

# How monkey murder brought British coastal towns together

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(PhysOrg.com) -- How two British coastal communities, hundreds of miles apart, came to be associated with a centuries-old tale of monkey murder has been investigated as part of a new study.

Research on the cultural identity of British fishing communities has thrown up a bloody link between the Scottish village of Boddam, near Peterhead, and Hartlepool in North-east England.

According to legend, the Hartlepool monkey was the only survivor of a shipwrecked French warship during the Napoleonic Wars. It was found dressed in full military uniform, presumably for the amusement of the crew.

Thinking it must be a Frenchman, the fishermen hung the unlucky simian seafarer. The story made its way down the generations and today fans of Hartlepool FC are known as the 'monkey hangers'.

Indeed, the town's mayor, Stuart Drummond, was elected in 2002 - and again in 2005 - after campaigning in the outfit of the football team's mascot, H'Angus the Monkey.

A less publicised monkey associaton, if one no less well known in the North-east of Scotland, stems from a folk song called The Boddamers hung the Monkey-O.

It describes how a monkey survived a shipwreck off the village of Boddam near Peterhead, Aberdeenshire. The villagers could only claim salvage rights if there were no survivors from the wreck, so they allegedly hung the monkey.

Fiona-Jane Brown, a folklorist at the University of Aberdeen's Elphinstone Institute, is carrying out research on the areas of belief and identity in North-east Scotland, the Outer Hebrides and mainland Shetland.

Aware of the link between the Aberdeenshire village and Hartlepool's own monkey-hanging myth, she decided to delve deeper into how each legend grew.

"The historical and cultural journey of the song is absolutely fascinating," she said. "The first mention of the Boddam legend can be dated back to 1772 when a shipwreck of the Annie is said to have taken place on the Buchan coast, which is recalled in one version of The Boddamers Hung the Monkey-O song.

"That was followed by the Scottish ballad The Monkey Barber, which

was published in 1825 in Glasgow and Edinburgh. The story centers on a barber's pet monkey who is mistaken by an Irish farmer for the barber himself and demands to be shaved."

The core of the song appeared to travel south, as just two years later a similar tale appeared in Allan's Tyneside Songs. Called The Sandhill Monkey, it tells of how a labourer mistakes a monkey for a local shopkeeper. That same year, a song about a baboon appeared in Thomas Armstrong's Newcastle Song Book.

And it is this ditty which is thought to have spawned the Hartlepool song, thus embedding the monkey myth in the local culture.

Fiona-Jane explained: "According to the urban legend, the Tyneside baboon was a pet of some Russian Cossacks who had visited the area during the Napoleonic Wars. They dressed the beast in uniform but it escaped and caused confusion among the locals."

Historians have suggested that the tale inspired Tyneside music hall star Ned Corvan to pen The Hartlepool Monkey song as part of his act around 1854.

But according to Fiona-Jane, Corvan's song also retained whole lines from the original Boddam version and used the same tune, The Tinkers' Waddin'.

She said: "The Baboon song was still very popular at the time, but it's likely that Corvan may have also toured in Scotland and heard the Boddam Monkey song, which was probably well-known amongst fishermen on both coasts.

She added: "The evolution of the song remains an intriguing story in itself but it's also interesting how each community relates to it now.

"In the North-east of England, the legend has been generally adopted as a positive marker of social identity which survived on the football field. But in the North-east of Scotland, the Boddamers - who have a longstanding rivalry with nearby Burnhaven - have refused to accept what they see as a slur against their community, a bad memory of bitter rivalries of the past."

Provided by University of Aberdeen

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