recently retired from his teaching post in the Department of Folklore at St Johns, Newfoundland.

The proceedings included three themed panels and ended with a plenary session where the organisers invited delegates to provide feedback on the future direction of the centre. Our central aim was to generate discussion and debate about the future of folklore in higher education; what is needed, what is missing and what delegates could offer. Introducing the speakers, Dr Clarke said folklore studies was well established as a subject for teaching and research in some 22 campuses across North America and in Ireland, Scotland parts of northern Europe. But in England, where folklore was invented – with the foundation of the Folklore Society in 1878 – the discipline had

struggled to establish itself as a valid area for academic study. He felt times were changing as evidenced by a recent HLF grant that had revived the Archive of Folk Life and Dialect Studies at Leeds University and by the launch of the first new taught Masters in Folklore Studies at the University of Hertfordshire in 2019.

The theme for the first panel was archiving, documenting and photographing folklore (chaired by Diane Rodgers). The first speaker was Emeritus **Professor John Widdowson**, the former director of NATCECT. He said proposals for new programmes in folklore studies at Sheffield Hallam and the University of Hertfordshire offered new opportunities to exploit the resources already available and to inaugurate new archives, continuing the documentation of current and future developments in our English traditions. He said archives, fieldwork and building a research culture were essential ingredients for establishing folklore studies within Higher Education. He also advocated the establishment of an online forum where folklorists could discuss and share their research rather than working independently.

The second speaker, **Richard Bradley**, is a librarian in Special Collections at Sheffield Hallam University and has a deep interest in folklore and calendar customs. He has published on aspects of local folklore, customs and legends and made 'characteristically British sound recordings' as part of his fieldwork in the Peak District. His paper explored examples, collected during fieldwork, where almost imperceptible changes in domestic life have impinged on the practice of traditional customs in some way. He also drew attention to the online petition to the Department of Culture Media and Sport, launched by Keith Leech, that recommends the UK ratify the UNESCO Convention on Intangible Cultural Heritage, as this places 'an international obligation on local authorities to assist rather than hinder their continuation for future generations'.

The final speaker in this panel was **Andrew Robinson**, senior lecturer in photography, who is also a member of the CCL team. Andrew's interest in Folklore and Calendar Customs was sparked by a visit to Cliffe Bonfire Society's celebrations in Lewis, East Sussex in the early 1990s. This led to a five year photographic documentation of English Calendar Customs during the late 1990s and a major body of work entitled 'Another England'. Andrew's paper used his own experiences as a starting point for an exploration of photography's relationship with the English Calendar Custom and outlined a number of key themes including: a questioning of the role of photography in preserving such events; the custom as a rite of passage for photographers; the 'lure of the wyrd'; and the ritual of rephotography.

After a lunch provided in the campus Granary café, the theme for the second panel was Folklore Studies past and present and was chaired by Dr Clarke. The first speaker, **Paul Smith**, examined how the study of Contemporary Legends had developed since 1980s. From an initial simple observation in a conversation with a colleague at CECTAL, the study of what became known as 'urban legends' resulted in the Perspectives conferences and ultimately to the creation of the International Society for Contemporary Legend Research (ISCLR) with a newsletter, journal and annual international summer conference. Paul also summarised some of the theoretical issues that have been explored by ISCLR members over the years but not necessarily resolved, including the issues of definitions and what we embrace in the canon of narratives that are studied.

Unfortunately, Professor Owen Davies, who was due to speak on the new Masters in Folklore Studies was unable to attend as the validation event at the University of Hertfordshire clashed with

our symposium. **Dr Ceri Houlbrook**, who worked with Owen on the launch of the course, outlined the processes and challenges of putting together a postgraduate programme of study centred on folklore. Dr Houlbrook outlined the content of its proposed modules and looked forward to the first intake of students in the autumn of 2019.

The final speaker from the second panel was **Dr Katy Soar**, lecturer in Greek Archaeology from the University of Winchester. Like Dr Houlbrook, Dr Soar's interest in folklore grew out of her research interests in archaeology. Her paper considered the various ways the two disciplines interrelate and considered how to design and develop a course that adopts an integrated approach that combined archaeology and folklore. Dr Soar said she planned to develop such a module in her department starting in 2019.

The third and final panel followed an afternoon break for coffee and discussion. Chaired by Andrew Robinson the theme was Folk Horror: folklore on screen.

The first paper was presented by the CCL's **Diane Rodgers** who is conducting research towards her PhD, under the supervision of Dr Clarke and Sheldon Hall, Reader in Film Studies, who was one of the delegates. Diane's research examines how folklore is communicated by 'wyrd' television (which combines folk horror and other media with hauntological themes) and outlined the importance of contextualising this in a folklore studies context. Diane's paper showed the significant and continued impact of 1970s programming (such as the BBC's *Ghost Story for Christmas* series, 1971-78 and ITV's *Children of the Stones*, 1977) upon the post-2000 folk-horror revival and wider popular folk belief. Diane also discussed the development of the folkloric notion of ostension, and Mikel Koven's mass-mediated ostension, as a way to effectively combine folklore studies and screen studies and examine onscreen expressions of folk belief.

The second paper was presented by **Dr Douglas McNaughton**, Senior Lecturer in Film and Screen Studies from the University of Brighton. Dr McNaughton's paper examined notions of folk-horror as a peculiarly British genre and how the British landscape is represented as a character itself in many examples of 1970s television drama (such as the 1970 Play for Today *Robin Redbreast*). Dr McNaughton discussed the use of landscape and features such as stone circles, as frequently represented in television drama of the era, to suggest meaning and threat and creating a tension between rural and urban environments.

The third and final presentation came from **David Powell**, PhD candidate in Film Studies from the University of Birmingham. David's paper built upon similar themes as the previous panellists but developed wider notions of the 'ancient' as expressed onscreen through the use of landscape and, particularly through the unearthing of xenolithic artefacts (such as in *Quatermass and the Pit*, 1958-59). David also examined hauntology in television drama, with ideas of broken time and protagonists haunted by ancient landscapes, compelling their actions to be affected by events from another time (such as Alan Garner's *The Owl Service*, 1969-70, or *The Living and the Dead*, 2016).

The day ended with a plenary panel, chaired by Dr Clarke, that invited contributions from delegates on a series of questions that included: 'what do we hope to achieve and where do we go from here?' and 'what should the Centre's aims and objectives be for the future?'

Plenary discussion revealed a huge enthusiasm for the development of the centre, and a genuine need for a central point of focus for the study of folklore in the UK. Many suggested developments were around establishing a strong network for interested academics with good communication, such as a central email list overseen by the CCL, and regular events with opportunities to meet. Most delegates seemed to agree also that, both politically and culturally, the time is ripe for the study of folklore to be developed due to rising interest from both public and academic quarters. It was felt that the remit of the centre was a little unclear due to the use of the term 'contemporary legend' rather than 'folklore', but it was also noted that 'contemporary' and 'urban legend' have been proven to have broader popular appeal in terms of attracting students and researchers.

Overwhelmingly, feedback was extremely positive and the keenness of all to be involved in some way in further developments is promising for the future. General comments described the event as "excellent", "pioneering", "brilliant and inspiring", with wide consensus that future scholarship opportunities should be developed at all levels, alongside holding further regular events.

Please visit the CCL website and join our Facebook group: <https://www.facebook.com/CCLSheffield/>

We also have a JISC email discussion list: <https://www.jiscmail.ac.uk/cgi-bin/webadmin?A0=CCLSHEFFIELD>

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